

A Comparative Approach to the Eternising Poetry of Feng Zhi and Ugo Foscolo

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Abstract

This paper aims at bridging two literary corpora establishing a theme close to the heart of a number of poets who engaged with Romantic leitmotifs: the eternising function of poetry. In order to define this poetic stance, evocative examples of two key writers are adopted for close examination: select sonnets of modern Chinese poet Feng Zhi and select verses from the poems of Italian neo-Classical writer Ugo Foscolo. Both Feng Zhi and Ugo Foscolo make reference to the corruptibility of man's body. The ultimate purpose of poetry, as seen in the lyrical excerpts, is to immortalise what is generally conceived as ephemeral, be it the mortal beauty of a friend, the historical achievements of a nation, the quests of heroes or even the transient moments of human life. Poetry, unlike material tokens, becomes a unique product of human sensitivity and génie as it provides unequivocal fame and permanence in a world that is affected by time and its relentless corrosive power. The lyrical verses of Feng Zhi and Ugo Foscolo therefore become ever-lasting testimonials or symbols of historical memory for future generations, which can produce heroic sentiments in the case of the Italian carme or nostalgia and endurance on the Chinese side.

Introduction

Modern literary texts in China and the West highlight one of the main concerns of the poet, who as a modern intellectual, comes to terms with the historical and social conditions of his own country or "nation-to-be": the relationship with his community and the epitomised purpose of poetry. Although national literary corpora and cultures are conceived by people of different regions, one can identify basic universal traits. These belong to "all humans" as authors of a holistic cultural expression and gradually evolve given differences in geographical environments and social history. With the widespread of culture and communication, critics can undertake cross-cultural observations since heterogeneous cultures ultimately embody significant characteristics of compatibility under the influence of the so-called "human culture" (Zhang 2002, p.118). It is therefore no surprise that a well-read intellectual like Goethe concluded that one should rather talk about "world literature" instead of "national literature"(see D'haen, pp.5-6).

In light of such assertion, the selected literary texts presented in this paper elucidate the positive and eternising function attributed to poetry by modern Chinese lyricist Feng Zhi (1905-1993) and by Italian neo-Classical writer Ugo Foscolo (1778-1827). It is worth noting that both Feng Zhi and Ugo Foscolo, in spite of living in distally and temporally separated communities, embody two models of the same intellectual who experienced socio-cultural change during two significant periods of transition in what are now known as China and Italy.

Literary Analyses

As Chinese critics have stressed throughout the ages, poetry in China, whether in its classical, modern or contemporary styles, is in itself an eternal theme. In fact, when examining the role of spiritual cohesion in poetry, contemporary poet Wang Jiuxin 王久辛 (1959-) has asserted that odes belonging to the *Shijing* 诗经 (*Book of Songs*), have relentlessly touched the hearts of people for thousands of years (Huang 2009, p.1). Poetry, therefore, can be regarded as an everlasting phenomenon in China where verse writing seemingly appeared alongside the invention of writing. The influence of poetry in Chinese society has always been strong since time immemorial and the same can be said about English literature with its linguistic and cultural projection into the English-speaking world: children reciting

classical rhymes, poetic excerpts being found in contemporary music, slogans in commercials and advertisements and even quotes from the classics featuring in contemporary films and television series (Feng 2009, p.165).

During the Republican Era (1919-1949), a conspicuous number of Chinese intellectuals began to look at Western models in order to re-evaluate the importance and transmission of tradition. The consequent result was the experimentation by literati of new literary forms that could best suit the prosody and modern linguistic structures of the “new” Chinese literary language. On a similar note, Italian intellectuals during the Napoleonic Era looked at the forms of Classical Greek art to seek a world of harmony, beauty, vitality and serenity which was in stark opposition with their inert and obscure present. For Foscolo, the Classical world becomes a nostalgic dimension in which he finds refuge from all historical traumas, an alternative to political disenchantment, despotism and the ferocious nature of war. The neo-Classical view of Foscolo meets the post-Romantic attitude of Feng Zhi, as both writers fondly gaze at their worlds through a Romantic nostalgic soul. If Foscolo does not look at the Classical world as a lost and far-distant dimension, so does the lyrical persona in the Chinese sonnets who also believes to be the living witness and heir to a long tradition. As Foscolo asserts, the Italian civilisation carries the spirit and forms of the classical Greek tradition and, as appears from the ode “All’amica risanata” (“Ode To His Lady on Her Recovery”, 1802), the poet acts as poetic mediator between the two.

Foscolo lived in a period animated by a debate between neo-Classical and pre-Romantic writers. The former claimed that the Greeks and Romans had already achieved perfection in art and therefore the task of the poet was to imitate the ancients and re-propose those themes and myths. The latter, on the other hand, claimed that poetry should be spontaneous, free from all social and literary frets, inspired by nature, and therefore be popular. Foscolo succeeded in reconciling the two currents into a poetry that, while taking up the myths and techniques of the classical poets, also deals with purely Romantic themes, such as that of love in the aforementioned “Ode To His Lady on Her Recovery”. Written to celebrate the healing of a woman with whom Foscolo had had a love affair, the ode features two characterising aspects: the transfiguration of the poet’s reality and life from a classicistic perspective, and the concept of poetry as dispenser of immortality. Poetry is conceived as the only means for redemption from death and oblivion, two characteristics of the human condition.

In the first part of the ode, the poet exalts the external beauty of the woman by describing the activities of her mundane life. In the central stanza, poetry is allegorically connected with beauty. The last part contains the description of three divinities, emphasising their mortal aspect. The lyrical persona concludes by saying that she too will become a divinity through his poetry because her beauty is now immortal:

Qual dagli antri marini L’aspro più caro a Venere Co’ rugiadosi crini Fra le fuggenti tenebre Appare, il suo viaggio Orna col lume dell’eterno raggio;	As from the secret seacaves The star most dear to Venus With dewy hair appears Among the fleeting darkness, to effuse light’s Perennial ornament along its way;
Sorgon così tue dive Membra dall’agro talamo, E in te beltà rivive...	Just so do your divine Limbs rise from the sick bed, And beauty in you revives... (Foscolo translated in Gambon 1980, p.122)

The ultimate goal of the ode is in fact to crystallise the memory of the transient beauty of a healed friend. This concept is given further depth in the patriotic poem “Dei Sepolcri” (“On Sepulchres”, 1807). Here, in fact, the patriotic value and the character of memory is exalted in the example of the battle of Marathon, in which the death of so many Greeks and Persians is emphasised not so much as for the example of heroism they leave for posterity, ensuring that they will inspire new enterprises in other Athenian heroes. Nonetheless, the graves are not enough to pass on to posterity the fame of the

deceased person, as tombs become ruins; on the other hand, poetry becomes eternal and from this derives its importance in handing down glorious and immortal examples to posterity. On a similar note, Feng Zhi gives fame and immortality in Sonnet 9 to a friend who seems to have fallen in battle, presumably during the anti-Japanese conflict in China:

你长年在生死的边缘生长， 一旦你回到这堕落的城中， 听着这市上的愚蠢的歌唱， 你会象是一个古代的英雄 [...]	At the edge of life and death you grow all year round, One day you will return to this degraded city, Hear its frivolous songs, You will be like a hero of ancient times [...]
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你在战场上，象不朽的英雄 在另一个世界永向苍穹， 归终成为一只断线的纸鸢：	In the battlefield, you are an immortal hero Turning towards another world in the skies, Freeing yourself, finally, as a stringless kite:
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但是这个命运你不要埋怨， 你超越了他们，他们已不能 维系住你的向上，你的旷远。	But, of this fate you cannot complain, You have surpassed them, and they cannot Hold your flight, your infinity.
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The power of conferring immortality to anything or anyone through the use of verse is a notion that poets have professed since antiquity. Considerable examples of this kind are the verses of Pindar in Greek literature, Horace and Ovid in Latin texts, and Italian writers of the Renaissance period. During the Elizabethan period in England, Sir Philip Sidney wrote in his *Defence of Poesy* (1595) that “there are many mysteries contained in poetry” and exhorted men to believe the truth, “when they tell you that they will make you immortal by their verses” (Baumlin 2012, p.1). Similarly, Edmund Spenser glorified the notion of the eternising power of poetry by conferring immortal fame:

But what this verse, that never shall expire,
Shall to you purchase with her thankless pain. Fair
be no longer proud of that shall perish,
But that which shall you make immortal, cherish”
(*Amoretti*, XXVII in Johnson 1990, p.155)

The notions of death and transience of human life gained intensity in Chinese poetry since the beginning of the later Han period and became more persistent particularly during the Wei and Jin eras. Vivid examples are the poems by Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210-263), widely known as one of the “Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove” (Fusheng 2011, p.15). The poem “Yonghuai shi” 咏怀诗 (“Songs of my Heart”), for instance, presents various vehicles, such as the declining morning sun, the darkening bright sun employed by the lyrical voice to convey the theme of human death, and finally comparing human life with a “dew in the dust”, a metaphor for transience (Fusheng 2011, p.16). Nature in this poem does not embody the Taoist connotation where it serves as dwelling place for mankind as it does in Zhuangzi’s philosophy; instead it becomes a vehicle that emphasises and puts in stark contrast the immortality of nature with the frailty and evanescence of human life. The lyrical persona further laments that there is nothing in his power to stop this inevitable cycle and movement towards decay. His heart’s desire is to transcend this painful condition and join the world of the immortals. Nonetheless, the fulfillment of this wish is somehow contrasted with the state of awareness of the lyrical persona who knows that this wish can never come true. Death is accepted by all schools of Chinese thought as inevitable and natural (Fusheng 2011, p.19). Cao Zhi affirms in fact that life ends in death. In Taoist philosophy, death becomes a natural phenomenon and a “cause for celebration as it brings us back to our home, which is nature” (Fusheng 2011, p.19). In contrast with the traditional Chinese view of death and seeking of immortality, Feng Zhi’s modern elaboration of the topic brings in a new mentality and understanding of what death represents and entails. In fact, Feng Zhi reviews the theme of death and life in his poetry in light of the significant philosophical and literary influences exerted by Western literature, and more particularly the works of Goethe, Novalis and Rilke.

The issue of immortality has haunted various Chinese poets and intellectuals from of all periods. A significant passage from the *Zuozhan* 左傳 clearly outlines how “immortality” was generally perceived and could be possibly achieved. The preservation of one’s name and reputation by establishing one’s merit (*ligong* 立功), virtue (*lide* 立德) and words (*liyan* 立言) (Fusheng 2011, p.20) granted immortality. Since establishing one’s immortality represented a challenging endeavour in a period of social unrest and revolt, poets from different regions and periods sought effective alternatives that could grant them the same result. On one hand, lyricists turned to the innate power of poetry to bestow everlasting life to anything and anyone the poem can address; on the other, intellectuals sought immortality through the use of the imagination to fill the gap between life and death. If this was the case in European Romanticism, as exemplified by the poetry of John Keats, literature written on imaginary trips developed into a real literary genre in Chinese tradition, especially during the Wei-Jin period. The so-called *youxian shi* 游仙詩, in fact, are poems that describe imaginary journeys embarked by the lyrical self to join the immortals. Cao Zhi gives a great contribution to this lyrical genre with the poem “Youxian” 游仙 (“Roaming with Immortals”):

人生不滿百	Human life does not outlast a hundred years,
戚戚少歡娛	The years come and go and give so little joy.
意欲奮六翮	I wish I could spread my strong wings
排霧陵紫虛	To clear the fog about me and head straight to Purple Tenuity.
虛蛻同松喬	I'd shed this cicada-shell like the immortals Song and Qiao
翻跡登鼎湖	And sail through the sky of Tripod Lake.
翱翔九天上	I'd hover in the end of the nine heavens
騁轡遠行遊	And clutching the reigns gallop far away:
東觀扶桑曜	I'd go east to watch the shimmering Fusang Tree,
西臨弱水流	West to near where the Ruo River runs at the land's end.
北極登玄渚	Northward I would attain the isle in Dark Sky,
南翔陟丹邱	Soaring to the south I would ascend the Red Hill.

(Cao Zhi translated in Fusheng 2011, pp.21-22)

The lyrical persona is dissatisfied with the frets of human life and wishes to transcend his earth-bound condition and attain immortality. It is worth noticing, however, that the poem merely implies the lyrical persona’s *wish* to attain immortality and not its fulfillment. On a very similar note, Feng Zhi’s poetry conceals the lyrical intent to achieve permanence through imaginary trips and transcendental flights to Elysium. His sonnet collection *Shisihang ji* 十四行集 (*The Sonnets*), in fact evokes the theme of immortality and permanence through the traditional Chinese imaginary journey as conceptualised in the *youxian shi* genre, the imagination and the eternising power of poetry as a whole.

Among the poetic accomplishments sung in the sonnets, the lyrical subject is often found together with a mystified companion and embodied as a lover, gaining aesthetic experiences and transcending into the sublime. Imagination in Feng Zhi’s poetry is holistically conceived as a powerful means to achieve infinity and permanence. The perception of infinity, which moves the sensitive lyrical persona, is discerned as a state of boundlessness that is perceived in spatial and temporal terms. In fact, as the various sonnets demonstrate, the lyrical self often gains a new aesthetic experience of both temporal and spatial infinity through a personal interaction with nature. In Sonnet 3, for instance, once dissolved into nature, the self can transcend reality, overcome the earth-bound condition of the living world, and attain perpetuity:

我把你看成我的引导：	You are my guide:
祝你永生，我愿一步步	May you be eternal, as I wish to gradually
化身为你根下的泥土。	Decay for the soil under your roots.

(Feng Zhi, Sonnet 3, translated by the author)

Lyricists like Feng Zhi evoke the eternising power of poetry as they sing, chant or even pray in verse. Sonnet 4, for instance, is dedicated to the flower 'edelweiss'. The close relationship and union with the vegetal, as also taught by the German Romantic Novalis, is exemplified in the prayer that the Chinese lyrical voice utters for the little flower:

我常常想到人的一生， 便不由得要向你祈祷。 你一丛白茸茸的小草 不曾辜负了一个名称 [...]	At times, when I think of men's life, I cannot resist praying to you. You, bunch of white luxuriant grass Your name have never let down [...]
这是你伟大的骄傲 却在你的否定里完成。 我向你祈祷，为了人生。	This is your greatest pride Yet, fulfilled in your denial. To you I pray, so that you may live. (Feng Zhi, Sonnet 4, translated by the author)

The lyrical voice in sonnet 4 recalls the essential Romantic notion of the "Romantisierung der Welt" (Billen and Hassel 2005, p.171) or "romanticisation of the world" by which the poet confers immortality to the little and vulnerable flower prone to natural disintegration.

The final and explicit exhortation by Feng Zhi to grant permanence and transcendence to all living and non-living things sung in his poems is found in the concluding tercet of Sonnet 27, the last sonnet of the collection:

从一片泛滥无形的水里， 取水人取来椭圆的一瓶， 这点水就得到一个定形； 看，在秋风里飘扬的风旗，	From a shapeless expanse of water, A man came to fill an oval vase, So, this now obtains a determined shape; Look, the flag waved by the autumn wind,
它把住些把不住的事体， 让远方的光、远方的黑夜 和些远方的草木的荣谢， 还有个奔向远方的心意，	Holding things which cannot be held, Let the far distant light, the far distant darkness The glory of far distant plants withering, Still urge rushing towards the infinite,
都保留一些在这面旗上。 我们空空听过一夜风声， 空看了一天的草黄叶红，	And preserve something of this flag. In vain we heard the night wind, In vain we saw the grass turn yellow and the leaves red,
向何处安排我们的思、想？ 但愿这些诗象一面风旗 把住一些把不住的事体。	Whither shall our thoughts be directed to? Could only these poems, like a flag, Hold things which cannot be held. (Feng Zhi, Sonnet 27, translated by the author)

Both Foscolo and Feng Zhi lived during two significant periods of transition in their respective socio-cultural milieus. If the cultural environment in which Foscolo lived was characterised by a new form of enlightening rationalism and materialism, Feng Zhi witnessed a series of contrasting social and cultural movements in China, which aimed at establishing a national language and literature for a nation that was still taking shape. It is not surprising then to find modern Chinese writers and intellectuals who begin their literary career by exposing ideals of a cultural movement and then regularly changing their poetic stance and objectives according to the social, cultural and political needs of the new nation-to-be. Nonetheless, when it comes to Feng Zhi and his literary production, it is possible to identify a steady refinement in his poetry; a gradual shift from Romanticism to Modernism.

If death represents for Foscolo the only solution and a means by which he can achieve quietude in a time of historical disenchantment and loss of hope, decay becomes for Feng Zhi the beginning of a new cycle that is everlasting. Death gains a positive tone in Feng Zhi's poetry as it bestows

transcendental perpetuity. Poetry and its eternising function allows both lyricists to convey the sublime and grant immortality to a corrupting world where neither a tombstone nor a flag can stand the corrosive and vicious effect of time. Both Foscolo and Feng Zhi instil in their poetry a sense of dissatisfaction with the incumbent situation and world they live in. The active and heroic vision of the world seemingly leads them to seek an alternative dimension where man can be at peace with his existence. The realisation of such ideal dimension is fulfilled by the eternising function of poetry, beauty, arts and transcendence (Barbarisi 2006, p.909). As Foscolo writes in one of his famous verses in *Dei Sepolcri*, the poetic song, depicted as harmony, enjoys eternal endurance:

E me che i tempi ed il desio d'onore
Fan per diversa gente ir fuggitivo,
Me ad evocar gli eroi chiamin le Muse
Del mortale pensiero animatrici.
Siedon custodi de' sepolcri, e quando
Il tempo con sue fredde ale vi spazza
Fin le rovine, le Pimplèe fan lieti
Di lor canto i deserti, e l'armonia
Vince di mille secoli il silenzio
(vv.226-234)

And I, whom these hard times and my own longing
For honour lead away through many peoples
As a fugitive, may I be summoned
To evoke the heroes by the inspiring Muses.
They sit as guardians to the tombs, and when
Time with its ice-cold wings has swept away
Even the ruins, the virgins of Pimpleia
Cheer up the deserts with their holy singing,
Their harmony triumphs over the silence
Far longer than a thousand centuries.
(Foscolo translated in Bianchi 2015)

The subject of this crucial stanza are the Muses Pimpleia, epitomised as a symbol of the eternal value of poetry. Their action is opposed to the destructive effect of time, personified and described as a bird which with its “ice-cold wings” wipes out the sepulchers: although exalted as a place of memory, they are also subject to the endless corrupting action of time, which finally makes these places “deserted”. Poetry only, on the other hand, can triumph over silence after more than a thousand centuries have passed.

Conclusions

The selected verses in this essay briefly demonstrate how poetry enjoys a transcendental virtue through its eternising power and function. The two lyricists comparatively examined, Ugo Foscolo and Feng Zhi, despite having lived in two far-distant countries and eras, analogously express a similar poetic voice that bestows fame and immortality on anything and anyone that falls under their poetic pen. If, on the one hand, Foscolo denounces a historical disenchantment and his struggle with building a relationship with a newly-established society, Feng Zhi, on the other hand, embodies the example of a modern Chinese intellectual who consciously lives his time of transition, figuratively bridging China with the West. In his neo-Classical works, Foscolo employs elements of the European classical culture seen as “perfect”, whereas in his Chinese post-Romantic poems, Feng Zhi succeeds in re-evaluating elements of the Chinese classical tradition and in incorporating Western ideas of philosophy and literature.

The enduring affect of permanence and transcendence exerted on the existence and fame of people and things is said to extend beyond the use of tombstones or hold innumerable and ‘uncontainable’ things than wind sock or a wind flag can hold.

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