

Redefining Macau Melancholy through Pushkin and Chekhov

Tudor Vladescu

During a conference on the poetry of Pushkin, who is considered a founding father of Russian literature with no traceable link to Macau, the conclusion reached was that, in all respects, there is nothing more distant to Pushkin's melancholy than Chekhov's slightly tragic stories. More than obvious to any reader of literature, this truism bears much more significance when we refer to the reading public of Macau. If we are to consider the act of reading literature as a message-conveying act – a sort of dialogue between the reader and the text – the context of the act of reading is much more significant when we decide to turn the pages of Chekhov's stories in Macau, 2009. It might seem a little bit of a stretch to apply the “poetic function” of Roman Jakobson, which refers mainly to verbal communication and poetry, to the almost dark stories of Chekhov. Still, poetry does not refer to rhymes, meters or rhythm any more. The poetical meaning migrated from incantation and celebration of sound towards an incentive for emotional exaltation a long time ago, that being at least a century ago. And then, it died. Poetry in the classical sense is still written, but new poetry seems to be a little bit too late for meeting the reader's expectations. Nobody has broken the seal with which Beatniks have closed the door to classical poetry, and that – at least for poetry written in English – already happened half a century ago. No poet has become so famous as to be globally praised since then, and nobody seems to have any chance to do it in the near future.

Alexander Pushkin is barely quoted in the recent works of literary theory. His fame has faded away, gone with the revolutionary spirit of the Decembrists, with the spirit of Byronian heroism, with the deep crevasse that has estranged city dwellers to the wide open wilderness of the countryside. The multiplication of meanings of the simple word “poetry”, which has already become in common language a very clear antonym of structured, positivist and, not incidentally, progressive thinking, actually sustains the phenomenon of depreciation of lyricism. Enclaves of poetry addicts still exist. In Truro, Cornwall, a small group of – I dare say – intellectuals gathered around novelist D.M. Thomas to form a group called “Stray Dogs”. Deeply in love with the poetry of Russian poets, especially Anna Akhmatova's group, they were, in the late 1990s, a very active reading group, combining poetry reading and creative writing in a sort of literary salon that was at least anachronistic. No Stalinist regime in Great Britain and no totalitarian nostalgia could have been attributed to that group of enthusiasts. Apart from the patronage of the writer, the group was not at all homogenous. For instance, some were very much in love with Robert Frost, a “Pushkinian” American poet whose melancholy is adapted to entrepreneurial solitude in nature at most, in contrast to the wide spaces of Russian geography and folklore.

None of these conditions apply to Macau. There are no wide open spaces to celebrate in verse, no nostalgia for a period of intellectual effervescence and no promise of revolutionary uprisings. Still, as the last Portuguese outpost in South-East Asia, Macau functioned as a place of exile or self-exile for scores of intellectuals. Melancholy is endemic in Macau, as it is engraved in the form of Camoes' stanza engraved on the wall

of the San Francisco Garden. Although the city is now a dynamic gambling mecca, a place where entertainment constantly reshapes not only the skyline, but also the identity of all Macau citizens, a deep and undetermined melancholy is clearly diffused in the very fabric of the city. An appreciation of poetry, especially for the young generation, is very unlikely.

In these circumstances, Anton Chekhov's writings may function as a safety valve for the appreciation of literature in Macau. First of all, reading his work is not as easy as expected. Poetry, with its quality – nowadays considered defect – of maximizing redundancy, is definitely not in tune with the very pragmatic and direct communication required by a modern city life. The bells tolling for the death of poetry have been silent for a long time now. But the overwhelming human emotions – which, without a doubt, are the fuel for common day-to-day existence – have to find a substitute levy. Although non-fictional in essence, research carried in anthropology seems to successfully survive the anti-fictional tidal wave of contemporary society. The wealth of human emotions, the hermeneutical effort that a reader of poetry and, by and large, fiction, is supposed to undergo for a full literary experience survives, surprisingly, in what Clifford Geertz defined – in use – as “thick description”. Today, when literature is considered much too difficult and hermetic, finding one's way from the foundations of observable ethnographic realities to the upper layer of organized cultural categories seems an honest and easy way to recover the delicate and deep human emotions “live”.

Just as an example, Anton Chekhov's story “A Woman's Kingdom” may be considered much more referential than any journalistic article describing the life of second generation nouveaux riches in Macau. Literature doesn't describe. That is, actually, the origin of all this drama of literature becomes a Cinderella of educative policies around the world – and not only in Macau. Useless as it seems, a story like Anna Akimovna's is the story of solitude among friends and family, of the inner struggle caused by the bouncing effect of managerial responsibility and of – inevitably – love. No melancholy in the Pushkin way, but a deep web of situations that redefine melancholy in the industrial age. Macau, as a post-industrial society, clearly redefines melancholy. As a matter of fact, the “thick description” of the Macau culture resides in a melancholy ready to be turned into fiction. The substance of this emotion is so complex, so deeply hidden under layers of forgotten and not-yet-forgotten history that it may be tackled only gradually. My selection of Pushkin and Chekhov may well have been Robert Frost and William Borroughs, for example. The access to the “thick description” of the Macau melancholy is conditioned by such a methodology, as an emotion so intense and private as melancholy is by no means available to any anthropologist or writer without a gradual detour through old fashioned literature.