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The Magic of Poetry and the Poetry of Magic



Il poeta e il negromante (Poets and Necromancers)

Translated and introduced by Maurizio Riotto
Libreria Editrice Cafoscarina, 2017, 320 pp.

Maurizio Riotto's recent work *Il poeta e il negromante* translates and analyzes texts from the Korean literary tradition, tackling the fascinating subject of the fantastic tale. The first part of the work comprises an excursus on the Korean peninsula and its history of external relations with the Chinese Empire as well as with Japan. Riotto demonstrates a profound knowledge of Chinese and Korean cultures while also comparing them to aspects of the Classical Greek and Latin traditions in order not only to bring Italian readers closer to the text, but also to reflect on the surprising similarities between particular figures or

beliefs.

Central to his book is the figure of the “poet necromancer” who, through the magic of his poetic art, accomplishes extraordinary feats such as bringing the dead back to life. If this assumption stems from the accurate account of poetry's intrinsic value which significantly elevated the poet's status, and if for his abilities the poet in the Greek and Latin traditions was believed to bridge two worlds (consider Homer and Virgil, to name the most obvious examples), then in East Asia the figure of the poet is enriched through a distinctly magical dimension which renders him a powerful creator of spells with a positive impact on his country.

The second part of the book consists of two short novels translated in Italian and suitably chosen to illustrate Riotto's subject matter. The first, the seventeenth-century *Choe Munheon-jeon* (The tale of Choe Chi-won), was written by an anonymous author in Chinese. It recounts the story of a well-known character in the Korean tradition, Choe Chi-won, who lived between the ninth and tenth centuries. The novel presents historical events within a fantastic frame: Choe's mother is kidnapped by a golden pig and taken to a parallel world reminiscent of “The Peach Blossom Spring” by the great Chinese poet Tao Qian (365-427). She is soon freed and gives birth to a child everyone suspects is the son of the magical creature. Her husband, a high-ranking official, decides to throw the newborn into the sea, but then he repents and

devises a complex plan for bringing him back without again unleashing malicious rumors. To everyone's amazement, the child, who has miraculously survived death at sea, knows how to read perfectly and refuses to return home. That the child is extraordinary is confirmed by the descent of celestial figures who appear in succession to teach him their superior knowledge. As a result, using his extraordinary abilities, he solves the mysterious riddle posed by the Chinese Emperor to the sovereign of Silla and composes a poem about it. He then reaches China where he confronts innumerable dangers with courage, overcoming them with the guidance of the immortals. When he arrives in the capital, Choe ironically states: “Fancy that! I can enter without difficulty through the gates of a small country but now my hat smashes into the gates of this great power.” He refuses to proceed any farther. It is easy to understand why China is represented as an arrogant enemy which, because of its immense size, claims the right to swallow up the small kingdom of Silla, and also why Choe is a Korean nationalist hero of sorts.

The second novel, the nineteenth-century *Jeon Uchi-jeon* (Story of Jeon Uchi), is translated from Korean. Written by an unknown author, it recounts the deeds of a sixteenth-century historical figure, a minor official adept at sorcery and necromancy. His familiarity with the spirit world leads him into various clashes with the established order until he is finally arrested and dies in prison—or at least, that is what he has people believe

since his corpse is never recovered. The literary text highlights the magical abilities of the protagonist who comes into the possession of some mysterious writings stolen from a fox with nine tails (an evil spirit found in the Chinese tradition). He then masters these spells and uses them for himself or for those in need.

Fantastic tales do not serve merely as entertainment: they often deliver a moral message as well. It is no accident that the novel dates back to the 1800s, a period in which Korea was afflicted by uprisings, epidemics, and foreign invasions. As Riotto notes, “By now it must be obvious that only magic could have changed if not the country's destiny, then at least that of the individual.”

The book is of indisputable cultural value for both the general and scholarly public, but what is more, Riotto succeeds in the arduous task of producing a particularly fluent and enjoyable translation which is also philologically accurate and accompanied by ample notes. The volume supplies the original texts of both novels, texts indispensable for the specialized reader and extremely important for the teaching purposes of the author who is a long-time university professor. The book is replete with a rich bibliography, a large number of illustrations, and a useful analytical index. ☺

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| JAPANESE |

The Darkness of School, The Darkness of Society



優しい嘘 (Sublime Lies)

Kim Ryeoryeong
Translated by Kim Nahyun
Shoshi Kankanbou Publishing,
2017, 261 pp.

A girl chose death. Why? She had friends. She still wanted that MP3 player so badly. In *Sublime Lies*, Kim Ryeoryeong closes in on the darkness that haunts adolescence. Manji lives with her mother and younger sister, Cheonji. Their father, a sculptor, died in an accident. Now their mother tries to make ends meet working in the tofu corner of a supermarket, but she always comes up just short of rent. Without warning, Cheonji hangs herself with a rope of red thread she braided. Why? Unable to shake this question, Manji begins searching for the cause of

her younger sister's death.

The first culprit is Hwayeon. When Cheonji transferred to a new elementary school, Hwayeon approached Cheonji and acted like her friend. But she also spread false rumors and bullied Cheonji, all the while acting like it was just a joke. When Cheonji tried to make other friends, Hwayeon would get in the way. Why? If she hadn't, the other kids wouldn't have paid attention to her. Hwayeon, too, was starved for affection. Her parents ran a Chinese restaurant. They were poor. But none of her friends cared when she was scolded or abused. She had bad grades, and not even her friends respected her. Then Cheonji appeared. Hwayeon clung to her. She tried to fill the hole left by a lack of parental love with Cheonji's feelings. Feelings she pulled out of Cheonji by alternately bullying her and being kind to her.

But it was her classmates who encouraged Hwayeon's bullying. They laughed when Hwayeon kept changing the rules of tag to make sure Cheonji stayed “It”; they were overjoyed when Cheonji showed up late to Hwayeon's birthday (Hwayeon had purposefully told her the wrong time) and all the food was gone. But they never took responsibility for the psychological violence. They were convinced they didn't do anything wrong. To them it was just like watching a variety show where all the celebrities who show up have something horrible happen to them. But they were the ones who made