Ideal
and
Actual
in
The
Story
of
the
Stone

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A WORLD APART

Poetry and Society in the Garden of Total Vision

Poetry is everywhere in Bao-yu’s world. Couplets are inscribed on doorways, on paintings, even on rocks in the Garden of Total Vision. The dramatic entertainments that are part of every family occasion, from public holidays to birthday parties, are largely in verse. Poetry composition is an essential social skill for men and women, although women’s poetry seldom reaches an audience outside their intimate realm, and women may be deeply conflicted about the role of poetry in their lives. Because The Story of the Stone is a microcosm of society, it shows not just poetry but the social practice of poetry, both as private expression and public display. The main characters to whom we become so attached have internalized poetry and a poetic view of life and continually relate their literary knowledge both to their sentimental inner life and to their understanding of the world around them.

Poetry in the day-to-day world of The Story of the Stone includes poetry composed by the characters as a tool of social intercourse and poetry as an ornament of everyday life. In the textual history of The Story of the Stone, poetry composed by the characters has another dimension: It often preserves the tracks of earlier plots, characters, and devices, which were later, intentionally or unintentionally, edited out of the prose narrative. The inconsistencies of the poetic and prose levels of the novel, which have been well studied by experts in the novel’s textual history, illuminate the gap between the author’s original intentions for his story and characters and the final, though unfinished version. It appears that, as revisions were required, either by Cao Xueqin himself or by his editors, the last things to be changed were the poems.¹

But even without these tantalizing inconsistencies, we would have an extraordinarily rich range of poetic functions to consider. On many levels, the poetry in The Story of the Stone holds the key to the novel as the Stone himself wished it to be read, as “a true record of real events” (yi zhi shi shi zhi qi shi) (SS 1.1.51, HLM 1.1.3). This function of poetry links the artist’s intention with the canonical function of poetry, namely, “expressing individual intent” (yanzhi).² In the context of a masterwork of prose fiction, this dictum becomes even more complex than it is in the
everyday life of a poetry critic because the poetry is composed, declared, recalled, and quoted in a fictional world. The conventional association of zhi ("intent") with qing ("emotion") or, as rendered in this study, "attachment," and the fact that poetry is the accepted medium of both, invests every line of poetry in The Story of the Stone with the potential to represent disillusionment and transcendence.  

On the expository level, poetry is also a vehicle for the revelation of character and fate. The poetry of social gatherings can be just as revealing as the most intimate cri de coeur. As often as not, however, the composers of public poetry, and their readers or listeners, are unaware of its real significance. Private poetry, by contrast, is invested with significance. The solitary poet assumes the clichéd persona of one in the grip of lyric transcendence. When the poet is a confused adolescent, it can be difficult to tell what is cliché and what is genuine insight. Furthermore, a poet's peak experience is not, traditionally, solitary; rather, the poet requires a "perfect listener" (zhiying), who instinctively understands the emotion of the poet without mediation. The real significance of a poem in The Story of the Stone may be revealed only when it is overheard, but the question of whether the listener can understand the poet's feelings, or whether only the reader can understand them, while the listener remains in a fog, is part of the complexity of the relation of poetry to the novel as a whole.

Even if we are alert to poetry's role as a key to the allegorical structure of the novel, it can still be difficult to grasp the import of any given poem. Each poem must be read through the multiple veils of social and literary convention as well as the emotional vagaries of the individuals involved. A reader's difficulty in understanding poetry's intimations of disillusionment is a shadow of the difficulties for those fictional characters living the life whose vanity is revealed. The author must have hoped that readers would be able to appreciate the poetry in all its avatars. He quotes and alludes to the entire tradition. He contributes original examples of poems of every genre, which, depending upon their context, range from fine poems in their own right (in his descriptions, or in representing the work of such poetic talents as Dai-yu and Bao-chai) to commendable efforts by earnest aspirants to lyric transcendence to crude lampoons by crude buffoons. Nevertheless, in The Story of the Stone the appreciation and practice of poetry are objects of nostalgia and manifestations of social ideals that, even within the novel itself, are lamented as slipping away. It is not just the poetic view of life but the practice of poetry that is essential to this elegy for traditional Chinese society.

Bao-yu's first encounter with poetry in all its potential is in his dream in chapter 5, in the hypersensuous and luxurious bedchamber of his niece, Qin Ke-qing. The fairy Disenchantment herself is described in a rhapsodic verse in the fu ("lyric prose" or "rhapsody") form. This genre had been favored since the Han dynasty for lavish descriptions, and Disenchantment comes from a noble lineage of beautiful women celebrated in poetry. Indeed, when Bao-yu views fine images of women, he appreciates them by recalling Disenchantment's literary ancestor, the Goddess of the River Luo from a poem in the same genre by the Wei dynasty poet Cao Zhi (192–222). Touched by the urgent plea of the spirits of Bao-yu's ducal ancestors, Disenchantment has agreed to plant in the boy the seeds of his awakening to the vanity of his existence. The first vehicle of this intended awakening is poetry, in a set of riddles in the Celestial Registers that reveal the fates of the girls in his life. The rebuses and dense symbolism of the short verses contained in the Registers are beyond him, especially since he cannot conceive what the poems have to do with him. Disenchantment then presents her pageant of poetry and music—"The Dream of Golden Days" (hong meng)—twelve songs spelling out the messages of the registers even more plainly. Again Bao-yu does not understand their specific prophecies of the tragic loves and marriages of the women in his life: Dai-yu will die in despair, Bao-chai will be frozen in a loveless marriage, Xiang-yun's bliss in marriage will be cut short by her husband's fatal consumption, Ying-chun's sadistic husband will batter her to death—even Qin Ke-qing, in whose chamber he dreams, will hang herself when her adultery with her father-in-law is discovered. If he cannot understand the particulars, the final chorus carries explicit warning:

The Birds Into the Wood Have Flown

The office jack's career is blighted,
The rich man's fortune now all vanished,
The kind with life have been required,
The cruel exemplarily punished;
The one who owed a life is dead,
The tears one owed have all been shed.
Wrongs suffered have the wrongs done expiated;
The couplings and the wanderings were fated.
Untimely death sin in some past life shows,
But only luck a blest: old age bestows.
The disillusioned to their convents fly.
The still deluded miserably die.
Like birds who, having fed, to the woods repair.
They leave the landscape desolate and bare.

(SS L.144, HLM L.53)

This poem comments on the futility of attachment in both the mundane and fictional worlds. The workings of fate are inexorable; yet, even when all fates are justly fulfilled, we are mired in attachment to the characters and feel loss when this pageant of actors rings down the curtain. Unless Bao-yu can awaken to the dangers and delusions of his existence, he is doomed to slow disillusionment in the world of the red dust, instead of the complete revelation the pageant offers. Bao-yu, unfortunately, is attuned only to the color and noise of such entertainments. Even as he seeks lyrical transcendence through poetic expression, it has never occurred to him to appreciate poetry as a document of truth: intellectual, emotional, or spiritual. It is not just the feelings of the words, but their literal content that is essential to their appreciation. Until Bao-yu learns to appreciate what poetry says, he cannot understand what it means, even in his own compositions. The evolution of Bao-yu's poetry appreciation is actually the history of his self-awareness. As his appreciation matures, so does his worldview. Since he cannot recognize the significance of the "Dream of Golden Days," he must plod on through a comprehensive sentimental education that gradually awakens him to the fact that even his poetic view of life cannot mitigate the necessary suffering of a mortal existence.

Part of this education comes at the hands of his father, through attempts to inculcate in the boy the skills and knowledge expected of the sons of the gentry class. Certain kinds of social occasions are regarded as training grounds for later careers in public service. Chinese boys with these aspirations would be called upon to recite texts for cultivated guests or to compose poetry to celebrate special events. Bao-yu's progress in such polite accomplishments is often tested and harshly criticized. In chapter 17, egged on by his pseudo-intellectual hangers-on (the "literary gentlemen" [qinque] who assiduously pay court to their patron), Jia Zheng tests Bao-yu's talent for composition by conducting him on a tour of the extraordinary garden, really a separate imperial residence, built to honor the imperial concubine. An essential part of such a garden's design would be the titles and poetic inscriptions bestowed on its significant sites. Jia Zheng himself insists that the garden will be incomplete without poetry:

"These inscriptions are going to be difficult... Her Grace should have the privilege of doing them herself; but she can scarcely be expected to make them up out of her head without having seen any of the views which they are to describe. On the other hand, if we wait until she has already visited the garden before asking her, half the pleasure of the visit will be lost. All those prospects and pavilions—even the rocks and trees and flowers will seem somehow without that touch of poetry which only the written word can lend a scene."

(SS L.324-325, HLM L.154)

The test of versifying on command requires that Bao-yu concentrate fully upon his task, which includes both evocative inscriptions for various sites and couplets to accompany them. He must exercise his powers of observation to extract the essence of the scenes to be celebrated, capture their unique qualities in his inscriptions, with appropriate allusions to sites, events, and poems from the tradition at large. This is an important social attainment in traditional Chinese gentry culture, whose significance for professional success should not be slighted, even though a talent for poetry alone is not enough for an illustrious public career.

Jia Zheng is ill disposed because, according to the schoolmaster, post-casting is the only area in which the boy is making any progress. So Bao-yu is on the line to show his father that his talent is genuine. Jia Zheng's personal prestige is also on the line, however: to prove to his enthusiastic toadies not only that his son's promise is being fulfilled but that he can exercise authority over him. Jia Zheng can make Bao-yu's life a misery, but Bao-yu can disgrace him in public with a flabby performance. The conflict between the two is the central tension of this poetry ordeal, with the disdainful father balancing anger and pride, the adolescent son dread, inspiration, and a sassy desire to show off.

That the occasion becomes an ordeal shows how far the family has deviated not just from ideal authority patterns but also from the solidarity patterns proper authority is supposed to establish. If Jia Zheng and Bao-yu's relations conformed to ideal patterns, the son would be anxious to earn his father's approval, the son's success would reflect well on the father, and the father's pleasure in the son's accomplishment would enhance the son's feelings of affection and gratitude toward him. Because of the estrangement of father and son, even if Bao-yu distinguishes himself, his father has no way of showing his approval positive-
ly. Bao-yu's most skillful titles and couplets Jia Zheng can only praise with faint smiles; for his lesser efforts, his father has sharp words and even threats of physical punishment. The Garden of Total Vision is thus the scene of the explicit revelation of the erosion of the Jia family's sense of priorities. The boy does have talent, and his position as Jia Zheng's sole surviving son by his primary wife makes him the object of great hopes. When asked to demonstrate his abilities to his father's entourage, however, he must struggle with his resentment at being the object of his father's contempt and despair. Indeed, when Yuan-chun visits the garden we are surprised to discover that, in spite of his father's scorn, Bao-yu's contributions have been used after all. The Stone as narrator goes out of his way to explain, in a special note to the reader, that this is out of deference to the imperial concubine's affection for her little brother; however, Jia Zheng could not have relented had he found Bao-yu's work truly beneath the family's literary standards.10

This power struggle takes place in a setting so beautiful that conflict should be forgotten, for never was there a man-made paradise so conducive to spontaneous celebration. The Garden of Total Vision (Daguan yuan) is not yet named at this point in the narrative, but as we tour it for the first time we get a vivid sense of its scope.11 Its title is the inspiration of the imperial concubine herself. Her commemorative verse honors the designer (a hired professional) as much as the family whose wealth could purchase such perfection:

Embracing hills and streams, with skill they wrought:
Their work at last is to perfection brought.
Earth's fairest prospects all are here installed,
So "Prospect Garden" let its name be called!
(SS 1.18.365, HLM 1.18.173)

The phrase daguan literally means "grand view," embracing the many brilliant prospects contained in a garden covering altogether about an acre of land. The phrase is also a Buddhist metaphor for spiritual insight. The "grand view" in spiritual terms is profound insight or complete grasp of the nature of existence; Plaks renders it as spiritual and metaphorical "total vision." Is Yuan-chun merely honoring the genius of the designer? Or can she have an inkling of what the garden will be to her beloved younger brother when, by her express order, he is sent to live there along with his female relations?

Although Yuan-chun's name for the garden is literally inspired, what the family sees is the best that money can buy for a daughter elevated to the emperor's favor. For all their highbrow pretensions, the senior Jias see the garden as a practical work of craft. An important aspect of this particular garden is that its various prospects and sites evoke as many different styles and environments as possible, from imperial style (Hall of Reunion, Xingqin bishui) to a simple rural farmhouse (Sweet-Rice Village, Duxiang cun), from luxurious prosperity (House of Green Delights, Yihong yuan) to a secluded hermitage (All-Spice Court, Hengwu yuan).12 The garden, however, is a work of art within the larger work of art—the novel. What the adults see as a site for a unique formal occasion the children will regard as a universe. In literary terms, it is a universe, not least because the description of the buildings, promenades, waterways and pools, hills and dales, and most abundantly the plants, symbolically represent all the elements of the environment of a vastly wealthy and privileged gentry family.13

The garden, therefore, invites "that touch of poetry" which is so essential to the pleasure of its beauty, but the different generations have different notions of what is to be celebrated. This is also a struggle between the father's inflexibly orthodox interpretation of the natural world and the son's romantic one. The range of poems that Bao-yu must compose reflects this, along with the range of historical and textual allusions he calls upon to justify himself. The literary gentlemen are there to promote Jia Zheng's happiness, and so they are bound to encourage their patron's son to excel. Their contributions are insignificant: The real exchange is between the talented boy and his harshest critic. Bao-yu must check both his desire to one-up his elders and betters in knowledge and poetic talent and his impulse to express his own feelings, which are not what Jia Zheng wants in his home, his son, or the inscriptions in his garden.

Bao-yu does best when he combines his romantic approach with orthodox references to classic texts. When he names the small artificial mountain at the gate of the garden "Pathway to Mysteries" (Quing tongyuan), he gratifies not only his father's desire for a dignified and evocative reference but his own as-yet unformed anticipation of the possibilities of life for him. Unknown to him yet, the heart of Bao-yu's experience will take place in this garden, and in that light the title alludes to the novel's allegorical frame as well as the boy's potential liberation.

As long as they refers to sites of "natural" beauty, Bao-yu's titles and couplets pass muster. But at Sweet-Rice Village, a miniature farm plunked
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not prevail against a system of philosophically oriented and artistic conventions that rears simplicity and naturalness into a thoroughly artificial image of rustic life.

Bao-yu nearly comes to grief again when they reach the main reception hall of the imperial palace of the Qing dynasty, where they find that the emperor's son is a man of the world and has already married his daughter. Bao-yu, who has never seen such an overbearing and domineering person before, is taken aback. But his mother, who is with him, reassures him that everything will be all right.

I've never really understood what the ancient man by "natural..."

"Why, fancy not knowing what 'natural' means—" you said to me. "Naturally, that is the way nature is."

"You are right. I was wrong in saying "natural..."

"How do you know what 'natural' means—" you asked me. "Naturally, it is the way nature is."

"That is true. I see it now."

"I think I understand what 'natural' means—" you said to me. "Naturally, it is the way nature is."

"So I see."

"You are right. I was wrong in saying "natural..."

"I thought you were right when you said "natural..."

"But I was wrong. I see now that you were right."

"You are right. I was wrong in saying "natural..."

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"I thought you were right when you said "natural..."

"But I was wro
couples are kept. After all, the garden has been created by the author of *The Story of the Stone* for Bao-yu’s emancipation. Consistent with the Jia family’s faulty household management, the children conduct their affairs in the garden either with no supervision or with too much of the wrong kind. The domestics vie to pamper their charges and to avoid work as much as possible. The elder Jia’s regard the garden as a place for pleasure themselves, to escape everyday cares in parties and festivals. The garden is a world of romantic release for all generations, and the fact that the children come of age there makes their initiation into the world of adult affairs that much more abrupt and traumatic. They are not just living in an ideal world, doubly protected from the realities of life beyond the red walls of the Ning-guo and Rong-guo Houses. They are integrated into a world created by artifice and self-consciously resonant with poetic allusions. The isolation of this ideal world encourages its residents to take their roles from poetic references and aspirations, and, as they assume these roles, they are deluded into thinking that they have a chance of fulfilling their dreams.

Each residence in the garden, in name and style, evokes the character of the person who settles in it. Li Wan, whose wealthy family enforced ignorance and industry on women as a matter of principle, is installed at the artificially rustic “Sweet-Rice Village” to act as chaperone for the adolescents. Dai-yu takes the “Naiad’s House” (Xiaoxiang guan), secluded in a green thicket of bamboos. Bao-chai is allotted “All-Spice Court,” as she is the only member of the family thoroughly versed in the properties of the myriad useful plants at that site. Level-headed and bookish Tan-chun chooses the “Autumn Studio” (Qiushuang shuzhai; literally, a library study).14 Bao-yu, of course, has the House of Green Delights. These residences, in turn, will provide the inspiration for the artistic and social personae that their inhabitants will assume in their exclusive society.

In the garden Bao-yu comes to appreciate, as far as he can, the poetic view of life. Poetry is no frivolous pastime here: It is a mode of existence and a way to prepare for life in practical and intellectual terms. The residents of the Garden of Total Vision use poetry as a means of self-expression and as a way to practice adult-style social behavior, testing and enforcing their internal loyalties and hierarchy without overt interference from the outside world.15 It is also functions as a tool for developing mutual awareness and understanding. Although Bao-yu’s poetic gifts may make a small lion of him in his father’s world, in the inner quarters they are consistently overshadowed by those of his female cousins. But here he has a chance to find out what poetry can be, both in the semiprivate context of the frequent poetic gatherings in the garden and in the intimate context of truly private expression.

The Crab-Flower Club (Haitang shiske) founded in chapter 37 is the inspiration of Tan-chun. Her flowery invitation to celebrate their exclusive society in poetry meets with universal enthusiasm. Their only previous opportunity to compose together was at the request of the imperial concubine, who requested poems to celebrate her favorite sites in the garden. There the emphasis was on Bao-yu, whose success depended on help from Dai-yu. Although his quatrains were appropriate to the occasion and pleasantly turned, the situation demanded formality and decorum before inspiration.

Not only does the club give focus to a set of talents hitherto without purpose, but it reinforces the boundaries of their wonderful world against the outside world, while expanding its possibilities within. There is much more to a poetry club than writing poems. Their first activity is to give one another pen names. This is a time-honored activity of literary aspirants—after all, even Cao Xueqin’s own commentators are known to us only by their sobriquets. Part of the purpose of these pen-names is to break down the hierarchies of family relationships—sisters, cousins, in-laws—to which they are bound outside the garden and by which they are supposed to address one another. Part of the purpose is symbolic, as each name evokes some essential aspect of their characters and the dwellings they selected: “River Queen” (Xiaoxiang feizi) for the perpetually weeping Dai-yu alludes to the speckled bamboos that screen the Naiad’s House, said to be flecked with the tears of the two queens of the emperor Shun after his death; “Lady All-Spice” (Hengwu jun) for the pharmacologically learned Bao-chai; “Green Boy” (Feng gongzi; literally, “Lord of the pleasures of youth”) for the boy who lives in the House of Green Delights, and so forth. Even the cousin who visits frequently from outside, Grandmother Jia’s great-niece Shi Xiang-yun, is given a pen name, “Cloud Maiden” (Zhenxia jiyu); to evoke the imaginary residence she would have chosen, had she lived in the garden.16

Li Wan, as arbiter of decorum and nominal overseer of their activities, appoints herself president. The children are soon deep in a structured performance of literary conventions: part pleasure, part earnest competition. The first meeting of the Crab-Flower Club meticulously details conventions of poetry composition as a social activity. Even in play, there are rules to be followed. The procedures for selecting the subjects, genres and rhymes to be used are half arbitrary, half formal. “White Crab-Flower” (baihaitiang; in this case, the pendulous, white
blossom of the autumn flowering crabapple) is the first subject because Li Wan has seen the gardeners bringing in two pots of the lovely “Maiden’s crab” to Bao-yu’s apartment. The fact that she is the only one who has actually seen the plants is not really a problem:

“How are they going to write poems about it if they haven’t seen it?”

“We all know what white crab-blossom looks like,” said Bao-chai. “I don’t see why we necessarily have to look at it in order to be able to write a poem about it. The ancients used a poetic theme as a vehicle for whatever feelings they happened to want to express at that particular moment. If they’d waited until they’d seen the objects they were supposed to be writing about, the poems would never have got written.”

(SS II.37.221, HLM I.37.374)

Bao-chai speaks explicitly to the strength of conventions of composition and, incidentally, allows the author to take a sly poke at the biographical fallacy—the assumption that every poem is on some level a true record of events in a poet’s life and therefore a potential source of authentic biographical information. The notion that an individual’s writing is a key to his or her experience is attributed to Mencius, who in speaking of the writings of the ancients declared, “If we chant their poems and read their books, how could we fail to know them as people? By these means we can speak of their world.”17 The Story of the Stone itself has been mined exhaustively for information about the author and his world.18 Here Bao-chai, with typical practicality, insists on the use of the imagination.

Yang-chun sets the genre for their poems at random from a book in Tan-chun’s shelves; an octet in regulated verse (lishi). She then asks a maid for two words to determine the end of the first line and the rhyme word in the second line. Matching rhymes for lines four and six are drawn from the set of “rhyme cards” (yinpu xialu), which would be at hand in any well-appointed young lady’s room. These cards were practical aids to aspiring poets, identifying appropriate rhymes and tones for correct composition. Lastly, the maid is asked to draw a card for a word to turn the final couplet.18 The participants work against the clock (a short stick of incense is lit to act as a timer), each in his or her own style. The poems produced, while all adhering to these strict conditions, reflect the personalities of the poets, as do their processes of composition.

Bao-chai applies herself to the task at hand and writes a workmanlike hymn to the radiant fragility of the autumn blossoms. Bao-chai admits that she has come up with something, but deprecates her contribution—her poem is a perfect mirror of her own preferences for plain colors and autumnal imagery. Bao-yu paces up and down, working up a sense of pressure as he listens to the others, then writes his in a fluster, indiscemely comparing the chaste blossoms to the notorious Yang Guifei rising naked from her bath. Dai-yu appears unconcerned, sauntering in at the end and knocking off a poem that conveys the ethereal scent and grace of the autumn crab blossoms.

From the first, Dai-yu and Bao-chai jockey for first place, while Bao-yu’s contribution goes to the bottom of the ranks. Bao-chai and Dai-yu represent two opposite but complementary styles of creativity, just as they represent opposite but complementary styles of women. Li Wan, as befits the dignity of the chaperone of the garden, is ex-officio arbiter of taste and decorum, and although she herself does not compose, the members of the Crab-Flower Club respect her judgment of poetry. Sometimes Bao-chai will take first place, sometimes Dai-yu. Dai-yu leads in “elegance and originality” (fengli bicehi), Bao-chai in “character and depth” (nanxun hunhui).20 Together the girls represent great genius and brilliant execution, the two irreconcileable yet complementary approaches to poetry composition in the Chinese tradition. This alliance of rivals is just one aspect of their relationship. Bao-chai’s attitude toward poetry is fraught with conflict. On one hand, she has great talent for composition and tremendous knowledge of poetry and poetic theory. On the other hand, she is painfully aware that the transcendent of poetry is virtually unavailable to women in her society. Poetry is not a woman’s “proper business,” and women’s poetry is not for public display; it is usually only chance that preserves a woman’s poems and carries them beyond the intimate family context. But even within the family, which is a woman’s proper sphere, Bao-chai apprehends the irony and frustration of personal expression without the prospect of an audience. The more restricted the potential audience, the less likely a poet will find that “perfect listener” to know her heart.

Dai-yu and Bao-chai are the two great talents of the garden, but there are several others, newcomers or outsiders, with talent to illuminate certain features of the garden’s society. The Crab-Flower Club’s wild-card talent is Shi Xiang-yun. As Grandmother Jia’s great-niece, she has been an intimate of the Jias since babyhood, but, as she lives outside the garden with her uncle, she is forgotten in the first rush of enthusi-
asm. Her hurt is soothed by a chance to write on the original topic of crab blossoms, at which she excels with two poems, and the opportunity to invite the others to a session the following day. Xiang-yun’s enthusiasm is briefly damped when Bao-chai, with whom she spends the night, reminds her that she lacks the wherewithal to manage and pay for such a party. Bao-chai offers her support in arranging a cassia-viewing party for the Crab-Flower Club and Grandmother Jia as well. Xiang-yun is grateful; both girls know how the happiness of the garden depends on the patronage of Grandmother Jia.

As part of the next day’s entertainment, they together select the subject and form of the poems. Bao-chai’s sense of the occasion is linked directly to her sense of the mainstream poetic tradition:

“About the theme for tomorrow’s poems . . . we don’t want anything too outlandish. If you look at the works of the great poets, you find that they didn’t go in for the weird and wonderful titles and ‘daring’ rhymes that people nowadays are so fond of. Outlandish themes and daring rhymes do not produce good poetry. They merely show up the poverty of the writer’s ideas. Certainly one wants to avoid clichés; but one can easily go too far in the pursuit of novelty. If one has fresh ideas, one does not need to worry about clichés; the words take care of themselves! But what am I saying all this for? Spinning and sewing is the proper occupation for girls like us. Any time we have left over from that should be spent in reading a few pages of some improving book—not on this sort of thing!”

(SS II.37.235, HLM 1.37.382)

Bao-chai’s speech, in spite of its feminine disclaimer, is a fair echo of the Stone’s denunciation of hackneyed and meretricious poetry. But the girls do find a way to carry out Bai-chai’s critical imperatives. Their choice of subject is chrysanthemums, and the next question is how to infuse with it with originality. Bao-chai continues:

“If you somehow involved the poet in the theme . . . You could do that by making up verb-object or concrete-abstract titles in which ‘chrysanthemums’ was the concrete noun or the object of the verb as the case might be. Then your poem would be both a celebration of chrysanthemums and at the same time a description of some action or situation. Such a treatment of the subject has been tried in the past, but it is a much less hackneyed one. The combin-

The result is a plan for a poem sequence whose twelve topics will produce a unified work of art: “All three months of autumn condensed into a single sequence of a dozen poems!” (SS II.37.238, HLM 1.37.384). The Chrysanthemum Suite is the Crab-Flower Club’s most polished exercise in the social practice of poetry. The process of selection of topics, as well as the execution of the exercise at the next day’s entertainment, provide insight into poetic practice as a rite of passage into maturity in Chinese gentry society and further insight into the relations among the inhabitants of the garden. Although the young people’s contributions are again uneven, overall this is the most uniform, and unified, work the garden will produce.

Bao-chai’s introductory verse, “Remembering the Chrysanthemums,” sets the flowers in their seasonal and cyclical context. She also writes of “Painting the Chrysanthemums” in black ink, to keep their image alive after they have faded. Bao-chai eschews color in her own domain—when Grandmother Jia brings Grannie Liu to see her room, she is shocked by its complete austerity. Her reproach to her granddaughter suggests that such apparent self-effacement is not only unfeminine but arrogant. In fact, her taste is an unfeigned expression of her way of seeing and imagining. As we know from her remarks about not needing to see the autumn crab blossoms to write about them, for Bao-chai evocation of the object suffices, and a black ink painting would still bring out the chrysanthemums’ bright colors.

Bao-yu’s poems are all action: “Seeking the Chrysanthemums” and “Planting the Chrysanthemums.” Xiang-yun “admires” and “arranges” them, then intensifies her image of “The Shadow of the Chrysanthemums” by mingling scent with evening shadow. Tan-chun writes of “Wearing the Chrysanthemums” and finishes the suite with “The Death of the Chrysanthemums,” which refuses to mourn but looks forward to meeting them the next autumn. Dai-yu’s poems, which triumph in this contest, treat the chrysanthemums as personifications of autumn inspiration—she “celebrates,” “questions,” and “dreams” of them, as sentient beings in perfect sympathy with her autumn feelings.

Again, the poets’ contributions mirror their personalities and preoccupations. Bao-chai and Tan-chun are grounded in appreciation of seasonal rituals. Xiang-yun has an intense sense of the inspiration of a
unique moment. Bao-yu distracts himself with fussy actions and misses a more profound appreciation. Dai-yu evokes the awareness that plants are in harmony with human beings, yet her symbolic communion with the flowers comments rather pathetically on her difficulties with human communion. Considering Dai-yu’s origin as the Crimson Pearl Flower, this mode of self-presentation should not surprise us.

There are many other such events, though none quite so crisply structured. Some are deliberately informal, as with the riot of poems on the subject of eating crabs (crustaceans, not apples) at Xiang-yun’s party following the composition of the Chrysanthemum suite. Later that winter, the members of the poetry club try their hands at a long linked-verse composition celebrating a magnificent snowfall (chapter 50). The garden’s society has by now been swelling by the arrival of several more female cousins, including Bao-chai’s cousin Xue Bao-qin. All the new arrivals are competent poets, and Bao-qin, whose beauty and personality make her a possible compromise between Bao-chai and Dai-yu, is almost as gifted as the two girls she closely resembles. The party begins with the girls broiling kebobs of venison over an open fire, and the poets carry their high spirits into their couplets. Even Xi-feng participates: She provides the first line and introduces the snowstorm as the subject of the poem. The participants start out taking turns, but as the most agile poets quickly get carried away the others are elbowed out of the poem. Xiang-yun, Dai-yu, Bao-chai, and Bao-qin end up in a free-for-all. Xiang-yun collapses with laughter, saying, “This isn’t verse-making. . . . It’s more like a duel to the death!” (SS II.50.494, HLM II.50.522). Xiang-yun’s capacity for living in the moment as well as her inventive intellect give her poems a special energy that set her apart from Bao-chai and Dai-yu, as indeed her level of sheer physical energy does. Her particular life-force has a distinctive voice in the Crab-Flower Club.

Xue Bao-qin’s poetry also has a distinctive voice, although her compositions tend to be ingenious rather than inspired. She acquires herself well in every exercise, but her most ambitious effort is a set of riddles on historical sites that she claims to have visited with her father. Her older cousin Bao-chai protests that two of her sites celebrate characters from plays, rather than strictly historical figures—the monastery at Pudong from the Romance of the Western Chamber and the Plum-Tree Shrine from The Peony Pavilion (Mudan ting Huanhun ji; also known as The Return of the Soul). Even Li Wan finds Bao-chai a bit priggish here and rules that the very fame of the stories lends the sites imaginatively associated with them authenticity (rather like associating Verona with Romeo and Juliet). With the garden’s chaperone arguing for the palpable existence of fictional creations, how can the young poets expect to distinguish fiction from truth?

That is precisely why Bao-chai regards, or affects to regard, such poems as a threat to the innocence of the garden. It is not so much that she feels that poetry and plays undermine authority—she is well aware that the authority patterns in the household are already far from ideal. But she understands, with regret, that the wish fulfillment so gratifying in literature is not to be found in everyday life, even in such a privileged household as this. Her critiques of poetry as an enterprise, therefore, are both ironic and self-ironizing. She can be hilariously pedantic:

“I shall call the next meeting,” said Bao-chai brightly. “There will be four themes for poems in Regular Verse and four for poems in other metres and everyone will have to do all eight of them. The first will be a three-hundred-line poem in pentasyllabics exhausting the rhyme ‘first.’ Its subject will be ‘On the Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate.’”

Bao-qin laughed.

“One can see that it isn’t really poetry you are interested in but in making things difficult for others.”

(SS II.52.539, HLM II.52.546)

Here Bao-chai is satirizing her own tendency to pedantic disquisitions, not just on poetry but on the futility of poetry as social exercise. She is far more generous with her chief rival, Dai-yu, whose genius in wit and poetic originality she readily acknowledges. When Dai-yu lampoons Grannie Liu’s visit to the garden in chapter 42, Bao-chai deadpans the role of commentator:

“The secret of [Dai-yu’s] sarcastic tongue is that she uses the method adopted by Confucius when he edited the Spring and Autumn Annals, that is to say, she extracts the essentials from vulgar speech and polishes and refines them, so that when she uses them to illustrate a point, each word or phrase is given its maximum possible effectiveness. The mere name ‘Old Mother Locust,’ for example, is sufficient to evoke the whole scene of yesterday’s party and everything that happened at it. What’s more, she is able to do this sort of thing almost without thinking.”

(SS II.42.335, HLM II.42.435)
Bao-chai’s attitude toward women’s poetry is one of self-doubting elitism, while Dai-yu’s, though just as elite, is far more optimistic about the role of poetry in women’s education. When Xue Pan’s concubine, Caltrup, begs to be taught to write poetry while her master is away on a long trading mission, Bao-chai laughs, but Dai-yu readily agrees to teach her. In order to refine Caltrup’s middletown tastes, Dai-yu sets her to reading the poetry of the Tang dynasty greats and admonishing her to learn from their example. Caltrup devours their poems and spends day and night reading and trying to write poetry. When Caltrup worries that she will never write good poetry, Tan-chun reminds her:

"Good heavens! we only write for the fun of it ourselves... You surely don’t imagine that what we write is good poetry? If we set ourselves up to be real poets, people outside this Garden who got to hear of it would laugh so loud that their teeth would drop out!"

(SS II.48.461, HLM II.48.502)

Tan-chun echoes Bao-chai, but Bao-yu reproves the girls for their general self-deprecation:

"That’s what Mencius calls ‘throwing yourself away’... You shouldn’t do that. The other day... [some of Father’s gentlemen] told me they had heard about our poetry club and asked if they could see some of our poems, so I wrote a few out for them from memory. I assure you, they were genuinely impressed. In fact, they have calligraphed them for blocks to have them printed.”...

"You really are the limit! Quite apart from the fact that the poems aren’t good enough, you have no business to go showing our stuff to people outside."

“What’s the harm?” said Bao-yu. “If those famous poems written by poetesses in days gone by had never been taken outside the women’s quarters, we shouldn’t know about them today.”

(SS II.48.461, HLM II.48.502)

Actually, all the poems by the garden’s female inhabitants are known to the outside world, by grace of the author of The Story of the Stone. The reader has access to works that might otherwise be lost, the chance to admire the authors and know their hearts, to appreciate their talent and receive instruction from their compositions; keeping in mind, of course, that these carefully preserved examples of women’s poetry are as much fictional creations as their authors are. It is part of the fulfillment of the vow Cao Xueqin made in the introduction to the novel to cherish and preserve the memory of the women he loved during his childhood: "however unsightly my own shortcomings might be, I must not, for the sake of keeping them hid, allow those wonderful girls to pass into oblivion without a memorial.”

The Story of the Stone may not preserve their actual poems, but it recreates a world in which such exceptional women could express themselves to the fullest and be understood.

Dai-yu’s "Songs for Five Fair Women" (Wuwu yin) take as their subject the heroic resolve of five notorious beauties of Chinese history (SS III.61.257–258, HLM II.64.696–697). Dai-yu gives their tales a tragic dimension, emphasizing not their roles as femmes d’histoire bringing ruin upon households and kingdoms, but on their unflinching confrontations with the disasters brought down around them. Xi Shi, Yu Ji, Wang Zhaojun, Green Pearl, and Red Duster are all portrayed as remaining true to themselves, refusing to compromise in their drive to find someone to understand their true worth or perish in the attempt. Dai-yu’s treatment of their careers provides a sharp contrast to the treatment of the women associated with the objects in Qin Ke-qing’s bedchamber, where their sensuality and its dangers overwhelm sense and senses. The chastity and integrity of Dai-yu’s character shine through in her original treatment of these archetypes and suggest that these figures are not well served in other hands. Although Dai-yu may not know what her destiny is, it is certain that her resolve will carry her through without compromise to her essential nature. Cao Xueqin records Dai-yu’s sympathy and insight and, in so doing, reinforces the purity of her character. He, at least, will not allow her to "throw herself away."

Dai-yu’s leadership of the garden’s poetry society is confirmed in chapter 70 when the others read her ballad “The Flower of the Peach” (Taohua xing). This is a long poem whose title, in addition to the association of peach blossoms with the essence of spring beauty and vitality, also evokes the ancient utopian theme of the Peach Blossom Spring (Taohua yuan). According to the legend, a fisherman following an unknown stream forgot himself, space, and time in contemplation of the beauty of flowering peach trees on the edge of the stream. At the end of the grove he found himself in a village cut off from the outside world, where everyone lived in harmony and no one suffered from envy or want. Happy as he was there, the fisherman grew homesick and departed. When he later tried to retrace his path, he could not find the stream, the trees, or the passage into the hidden village.66
Bao-chai has already praised Dai-yu’s originality in her treatment of the easily hackneyed themes of the five beauties. In “The Flower of the Peach” Dai-yu once again displays an unconventional imagination. While the title of the poem fixes the theme, Dai-yu’s rendition transforms the archetype. In this her achievement goes beyond any of her rivals, and the author demonstrates his unique gift of characterization; that is, not only in depicting a character truly capable of artistic innovation but in providing her with the credible fruits of poetic inspiration. Although Dai-yu is a fictional creation, her artistic excellence is genuine.

In “The Flower of the Peach,” Dai-yu breaks down the barrier between the flowering trees and the seeker, a maiden as lovely and fragile as the blossoms themselves. Indeed, she is a flower among the others, subject to the same short cycle of bloom, with this exception: she is sentient, and the flowers are not. She confers awareness upon them through the pathetic fallacy, but ultimately she knows that the trees do not share her melancholy or sense of doom. The flowers fade and die in due season, but if she follows them her season would be cut short.

Dai-yu does not hope for another spring, another chance to discover the lost secret of the peach blossoms. Instead of taking comfort in the prospect of a longer life, the girl who was the Crimson Pearl Flower in her previous existence is ineluctably drawn to melancholy contemplation of her flower-nature. In one sense she is right. Because of her illness, Dai-yu is indeed not long for this world. What she cannot know is that death, for her, will be a release from illusion and a return to her true state of being, the immortal Crimson Pearl Flower. In that avatar, she will embody the essence of the flowers more completely than any earthly flower could. Dai-yu’s experience of mortality, however poetically transcendent, is still only a matter of illusion. When she compares the present evanescence but ultimate recurrence of the peach blossoms to her own evanescence (which she does not realize will bring her to her proper home in the cosmos), she emphasizes the very delusion from which her present life is supposed to liberate her. Dai-yu’s glimpse of the nature of the peach blossoms, in that sense, is like Bao-yu’s frisson of inaccessible memory when he first views the Hall of Reunion in the garden (chapter 17). Even her powers of intuition cannot lead Dai-yu to this realization because the only person with knowledge of all aspects of her being is the author himself. Cao Xueqin has created a convincing portrait of poetic genius, complete with worthy if minor works from “her” hands, but uses her lyrical insight to point to the inadequacy of lyrical insight. Is his only purpose to emphasize the necessity of her return to the Realm of the Void, or is it an admonition to the reader, to remember that his own book, however brilliant and illuminating, still operates within the limits of human consciousness?

Fired with enthusiasm for Dai-yu’s piece, the members of the Crab-Flower Club, which has not met for more than a year, vote to revive their society and change its name to the Peach-Flower Club (Tiohua she). It is spring, a chance for a new beginning. The former idealized state of the poetry club, however, like the location of the Peach Blossom Spring, is not easily recovered.

When Bao-yu reads “The Flower of the Peach,” he has not been told who the author is. He recognizes Dai-yu’s voice immediately, just as immediately understands her intent, and is moved to tears. When teased by Bao-qin about his certainty, he explains: “Cousin Lin writes like this because she has actual experience of grief” (SS III.70.380, HLM II.70.764). He cannot mean that the others have never experienced grief; both Bao-qin’s parents are dead, Bao-chai’s father died long ago, and Xiang-yun has been an orphan since infancy. It is as if Bao-yu has an intuitive sense of the debt of tears. Others experience grief, but eventually heal. Dai-yu never recovers from any loss or hurt. While she suffers from a serious illness, her spiritual suffering is also a fundamental part of her being, necessary to her loneliness and loveableness, even as it is fatal to herself and those who love her.

Indeed, most of Dai-yu’s poems are preoccupied, if not with death, with the passing of the seasons, loss, and decay. Later in the same chapter, Xiang-yun suggests trying another genre, ci (song lyrics), which are usually on informal, even light-hearted themes. The theme is willow floss—light enough. Dai-yu focuses exclusively on the catkins’ demise, at the mercy of the unceasing wind. All admire the poem, but remark on its pessimism. Dai-yu’s vivid imagination always has darkness at its heart.

In addition to writing poems at the poetry meetings, members of the garden’s society pair off to compose, enriching our insight into their relationships. Bao-chai and Xiang-yun’s collaboration on the titles for the Chrysanthemum Suite is an example of this. Indeed, Xiang-yun is often one of a pair and is crucial to these special intimacies. Notably, Bao-yu never exchanges poems or composes à deux. Xiang-yun is essentially remote, even though she is her cousins’ equal in talent. Dai-yu actually recognizes her as an equal but unthreatening talent, perhaps because Xiang-yun’s style, while often brilliant, never diminishes her own. In another sense, Xiang-yun is Dai-yu’s most compatible partner.
because she is a plausible substitute for Bao-yu. She is often described as a Bao-yu look-alike, and her brand of spontaneity and sympathy is a feminized version of Bao-yu’s own style—so inappropriate in a boy, but within the bounds of decorum in a tomboyish girl.  

In one of the last beautiful moments in the garden, Xiang-yun and Dai-yu compose linked pentameters. The poetry club is in decline; Dai-yu’s attempt to resuscitate it with “The Flower of the Peach” has fallen flat, in part because Bao-yu is under renewed pressure from his father to devote his time to serious study. But the girls have one last chance. Under a brilliant moon, Xiang-yun rallies her cousin’s spirits:

“All that talk about spending Mid-Autumn night enjoying the moon together and using the occasion to revive the Poetry Club with another linked couplets session—and then, when the time comes, they leave us in the lurch and go off to enjoy the moon by themselves! No Poetry Club, no linked couplets, nothing! . . . Never mind. Since the others haven’t come, we’ll make up some linked couplets ourselves and take them along tomorrow to shame them with.”

(SS III.76.513-514, HLM II.76.836)

Linked couplets balance cooperation and competition, a perfect medium for these two.  

Although she sometimes has extravagant notions, Xiang-yun knows the meaning of compromise and is able to find happiness in less than ideal circumstances. She is an appropriate and effective substitute for Bao-yu in moments of intimacy that would not be possible for two people of opposite sex. Xiang-yun’s capacity for reflection and equanimity can fortify and encourage Dai-yu. Here, they bring out the best in each other. Standing under a radiant moon in a water pavilion, Dai-yu is comforted, and when Xiang-yun wishes for a boat and wine to complete her happiness, Dai-yu reminds her of the old saying, “Who seeks perfection must abandon joy” (SS III.76.515, HLM II.76.829). They then compose a poem celebrating the present moment, even as its melancholy tone acknowledges the end of their childhood. In a sense, the Concave Pavilion (Aoqing guan) in which they stand recalls their best days, when the children could reach out to the limits of their fancies to name all the sites in their artificial paradise, and their world was full of promise. They celebrate the Mid-Autumn Feast with images of companionship and the poetry games that did not take place that night. The couplets then turn to the overwhelming night, as the music dies, the toadstools sprout, and a stork flashes over the water in the darkness. The rhyme is difficult, and Dai-yu seems to exhaust it by turning to an image of herself: “Where, moon-embalmed, a dead muse lies in state” (Leung yue zang shi hun) (SS III.76.522, HLM II.76.842). Xiang-yun is admiring, but rueful:

“Excellent! Couldn’t be better! I love your ‘dead muse’!” She sighed. “I mean excellent from a purely poetic point of view, because it’s so original. It’s a bit morbid, though.” . . .

“With you to compete against, how else could I keep my end up?” said Dai-yu.

(SS III.76.522, HLM II.842)

At this point, the redoubtable Adamantina, the unshorn nun who has taken up residence at the Jia family’s Green Bower Hermitage, a secluded retreat within the garden, surprises them. Adamantina is a symbolic twin of Dai-yu, a glimpse of what Dai-yu might have been had her parents heeded the monk’s warning and taken steps to shelter her from contact with anyone but her mother and father. Like Dai-yu, Adamantina is a young woman of the most exquisite taste, with considerable poetic talent, but she takes it for granted that her position as a privileged Buddhist practitioner has set her apart from the lesser mortals who populate the world. Actually, Adamantina has taken only “half-vows”—she has cut her hair, but not shaved her head, signs of her parents’ attempt to compromise with her destiny: A wandering monk (yes, Impervioso) warned them that if she did not take vows she would meet a tragic fate. Her presence as the Jia’s pet religious in the garden indicates her underlying ambivalence. Her obsession with the forms of purity and refinement point to her equivocal state of existence; the appearance of being above the red dust is not the same as being free from it.

Adamantina praises the girls’ exercise in pure refinement, but admonishes them to stop: “There were lines which, in spite of their excellence, contained a note of almost decadent melancholy, lines which made me fearful for the person uttering them” (522, 524). She takes them back to her hermitage for tea, then undertakes to bring the poem back to the “proper aspect” (zhengqing zhenxu). Adamantina adds thirteen couplets of her own (the original number from which they derived the rhyme word), brings the poem and the poets to the light of morning, and reminds them of the evanescence of poetry:
Why should this rapt enjoyment end in sorrow,
Or timid cares our conscience irritate?
Poets ought in themselves to find their pleasure,
Not in the message they communicate.

(SS III.76.525, HLM II.76.843)

Adamantina is a creature of absurdly self-conscious fastidiousness,
but is apparently oblivious to the irony of her implicit chastisement of
the girls, particularly Dai-yu, for their unfeminine behavior in overin-
vesting their poetry with personal significance. Dai-yu’s poetry, at least,
is more significant than Adamantina can ever imagine. Dai-yu creates
images of self in her poetry that, on the one hand, foreshadow, and, on
the other, precipitate her own destruction. Her obsession with poetry as
the ultimate form of communication and self-expression, especially
with Bao-yu, will provoke Dai-yu’s last great grief, the last spurt of tears
before her debt is paid.

The poems written in the garden are idealized celebrations of a
place that is already an ideal. In order to survive their necessary depart-
ture from the garden, the children must heed the potential of poetry as
a vehicle for the development of self-awareness, if not awareness of the
vanity of existence. After his dream of the palace of the fairy Disen-
chantment in chapter 5, Bao-yu learns his first important lesson in the
significance of poetry for life at the hands of Bao-chai. Exasperated by
the noise level of the theatrical entertainments at a birthday party, Bao-
yu demands to know why a cultivated girl like his cousin keeps select-
ing racy scenes like Zhi-shen at the Monastery Gate instead of the qui-
eter, more sentimental scenes that he himself favors. Tactfully not
mentioning the fact that Grandmother Jia, the hostess, has a preference
for the more vigorous style, Bao-chai points out that Bao-yu is neither
hearing the music nor listening to the words, which contain deep emo-
tion and transcendence. When Bao-chai recites a “Clinging Vine” aria
from the play in a low voice, just for his benefit, he can focus on its qual-
ity. The aria is the lament of the disgraced monk Lu Zhi-shen, who has
been dismissed from his monastery for wreaking drunken havoc,
knocking down a pavilion, and smashing the guardian gods at the
monastery gate. When he bids farewell to his abbot, however, he ex-
presses genuine commitment and regret:

“I dash aside the manly tear
And take leave of my monkish home.

A word of thanks to you, my Master dear,
Who tissued me before the Lotus Throne:
’Twas not my luck to stay with you,
And in a short while I must say adieu,
Naked and friendless through the world to roam.
I ask no goods, no gear to take away,
Only straw sandals and a broken bowl,
To beg from place to place as best I may.”

(SS I.22.435, HLM I.22.211)

Although Lu Zhi-shen had entered the monastery unwillingly, on
the run from the law and without vocation, his genuine calling to the
Buddhist faith begins with his exile from its community. After Bao-yu is
“enlightened” by Bao-chai, he wreaks havoc in his own community.
Trying to avoid a quarrel, he offends both Dai-yu and Xiang-yun and has
the door shut in his face by the one and is told off by the other. Recall-
ing the aria, he experiences the self-pity (“Naked and friendless through
the world to roam”) without the self-realization. He even goes so far as
to write a callow imitation of a Buddhist gāthā and his own “Clinging
Vine” style verse to accompany it:

I swear, you swear,
With heart and mind declare;
But our protest
Is no true test.
It would be best
Words unexpressed
To understand,
And on that ground
To take our stand.

You would have been at fault, if not for me;
But why should I care if they disagree?
Free come, free go, let nothing bar or hold me!

(SS I.22.440–441, HLM I.22.214)

When Dai-yu discovers this doggerel she shows it to Bao-chai and
Xiang-yun, and all three go to his room to untangle his inadequate para-
dox. This is the first of many non-enlightenments for Bao-yu:
Bao-yu had in fact believed that he had attained an Enlightenment... He consoled himself with the reflection that if they, whose understanding was so superior, were manifestly still so far from Enlightenment, it was obviously a waste of time for him to go on pursuing it.

(SS I.23.443, HLM I.22.215)

Bao-yu may make light of the transcendent powers of poetry from plays, but Dai-yu responds very differently. In chapter 23, she overhears the Jia family's troupe of actresses practicing their arias and has an epiphany of the verses' power to speak to her mood. The lines, from an exchange between the lovers in The Return of the Soul, are of love and hopeless longing. The actresses' voices bring a revelation of the beauty of the play, and an overwhelming feeling of identity and hopelessness:

"And the bright air, the brilliant morn
Feed my despair.
Joy and gladness have withdrawn
To other gardens, other halls..."

"It's true," she thought, "there is good poetry even in plays. What a pity most people think of them only as entertainment. A lot of the real beauty in them must go unappreciated."...

She listened again...

"Because for you, my flowerlike fair,
The swift years like the water flow..."

The words moved her to the depths of her being.

"I have sought you everywhere,
And at last I find you here,
In a dark room full of woe..."

(SS I.23.466, HLM I.23.227)

Dai-yu goes into a virtual fugue of recalled lines of poetry, all alluding to the death of the flowers, the relentless passing of spring, the inevitable death of youth and beauty blighted without romantic love. She even has some awareness of the effect this power has on her, as illustrated by a line from Romance of the Western Chamber: "As flowers fall and flowing stream runs red, / A thousand sickly fancies crowd the mind" (SS I.23.467, HLM I.23.227). Instead of illuminating her mind to the fact that her situation is by no means unique, she gives herself over to the moment completely, and, were it not for the arrival of the solicitous Caltrop, she might have wept for hours.

Although the children must have watched scenes from these plays dozens of times, their language does not become part of Bao-yu and Dai-yu's intimate dialect until they have read the original texts in their entirety. Bao-yu, unfortunately, tends to offend his cousin when he cites them, going straight to the heart of a matter she finds mortifyingly delicate. This is a core feature of their relationship: When Bao-yu finally brings himself to speak of his affection, or alludes to it carelessly (as something so thoroughly understood between them that it needs no delicate indirectness), Dai-yu rebuffs and upbraids him. She takes his carelessness as a sign of trivializing her feelings. For a boy like Bao-yu the opposite is true: His attachment to Dai-yu is so complete that it is an unsconscious part of his being. It is only through the constant discipline of her oversensitivity that he learns to restrain his direct expression of emotion, ultimately to the detriment of both of them.

In chapter 26, Bao-yu overhears Dai-yu quoting from Romance of the Western Chamber: "Each day in a drowsy waking dream of love" (SS I.26.516, HLM I.26.256). Bao-yu laughs, recognizing "their" play—to whom could the lines refer but to himself? Dai-yu is terribly embarrassed and pretends still to be asleep. Bao-yu is touched by her sleep-flushed face and lets it go, then immediately missteps by thanking Nightingale for tea with another quote from the same play: "If with your amorous mistress I should wed, / 'Tis you, sweet maid, must make our bridal bed" (SS I.26.517, HLM I.26.257). Bao-yu is speaking too directly, and this offends both Dai-yu's maidenly modesty and her agonizing insecurity. Accusing him of dredging up coarse expressions to make fun of her, she flings back at him the enhanced communion the play affords them. It is a source of endless frustration to Bao-yu that, although he and Dai-yu are fluent in the same secret language, she refuses to speak to him in it.

Dai-yu is right to be cautious up to a point. The poetry in plays is beautiful, but plays are dangerous territory precisely because they are associated with romantic release. Bao-chai is able to appreciate their poetry well enough to teach its power to others, but she is also ready to warn of its dangers. During a drinking game in honor of Granville Liu (chapter 40), Dai-yu thoughtlessly quotes from The Return of the Soul...
and Romance of the Western Chamber to keep up her end of the game. Fortunately for her, only Bao-chai notices. It is one thing to listen to these plays during a family party, but quite another to reveal detailed familiarity with the texts. These are forbidden books, and knowledge of them is not to be revealed in a public context. The next day, Bao-chai summons Dai-yu to an inquisition.

"What were those things I heard you saying yesterday? Come now, the truth!" . . .

Dai-yu cast her mind back and remembered, blushing, that the day before, when stumped for an answer, she had got through her turn by citing passages from The Return of the Soul and The Western Chamber. She hugged Bao-chai imploringly.

"Dear coz! I really don’t know. I just said them without thinking. If you tell me not to, I promise not to say them again."

(SS II.42.332, HLM II.42.434)

Bao-chai then proceeds to give Dai-yu a good deal of sisterly advice on the dangers of poetry and plays for young people in general, young women in particular. Although the homily suggests acquiescence in social norms, her words imply no quiet resignation:

"So, you see, in the case of us girls it would probably be better for us if we never learned to read in the first place. Even boys, if they gain no understanding from their reading, would do better not to read at all; and if that is true of boys, it certainly holds good for girls like you and me. The little poetry-writing and calligraphy we indulge in is not really our proper business. Come to that, it isn’t a boy’s proper business either. . . . And unfortunately, it isn’t merely a case of their being led astray by what they read. The books, too, are spoiled by the false interpretations they put upon them. . . . What do we need to be able to read for? But since we can read, let us confine ourselves to good, improving books; let us avoid like the plague those pernicious works of fiction, which so undermine the character that in the end it is past reclaiming."

(SS II.42.333–334, HLM II.42.425)

This is not just a pompous disquisition on the dangers of art by an officious young woman anxious to one-up her brilliant cousin. Bao-chai echoes the Stone himself, deploying the false interpretations encour-

aged by meretricious romancers. More unhappily, Bao-chai’s professed views on women’s education are ambivalent because she has already resigned herself to limited expectations for intellectual and emotional fulfillment in adulthood. Her speech is an ironic commentary on the opportunities for self-discovery and self-expression by women, however talented and educated. Since the world affords them so little scope for fulfillment in these areas—not just in the realm of literary achievement but in all the social realms they can encounter through poetry, plays, and fiction, including emotional and romantic fulfillment—they might indeed be happier if they never had their horizons of possibility broadened. If a girl seeks fulfillment in the mundane world, she must make the best of what will be hers. If Bao-chai’s is the voice of reason, it is certainly tinged with irony, if not outright regret.

Dai-yu not only acknowledges the truth in Bao-chai’s pronouncements, she is grateful for her cousin’s concern and discretion. She admits that if she had been the one to catch Bao-chai, she would not have been able to resist exposing her in public. This encounter becomes the basis of a rapprochement between the two rivals. We could see their opposition, cosmologically and temperamentally, in their previous relationship, but from this point their cosmic complementarity is translated into a mutually supportive friendship. Bao-chai and Dai-yu are not just the two essential halves of Bao-yu’s ideal woman; they exemplify two approaches to the possibilities of life for women of gentry families. Neither could find happiness or fulfillment without the other. The artistic temperament must find a grounding in social necessity; the perfect, dutiful woman will wither without dreams and sense awareness. When these two are separated, both are diminished. When Bao-chai marries Bao-yu, she loses her friend as grievously as Bao-yu loses his love.

Some time later, Bao-yu manages to quote from Romance of the Western Chamber without offending Dai-yu. Puzzled by Dai-yu’s rapprochement with Bao-chai, he asks: "Since when did Meng Guang accept Liang Hong’s tray?" (SS II.49.477, HLM II.49.510). In this case, there is no romantic insinuation, and Dai-yu explains the incident in full. Freed from the threat of romance, Dai-yu can safely reveal her knowledge.

Imagining themselves cast in their favorite dramatic works is one of the most dangerous games the lovers play. The penalty for forgetting the distinction between the roles they adore and their own lives is literally death, at least for Dai-yu. In The Return of the Soul, the heroine dies of longing, then is resurrected by the power of her lover’s devotion. That is magic and fiction. Dai-yu cannot be revived by Bao-yu after her
death; she does not even visit his dreams. *Romance of the Western Chamber* is a reworking of the Tang dynasty short story by Yuan Zhen (779–861), "The Story of Ying-ying." The original story is tragic: Ying-ying is a brilliant, spirited, and contrary beauty; her lover is an opportunistic cad. In the dramas based on this story, the lover is reformed and returns to his beleaguered fiancée covered with honors. Dai-yu’s touchy and passionate temperament evokes Ying-ying’s, but she makes a mistake in clinging to the play and forgetting that the original, Bao-yu is no cad. Dai-yu dies without knowing that he is faithful to her. If she regards herself as the living heiress of Ying-ying’s archetype, she should have recalled into conscious memory the original from which the happily-ever-after version was transformed.

The play that most evokes Dai-yu’s destiny is one that is obscure to almost all the guests at an entertainment arranged by Jia Zheng’s in-laws to celebrate his promotion to the rank of permanent secretary, in chapter 89. The selection is "The Transfiguration" ("Ming sheng") from *The Palace of Pearls (Ruizhu gong)*. The play explores the relationship between the mortal and immortal realms through the story of the moon goddess, Chang E, and her love for a mortal man. So great is her passion that she leaves her heavenly abode to pursue a mortal life with her lover. At the moment of fulfillment, the bodhisattva Guanyin enlightens her as to the vanity of attachment. She dies before her marriage can take place and returns to her proper place in the heavens. None of the members of the Jia household know this play, but they should recognize its main character. The day of the party is Dai-yu’s birthday, and she arrives at the festivities looking "exactly like the Goddess of the Moon descending to Earth" (SS IV.85.131, HLM III.85.948–949). Like Chang E, the Crimson Pearl Flower is a being of celestial origin whose love of a mortal clouds her perception of the emptiness of mortal attachment, but whose awakening to that emptiness can be achieved only through experiencing the pain of love and loss. Dai-yu’s career on earth is destined to follow that of the archetype in this play, and no other.

There are others in the garden who act as if the world of plays were real. In chapter 58, Bao-yu rescues one of the resident actresses, Nunuphar (Ou guan), from punishment when she is caught in the garden burning an offering to a deceased friend who used to play opposite her in romantic roles. The elder Jias deplore such superstitious manifestations, but Bao-yu is deeply moved by the girl’s gesture. Nunuphar keeps her friend’s memory alive by mourning her as if she really had been lovers. The actress can be seen either as utterly deluded by plays or as potentially participating in the process of awakening to the vanity of existence propounded by the Stone for the readers of his book; namely, entering the realm of form and attachment through the role she plays, awakening to passion, then realizing its vanity—it’s only a play!—and reaching spiritual liberation. Several of the actresses, in fact, resolve their disillusionment with the world and the vanity of their enterprise by entering a convent in all sincerity. They awaken to the vanity of existence through the experience of plays. Or is it the shock of realization that life is not like art? They have always known that they had no social prospects because of their class and trade, but they find that they have vast spiritual prospects by virtue of their practice of that trade.

There are many occasions when the significance of poetry is clear to the reader yet most of the characters remain oblivious. Poetry composition and appreciation play a major role at the festive gatherings associated with seasonal holidays or family celebrations and often illuminate feelings of emotional attachment that otherwise go unexpressed and unacknowledged. In chapter 22, Bao-yu’s father shows an unwonted sensitivity when Bao-yu, his sisters, and female cousins compose a set of systematically foreshadowing riddles in poetic form. These riddles are conceived in the tradition of yongwu poetry (poems about objects). This thematic subgenre of poetry uses an object to build up a central image, which is both intrinsically and metaphorically appropriate to the author’s expressive purpose. Such poems may have political significance (a politician becomes a parrot in a gold cage or a giant dead tree), but not necessarily (a wild goose embodies the poet’s longing for home, a peony a woman of marriageable age). The occasion is a party that takes place during the Lantern Festival, inspired by an exchange of riddles with the imperial concubine, Bao-yu’s elder sister Yuan-chun. The festivities begin with the contribution of Bao-yu’s straight-laced father Jia Zheng, whose riddle of a plain inkstone is a fair image of his own limited talent and inflexibility. The children then, one after another, unself-consciously compose riddles about objects that are metaphors for themselves. 

Yuan-chun’s firework embodies her flashy rise and rapid extinction as "an object of amusement" (wanwu, the clue she sends with the riddle) for the emperor. Tan-chun’s kite (her leitmotif), Dai-yu’s self-consuming incense clock, Bao-chai’s poignant “bamboo wife” (zhuifen), a wicker cylinder that helps keep the sheets from sticking to a sleeper during the summer but is discarded when the season changes—all are apt metaphors, and all are foreboding. Curiously enough, only Jia Zheng seems to understand them, and the unsympathetic fellow is plunged
into dejection. It is the first intimation that anyone on the mundane level can catch a glimpse of the future, or the truth.

Bao-yu’s self-revealing riddle is perhaps the most apt, as it exemplifies both the boy’s susceptibility and his inability to find release from it:

Southward you stare
He’ll northward glare.
Grieve, and he’s sad.
Laugh, and he’s glad.

(SS 1.22.449, HLM 1.22.218)

Bao-yu’s extraordinary sympathy with the girls is what makes his enlightenment possible, by virtue of the suffering it inflicts on both himself and his loved ones. At this stage, of course, he is incapable of understanding it. As a “mirror,” he reflects the emotion of anyone with whom he is in contact, but it is just a reflection. To an adolescent, perfect reflection may seem like perfect sympathy, but an adult knows all too well the limited possibilities of such a response. There is something terribly unchildlike about all the riddles. Jia Zheng is unable to speak his feelings, but inwardly he is quite overcome:

“Enough is enough!” he thought. “What can it be that makes these innocent young creatures all produce language that is so tragic and inauspicious? It is almost as if they were all destined to be unfortunate and short-lived and were unconsciously foretelling their destiny.”

(SS 1.22.450, HLM 1.22.218)

A drinking game in chapter 63 contains another set of poetic prophecies for the girls and Bao-yu. In honor of Bao-yu’s birthday, his maids organize a late-night party and invite the young ladies over for a game of “Choosing the Flower” (zhanhua ming’er). This game is played with a set of ivory tiles, each painted with a different flower and including ingenious directions on whom, and how, each player should toast and be toasted. The flowers are labeled with captions and a line of poetry capturing their symbolic essence, and, incidentally, the essence of the young lady who has chosen the tile. In this way, the girls all unwittingly tell their fortunes again, many echoing the prophecies of chapter 5.

The first to choose is Bao-chai, who selects the peony (mudan), titled “Empress of the Garden” (yanguan qunfang), with an inscription by the Tang poet Luo Yin: “Yourself lack passion, yet can others move” (SS III 63.224, HLM 116.680). While the merry company carries out the instructions for drinking and singing on the back of the tile, Bao-yu picks up Bao-chai’s tile and muses abstractedly on Luo Yin’s line, so perfect an expression of the effect of Bao-chai’s beauty and deportment. The implicit text, however, is even more important. This is Book of Songs (Shi jing) 95, “Qin Wei.” The poem is a betrothal song in which a young lady and a young lord participate in a spring festival. Enjoying the beauty of the landscape, the lady invites the lord to walk with her and presents him with a peony:

When the Chen and Wei
Are running in full flood
Is the time for knights and ladies
To fill their arms with scented herbs.
The lady says, “Have you looked?”
The knight says, “Yes, I have finished looking;
Shall we go and look a little more?
Beyond the Wei
It is very open and pleasant.”
That knight and lady
Merrily they sport.
Then she gives him a peony.

By picking up the tile with the peony, Bao-yu symbolically betrothes himself to Bao-chai. When it is Dai-yu’s turn, she draws the hibiscus (fuyang hua; “Mourner of the Autumn Mere”). The tile instructs “Hibiscus” to take 2 cups of wine with “Peony,” and the cousins drink together. The accompanying line of poetry on the tile is by the Song poet Ou-yang Xiu: “Your own self, not the East Wind, is your undoing” (SS III 63.228, HLM 116.682). The meaning of the line of poetry on Dai-yu’s tile is clear enough, but her association with the hibiscus flower becomes clear only after the death of Skybright (Qing-wen), Bao-yu’s clever but fatally beautiful and outspoken maid. In looks, sensitivity, and wit, Skybright is Dai-yu translated into the status of a purchased body servant. Also like Dai-yu, Skybright is infected with tuberculosis. Skybright’s agony does not last long, as she is driven from the garden during Lady Wang’s puritanical raid in chapter 77. Tossed into the squalor of her callous cousin’s house, she bids farewell to her master and succumbs to her disease. Des-
perate for consolation, Bao-yu persuades himself that she has not died but, rather, returned to the realm of the immortals from which she came, to resume her duties as the spirit of the hibiscus. He composes and declaims an ode to her in that persona. As he finishes, he is approached by a young woman who appears to be Skybright herself. It is Dai-yu, who, overhearing the ode, is moved to praise it and offer some suggestions. She focuses especially on the lines:

The young man in his crimson-curtained bed
must seem most cruelly afflicted;
And the maiden beneath the yellow earth must
seem most cruelly ill-fated.

(SS III.79.582, HLM II.79.875)

Dai-yu, however, points out that the image of the "crimson-curtained bed" and the phrases "young man" and "maiden" seem too clichéd. Bao-yu hits on something much more direct in his revision:

I by my rosy-misted casement seem most cruelly
afflicted;
And you beneath the yellow earth seem most cru-
elly ill-fated

(SS III.79.584, HLM II.79.876)

Bao-yu is oblivious, but Dai-yu is struck with a horrid premonition as these lines, merely pathetic before, speak to her deepest and most justified fears. Dai-yu drew the hibiscus before Skybright was assimilated to it, but Skybright's death and translation to a flower spirit, however fanciful, presage Dai-yu's destiny as well. Bao-yu's ode mourns them both. 41

After the death of Dai-yu, Bao-yu realizes the insufficiency of poetry either to express his feelings or to recall what he has lost. Recalled lines of poetry bring him no comfort. Musing on lines from one of the greatest romances in the tradition, the "Song of Everlasting Sorrow" (Changwen ge, also translated as Song of Enduring Grief), by the Tang poet Bo Juyi (772-846), he lights on the eternity of loss that attends such an abiding love: "Since death's parting, slow and sad the year has been;
/ Even in my dreams, her soul has not been seen" (SS V.109.174, HLM III.109.118). Nothing he can do can recall Dai-yu's spirit to comfort him. His own poetic inspiration seems to have dried up completely. He is quite unable to compose an ode to honor her life or her spirit. Is it be-

cause he has lost his jade? Or is his acceptance of her loss the beginning of his awakening to the jade's true significance?

Bao-yu, unable to invoke her by any volitional means, must wait for a transmission from the Land of Illusion. When his lost jade is unexpectedly returned to him in chapter 115 by Impervious, in spirit form, Bao-yu follows the monk back to the Land of Illusion. Here he is struck by the resemblance of the Paradise of Truth to his own Garden of Total Vision. Over the doorway of the chamber of the Celestial Registers is an inscription he is finally ready to read: "Awaken from Love's Folly" (Yinjue qingchi).

This is Bao-yu's extraordinary second chance to examine the Registers and learn, once and for all, the fates of the girls he cherishes. He is not distracted this time by the sensual stimuli of the court of the fairy Disenchantment, and when he reads the Registers a second time he understands their contents at once. Even then, Bao-yu has not arrived at the point of full awakening to the vanity of attachment. Denied more than a glimpse of a fairy lady whom he thinks must be Dai-yu, the still worldly young man is crushed to be cut off without a word. The monk admonishes him that all he needs to know is in the Registers, whose poems he has been granted the privilege of seeing twice. Those riddling poems read so long ago were indeed the key to the illusion that Bao-yu, and the reader, have played with for so long. Could words from the mundane world, however inspired, have such significance? Perhaps they could, but no revelation could result in awakening until the moment was right.