

THE INFLUENCE OF FAR EAST POETRY ON THE LYRIC POETRY OF FREDERIK RRESHPJA¹

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ABSTRACT

Frederik Rreshpja is not a contemporary poet. He is a poet of all time who sings to everlasting though ordinary things. Referring to the illuminations of his poetic memory, one might presume his poetic age to be three thousand years, time when “Iliad” was composed. The ancient times permeate his body and mind as the “transparent” lyre of the time passes by. Never betraying Homer - the father of all poets -, Rreshpja has washed his pen in the Yangtze River as Li Bo and Du Fu, has travelled ceaselessly through the fields of Japan as Bashō, looking for life and beauty, has smelled Saadi’s roses and from time to time has tasted the Rumi’s mystic honey. These poets have had a substantial influence on the recent works of Rreshpja and have oriented his lyrical energy towards a sense of calm and restraint, which is a distinctive feature of the Far East poetry. The perception and contemplation of reality by the eastern philosophers have enriched the lyric poetry of Rreshpja and have played a significant role in giving a final touch to his poetic style. It looks like every great epoch of the poetry is being stratified in the poetry of Rreshpja, where one might encounter reminiscences of Greek, Latin, Chinese, Japanese, Persian poetry, etc. Rreshpja has written a few basic archetypal texts, although he is a virtuoso of variety and play with words and verses revival. His poetic register, although apparently narrow, has allowed him to fly freely in time and space. The poet has long established a manner of his own, which, for its ancient transparency and purity, can compete with new contemporary poetry manners. This paper, by means of the comparative method, is aimed at enlightening the possible influence of Far East poetry on the poetry of Rreshpja.

Keywords: *Reminiscence, Li Bo, Du Fu, Bashō, archetypal texts, virtuoso of variety.*

¹ 1940 – 2006 Author of some poetry volumes like “Albanian Rhapsody”, “In this city”, “It’s time I die again”, “The Solitude”, etc. His works have been translated in English, Russian, German, Italian, etc., and have been evaluated by researchers and critics as thrilling poetry works of European standard.

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Referring to the poetry of Frederik Rreshpja, we may say that it resembles a high quality poetic glass. As far as spontaneity of creation and freedom of poetic communication are concerned, one can hardly draw comparisons between Rreshpja and other poets, for he is so unrepeatable, so unique. In some detailed evaluations of Rreshpja's lyric poetry, contemporary critics consider him as the master of a visions' empire who has managed to couple spirituality with memory and who is one of the few to have recaptured the female eye. Rreshpja impresses with his poetic image and word master skills.

The poet Agron Tufa quotes, "Frederik Rreshpja is the only poet to have dedicated his entire life to the sole genre of poetry...He is the one to have emancipated the Albanian reader more than any other poet...He is the one to have made perfect the modelling of his entire poetic instruments with regard to poetic techniques only, by creating a unique reality in all the Albanian literature²." This is a very reliable consideration given by one of the most distinguished poets of the 90ies, who were the ones to reject almost entirely the literary dogmas of socialist realism. This age's poets considered Rreshpja as one of the few poets who had managed to survive the former regime at an aesthetic level.

Rreshpja is not a seasonal poet. He is a poet of all time who sings extraordinarily to everlasting though ordinary things. Love, death, joy, sadness are everlasting realities, where he always travels. Hence, he is not a modern but an all-time poet.

If we were to rely on the creative memory sparks of Rreshpja, we might presume his poetic age to be three thousand years, time when "Iliad" was composed.

"On this ground I have been living for thousands years

Staring to the lightings' red hieroglyphs

And the Albanian cloudy mountain ranges." (When history rumbled, Albanian Rhapsodies)

The poet clearly envisioned antiquity, since the lyre³ time is a transparent time. He could perceive a myriad of ancient real scenes, for as he himself quotes "Time between us is as transparent as the air." (A wrath to the martyrs, Albanian Rhapsodies). The persistency of this poetic vision is already present in his first collection of poems "Albanian Rhapsodies" (1968). Here we find another distinguishing characteristic, which shall accompany all Rreshpja's works: the unique tone. He is one of the few poets to have never employed pathos so excessively as to make it sound pathetic. Just recall "The cannon in the field"! (Albanian Rhapsodies). If the cannon were left in somebody else's hands, its rumble would have been dreadful. The fact is that Rreshpja is a plain and simple poet. The simplicity of his poems is distinct amount other poets of socialist realism. The poet sings in a quiet voice. The exultation and the screaming are still there, but one has to read through the lines and find them. Naturally, we come across another characteristic of Rreshpja's poems, the vocation⁴ - the poetry felt as love to the most authentic aspect of life, the artistic one. The presence of art into real life is otherwise known as the sense of nature. Generally, the poems of Rreshpja, just like ancient art works, are pure essences: they

² "High-level poetry" (what writers think of Rreshpja's creative work). "Temp" journal, 31.07.2005.

³ Ancient musical instrument. Lyre is the emblem of music.

⁴ Somebody's commitment to do something (an artistic or professional activity)

embody the artistic enthusiasm of nature. Therefore, the poet converts himself entirely into a poetic instrument...

The poetry of Rreshpja is persistently inclined to discover unknown things by digging into known or haughtily presumed as known things. The poetic vision is absolutely pure, a primal genuine gesture, which brings to the surface of our knowledge such emotions, sounds, colors and images covered by the dust of our too earthy concepts of development, prosperity and civilization. Therefore, it uncovers a variety of inceptive conditions, shapes and views unaltered by the human manipulation and still touched by the divine breeze that moves back once the act of creation is complete. In most of his poems Rreshpja comes as a demiurge in the gnostical sense of the word; however, he is a demiurge that works with the man and tries hard to fulfill and "improve" odd things by confronting them to the nature, the living beings, the flowers, the grass, the woods, the sky and the stars as perfect examples of the initial creation. The tendency to improve man is more than evident in Rreshpja's lyrical poetry.

The Rreshpja's poetical and philosophical view of the world belongs to the classical category. The art found in the nature excites him and he resembles the ancient poets of human race. It seems like almost all great epochs of humanity are stratified in his poetry – we meet reminiscences of Greek, Latin, Chinese, Japanese, Persian poetry. His relation to these poets is evident in his verses filled with longing. This is the transcendent longing of the poet:

“Far away is Je River,
But, why do I miss lands I've never seen?
I've just heard their voice in Li Bo.” (The hunters' day, In Solitude)

Never betraying Homer - the father of all poets – Rreshpja, to our surprise, with a Pindaric departure on one side and totally in compliance with his own internal tendency on the other, has washed his pen in Yangtze River as Li Bo and Du Fu, has travelled ceaselessly through the Japanese fields in search of life and beauty as Bashō, has smelled the roses of Saadi and has tasted the mystic honey of Rumi...

In one of his untitled poems written two years before his death and surprisingly not included in the last poetic collections, Rreshpja mentions the great Japanese poet of the 17th century, Matsuo Bashō (1644 – 1694):

“Out of the legends' doors Bashō comes,
The tanka samurai,
Wearing the Songs of the Frontier Warriors”.

It is impressive how much Rreshpja is connected with Bashō and not with contemporary or conational poets such as Albanian, European or Anglo-Saxon ones, who belong to the west tradition. If he was inevitably attracted by the Japanese poetry, why should he stick to Bashō and not to other Japanese poets, masters of tanka and haiku? Indeed, among all great masters of versification belonging to the excellent Japanese poetic legacy, Rreshpja prefers Bashō, a poet of the seventeenth century, a more distant time than the modern one. Afterwards, the poetic perception of Rreshpja moves from Japan but not to return in Europe or America. The poet still remains in the Far East, although the specific location is China. However, it is not the modern China, but the one of Tang dynasty, where *meanwhile* Li Bo is drowning in the waters of Yangtze River trying to catch the Moon's reflection and Du Fu is fighting in battlefields or wandering through the extensive plains of China at the mercy of the fate and the natural conditions. We say *meanwhile* as the poetic perception of Rreshpja travels freely in space and time – two dimensions that enable great art existence and are always present in Rreshpja's poetic works.

Rreshpja continuously refers to Bash , Li Bo and Du Fu either in his poems or in conversations with friends, although he never gives explanatory details on the real reason for this attraction. Rreshpja is aware that Bash , Li Bo and Du Fu are great poets; however he seems to have forgotten that the world is full of other illustrious poets and ends up considering just a few of them.

There is a stunning resemblance between Rreshpja and Bash particularly as far as nature, poetic vocabulary, perception of life, bohemian spirit, and sense of delusion, abandonment and solitude are concerned. By quoting some verses of Bash , we may recognize some common characteristics between the poems of Rreshpja and those of the Japanese poet:

“All I own is a long-neck pumpkin,
As empty as my life.” (Japanese poems, page 111)

From these verses we notice the poverty and sadness of Bash , the same poverty and sadness that have captured Rreshpja and make him constantly fail to live a normal life. Again we quote Bash :

“Let us go my old hat!
Let me show you how cherries blossom
In the far Yoshino.” (Japanese poems, page 111)

Bash here comes as a vagrant in search of beauty. It is impressive how Rreshpja has employed the words of Bash in some of his own poems:

“O my old hat,
The morning finds us on the road.” (The Haunters’ Day, In solitude)
The vagrant and homeless Bash seeks hospitality in nature rather than in men:
“Oh you thriving shrubs,
Give shelter to this vagrant dog,
For one night only.” (Japanese poems, page 113)

Certainly Rreshpja does not deviate from the path of Bash when he writes:
“I knock on the nests’ ruins,
And tell the birds,
I’m homeless too.” (The Haunters’ Day, In solitude)

Bash is typically a bohemian poet who wanders through the fields and mountains of Japan never settling down and always merging with the nature. The Japanese poet has the sense of being not understood; therefore he sings:

“Sleep on a field,
And listen to the autumn wind’s whistle
To comprehend my verses.” (Japanese poems)

Li Bo, the most noted and translated Chinese poet in Europe is another favorite poet of Rreshpja. He has lived during the bloodiest period in the history of China, a period of terrible wars where thirty million people have lost their lives. However, from his verse “*my head I lay on a clouds’ blue pillow*”, we see that the poet has managed to escape from such havoc. Rreshpja mentions Li Bo only once in his poetry “The Hunters’ Day”, one of the last and most beautiful poems of Rreshpja, where the poetic atmosphere of Far East is present:

“Far away is Je River,
But, why do I miss lands I’ve never seen?
I’ve just heard their voice in Li Bo.” (In Solitude)

Li Bo is considered a poetic genius, a master of calligraphy, painting and music. He was a nonconformist, just like our Rreshpja. It’s worth mentioning the fact that he had rejected the

suggestion of the imperial caste to give his inspiration a Confucian⁵ direction (as his poetic inspiration belonged to the Taoist⁶ belief), which would have assured him an important position in the local administration. Du Fu, another poet of Tang dynasty has written some verses of Li Bo:

“His brushes terrify rain and wind
His poems make ghosts and demons cry.”

For a long time Li Bo has led a bohemian life travelling throughout the entire China. A poet who never observed roles, a free spirit, a hedonist, he sang only to the nature, wine and female beauty. Therefore, Rreshpja resembles to Li Bo in his also being a hedonist, who sings to the nature and love, sublimates the female image and likes to drink just as Li Bo. Both of them are lyrical poets, who bear a childish pure soul and always get enchanted by the beauty of creation. Purposely or not, Rreshpja has taken from Li Bo the smooth tone, the tendency to observe nature, the deep beauty and the mastery of embodying verses with fine enjoyments. Li Bo writes:

“A bright lunar ray lying on the bed
Like the sparkling dew resting on the ground
I raise my head to see the shining moon
I tilt my head full of motherland thoughts.” (Thoughts of a quiet night, Chinese classical poems).

The Moon is the key word of many lyrical poems of Rreshpja. The Moon is so present that one might presume he could not write a single poetry that lacks moonlight: “The shack made of moon...” (The poetry, In solitude), “Little moons that ate up the autumn’s sheep” (The vineyard, In solitude), “The valley painted in moonlight” (Requiem, In solitude), “The moon forgotten in the cattle’s memory” (Painting), “Around the moon fire wolfs sleep”, etc.

The voice of Li Bo in the following poetry entitled “Sculpted on a highland monastery” is deep and solemn; however it is spoken in a quiet, almost as a whisper, tone.

“A dark umbrella on the highland monastery.
I crane and catch the stars.
I dare not raise my voice
And wake up the sky.”

Our Rreshpja does the same thing. He introduces tragic sequences of his mood in a smooth tone that lacks fury and noise.

“Through the twilight a star is silently climbing,
With its eyes full of tears,
A rose blossoms in the garden. Eh, like a whisper!
Distant voices come and die in this wind.” (Aquarelle, In solitude)

It is almost the same tone of speech to create the impression that if we were to read the above verses having no previous knowledge on both poets, it would have been hard for us to make a clear distinction between Li Bo and Frederik Rreshpja. These poets are powerfully related to the nature; sometimes they project it inside themselves, whereas some other times they project their feeling inside the nature.

Li Bo never put his pen at the service of anyone or anything other than real poetry. He wrote poetry as heart and free inspiration told him to write, always refusing to obey the orders of the men in power:

⁵ Confucius (551–479 BC) was a noted Chinese philosopher. Here: definite direction.

⁶ Tao (Chin) – school of ancient Chinese philosophy: moral and mental ideal, principle cosmetic order. Here: indefinite, general, principled.

“I will never demean myself
At the service of the men in power
Or my heart and face would lack their joy.”

Rreshpja seems to continue this poem of Li Bo by cursing anyone who put poetry at the service of the men in power:

“Oh you crazy ungrateful slaves,
A bunch of obsequious hypocrites,
Walls and chains I despise,
So free and scandalous I was born.” (Press conference, In solitude)

Du Fu (712-770), one of the greatest personalities of Chinese poetic tradition in Tang dynasty, is another favorite poet of Rreshpja. Although his name does not appear in the poetry of Rreshpja, it is quite present in the conversations of our poet as an echo extended on his last period of creativity. What Rreshpja and Du Fu have mostly in common is their restless bohemian soul. They are both vagrants and poetry is a way to feed their essence; they have both died from sickness and poverty; they are national poets always concerned with the pains of ordinary people and finally, they both have a determined opposition to wars and raise their voice against all the sufferings they cause to people:

“I cannot sleep; these wars make me anxious,
I lack power to change the world.”

Whereas Rreshpja says:

“They burned villages down, leaving the graves in peace.
Indeed this was the first world war,
But other burning wars were to follow
Then people learned to kill each other
And this filthy task
Was left in the hands of tribunals and generals.” (Troy was not born yet, Solitude)

There is a famous poem of Du Fu entitled “Mourning for Kang Tao” where the poet describes the war havoc and terror:

“The first month of winter,
The flower of the youth,
Of ten prefectures
Turned into blood
The swamp waters of Kang Tao.
On the broad fields, under a clear sky
No more war tumults
Forty thousand volunteering soldiers
All dead in a day...”

Thirteen centuries after the poem of Du Fu dedicated to the massacre of Kang Tao in China, Rreshpja writes to the massacre of 2 April in Shkoder Albania:

“A leaf turned into bird and cried on the olive.
The old men left their village
To follow the roaming ghosts
In their trip toward the Galaxy.
The dead aligned at “Demokracia” square
Covered in the bridegroom sheets...” (Chronicle, In solitude)

Du Fu describes nature and environment at the service of a particular emotional mood. In “All gone and decayed” on one hand he shows us how much he misses his motherland, and on the other he tries to tell us that any country can be a motherland to anyone.

“It is autumn now: in the cry of the wild goose,
In the white dew, under the moonlight
Shining here in this borderline as in my country too.” (It is a bird)

Bash , Li Bo and Du Fu have had a substantial influence on the recent works of Rreshpja and have oriented his lyrical energy towards a sense of calm and restraint, which is a distinctive feature of the Far East poetry. The tempestuous content of his experiences and the irrepressible burst of his emotional narration have achieved a sense of measure and a particular sobriety as far as form is concerned. The perception and contemplation of reality by the eastern philosophers have enriched the lyric poetry of Rreshpja and have played a significant role in giving a final touch to his poetic style, which had started to take shape since 1968 with his first book “Albanian Rhapsodies”.

From time to time various authors have considered Frederik Rreshpja as a poet with distinctive formalist features. Furthermore the poet Sadik Bejko underlines that Rreshpja “in his best achievements is a perfect formalist⁷”. Not rejecting this opinion, we would like to add that formalism in Rreshpja’s poems is not the main purpose. The poetry of Rreshpja is delicate, fragile and vulnerable to misreading or misunderstanding. If the reader approaching this poetry lacks that register of sensitivity that is quite similar to the author’s, if the reader lacks that wholeness of signs, symbols, images and sounds that are found inside the verses of Rreshpja, and if that reader lacks the same quality of emotional memory, then the poetry transforms immediately into a bunch of just words. Therefore, in general it is a poetry that requires the esthetic understanding of the reader, a poetry that invites on stage the most qualitative side of his sensitivity. Rreshpja has written a few basic archetypal texts, although he is a virtuoso of variety and play with words and verses revival. His poetic register, although apparently narrow, has allowed him to fly freely in time and space. The possession of this register and the strong connection with the classical poetry make Rreshpja a mannerist in the highest sense of the word. With the passing of time he managed to create his own manner of writing, which was to compete convincingly with the mines of the new poetry bearing an ancient freshness and transparence.

Conclusions

The author of some poetic collections, Frederic Rreshpja has been considered by various national and foreign scholars as one of the best poets of Albanian contemporary poetry. He has dealt extraordinarily with everlasting though ordinary things. The poet impresses with his mastery of word and poetic image.

Rreshpja comes as a demiurge in the gnostical sense of the word. The art found in the nature excites him. His tendency to improve man by confronting him with the nature is evident in Rreshpja’s lyrical poetry. In this way he resembles the ancient poets of human race. It looks like every great epoch of humanity is being stratified in the poetry of Rreshpja, where one might encounter reminiscences of Greek, Latin, Chinese, Japanese, Persian poetry, etc

Never betraying Homer - the father of all poets - Rreshpja travels to the East. He feels inevitably attracted by the Japanese poetry. Strangely his favorite is Macuo Bash (1644-1684),

⁷ Sadik Bejko, “The last bohemian of Albanian poets”, newspaper “Shekulli”, 19.02.2006

who does not belong to the modern Japanese poetry. There is a stunning resemblance between Rreshpja and Bash particularly as far as nature, poetic vocabulary, perception of life, bohemian spirit, and sense of delusion, abandonment and solitude are concerned

Li Bo (701-762), the most noted and translated Chinese poet in Europe is another favorite poet of Rreshpja. He resembles to Li Bo in his also being a hedonist, who sings to the nature and love, sublimates the female image and likes to drink just as Li Bo. Both of them always get enchanted by the beauty of creation. Purposely or not, Rreshpja has taken from Li Bo the smooth tone, the tendency to observe nature, the deep beauty and the mastery of embodying verses with fine enjoyments.

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Bash, Li Bo and Du Fu have had a substantial influence on the recent works of Rreshpja and have oriented his lyrical energy towards a sense of calm and restraint, which is a distinctive feature of the Far East poetry. The tempestuous content of his experiences and the irrepressible burst of his emotional narration have achieved a sense of measure and a particular sobriety as far as form is concerned. The perception and contemplation of reality by the eastern philosophers have enriched the lyric poetry of Rreshpja and have played a significant role in giving a final touch to his poetic style.

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