

Neo-Daoist Aesthetics and Ruan Ji's
Prosepoem on Pure Thought:
Comparative Concepts of Poetic Inspiration

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies Ruan Ji's *Prosepoem on Pure Thought* as a major document of Neo-Daoist aesthetics of the Wei-Jin Period. It tries to unfold the symbolic structure of the prosepoem by comparing it with major Western poetic works that employ similar strategies of conveying critical insight through the significant use of structural devices. The chosen examples include Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," Rimbaud's "Drunken Boat," and Novalis's *Hymns to the Night*. By a close reading of Ruan Ji's work, the paper points out that the prosepoem contains a self-conscious, detailed and relatively complete account of a poet's inspirational experience, showing penetrating insight into creative psychology. Unlike earlier Daoist masters who often seem to have rejected the experience of rapture as a typical way of attaining truth, Ruan Ji perceives it as an authentic experience of spiritual enlightenment and aesthetic fulfillment. His concept of "true beauty" as lying beyond the senses and conscious judgment, intangible and inexplicable, has not only characterized his won works but also shaped the aesthetic taste of his time, as exemplified in the intuitive spontaneity and charming allusiveness characteristic of the "Wei-Jin style."

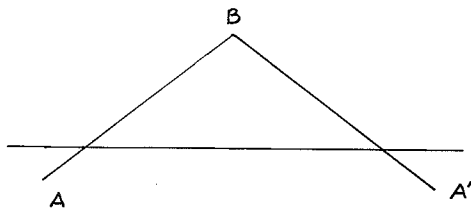
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In his Introduction to the *Complete Poems* of John Keats (1795-1821), Jack Stillinger makes an interesting observation on a recurring pattern in Keats's poetry, which "appears in a great many of the poems and can usefully serve as a device for relating poems, passages, and situations one to another in a view of what Keats's work as a whole is preponderantly 'about'." (xvi) He further illustrates this "basic Keatsian structure" with a diagram:



In other words, the majority of Keats's lyric poems carry a typical scheme of emotional unfolding with a literal or metaphorical excursion and return: "The action of a poem . . . involves first some kind of union between a mortal and external ideal by means of a dream (or a visionary entrancement that is like a dream), and then a gradual or sudden end to the union, as the dreamer awakens to reality." (xvii) The "meaning" underlying such a structure, often unarticulated but nonetheless overwhelmingly present in Keats's poetry, is his acute sense of the crisis of the Romantic transcendent vision, which he conveys not merely as a message, but as an

agonizing personal experience. Keats exercises this poetic device brilliantly in his "Ode to a Nightingale," where the singing of the bird alters from a flawless song of happiness to the "high requiem" in Stanza 6, and then to a fading "plaintive anthem" at the end, when the poet's mood shifts through a full circle of ideal and spleen, entrancement and disillusionment. (281)

One thing we can learn from this "basic Keatsian structure" is that a poem may deliver a critical statement more directly through its imagery and structure than through its referential substance. In some interesting cases, such as in Arthur Rimbaud's (1854-1891) "Drunken Boat" ("Le bateau ivre") which we now see as a major document of Symbolist poetics, a poem with a serious approach to the poetic process may carry on its argument or observation almost entirely at a metaphorical level. The spiritual excursion in Rimbaud's masterpiece takes the form of a boat's aimless journey into the madness of the ocean, for no purpose other than its desire for adventure and sensation:

The rivers let me travel my own road.
 Through the mad clashings of the tides,
 Last winter, as thoughtless as a child's brain,
 I sailed! ¹
 [Les Fleuves m'ont laissé descendre où je voulais.
 Dans les clapotements furieux des marées,
 Moi, l'autre hiver, plus sourd que les cerveaux
 d'enfants,
 Je courus! . . . (100)]

To the "boat" drunken with its delight in the extraordinary, storm-winds seem to be gentle blessings, and green waves are "sweeter than hard apples to a schoolboy." Gradually, however, the dazzling sights of the ocean turn into a darker world of gigantic "icebergs," "serpents," and horrifying

"corpses." But at this moment of confusion the "boat" is suddenly lifted to a quiet "birdless sky"--the celestial world of poetry and ideals where it steals the "jam of inspiration." Such a vision cannot, however, last long; soon the "boat" feels bogged down with fatigue, and longs to return to the safe ancient cities of Europe. Almost numb now with the "drunken torpors" of his excess, the "boat" feels a nostalgia for the familiar past, and wishes for a most humble return, a return to a child's mudpuddle. As an extended metaphor, the rich visual imagery of the poem becomes an embodiment of Rimbaud's principal theme of the poetic process as an angelic experience and the poet as a "seer."

Turning to the Chinese poetic tradition from such a perspective, we find a fascinating case in Ruan Ji's 阮籍 (210-263) *Qing si fu* 清思賦 (*Prosepoem on Pure Thought*)² where the author explores the experience of poetic imagination and spiritual quest in a similarly subtle and self-conscious way. It is true that the originality of the prosepoem is often obscured by the shadow of two great literary precedents, i.e., Song Yu's 宋玉 (?) *Shennu fu* 神女賦 (*Prosepoem on the Goddess*) and Cao Zhi's 曹植 (192-232) *Luoshen fu* 洛神賦 (*Prosepoem on the Goddess of the Luo River*), which establish the archetype of "immortal women" that Ruan Ji has obviously modelled his prosepoem on. What sets Ruan Ji's work apart, however, is its philosophical undertone--its serious approach to the experience of reverie or imagination itself, without apparent personal or moral preoccupations. He makes this clear at the beginning of the seeming "preface" to the prosepoem, written in parallel prose, by declaring that the theme of the prosepoem is beauty, or rather the perception of beauty, which is precisely what the Western word "aesthetic" means etymologically:

When the mind enters into such a subtle state that it discerns no forms, and stays in such complete silence that it hears no sound, it is then able to come to a

vision of the beautiful and the refined.

微妙無形，寂莫無聽，然後乃可以睹窈窕而
淑清。(Quan Sanguo wen, 44:10a)

There is an unmistakable Daoist vein in this statement, almost an echoing of Laozi's (老子) claim that "the greatest music has no sound." 大音希聲 (*Laozi zhu*, Chap. 41, 26) It is, however, as much of a reversal as it is an echoing; for by concluding the statement with an affirmative clause, Ruan Ji turns the early Daoist "anti-aesthetic" into a positive aesthetic ideal. True beauty, Ruan Ji claims, is one that lies beyond senses or words, intangible and inexplicable. It is nonetheless possible to attain such beauty through some uncanny spiritual experience, when one's mood is tranquil and one's heart is pure:

A place that is pure and empty, with vastness of space, is where spiritual things join together. An eye that is dizzy and blurred can then penetrate darkness and mystery. A mind that is as clean as ice, and a body as transparent as jade, are where pure and compelling thoughts dwell. In relaxation and absence of desire, the will and emotions are in perfect harmony.

夫清虛廖廓，則神物來集。飄遙恍惚，則洞
幽貫冥。冰心玉質，則激潔思存。恬淡無欲，
則泰志適情。(44:10b)

At the beginning of the prosepoem proper, the speaker once again proclaims his unique qualifications for the remarkable experience he is to relate in the remainder of the work—the qualifications that he alone possesses as the result of rigorous self-discipline and cultivation:

My attention was not divided by any particular
object, and my spirit remained seated in its

proper place.
 My mind was never agitated by desires; it was
 thus naturally sincere.
 Steadfast, I achieved Oneness in cultivating my
 inner self,
 So that it was not bent to habitual inclinations.
 志不亂而神正，心不蕩而自誠。
 固乘一而內休，堪寧止之匪傾。(44:10b)

But it is the depiction of the symbolic journey itself that makes the prosepoem, metaphorical as it is, one of the earliest documents in Chinese literature containing a significant, detailed, and relatively complete account of an author's inspirational experience. It is described as an inward journey, taking place in a milieu of nightly darkness and quietude, where tangible reality loosens its control over the senses and the mind sinks into an unconscious merging with the unknown. The moment comes, then, as a sudden internal (e)motion that quite startles the poet:

The god of the sun had sunk,
 And darkness of the night began to unfold.
 The moon's charioteer adjusted the reins,
 And cool breeze breathed through the air.

 I stretched myself, unable to fall asleep,
 Suddenly, I was awakened by something, to my own
 surprise.

 My intention was flowing and shifting, and my
 thinking continued to change its course;
 My mind was shaken, as if some idea had taken
 shape.
 As if it were a coming thing which could be
 received,

Or a departing soul refusing to take leave.

曦和既頽，玄夜始局。

望舒整轡，素風來微。...

乃申展而缺寐兮，忽一悟而自驚。...

意流蕩而改慮兮，心震動而有思。

若有來而可接兮，若有去而不辭。(44:10b)

With this ineffable feeling of inner agitation and yearning, the poet begins to play his lute, and his mind follows the lute to wander in mystical, unknown lands of the Kunlun 崑崙 Mountains and the Denglin 鄧林 Forest, resulting only in even more intensified longing for destination and fulfillment:

Opening the lute and the zither made of sweet-scented
osmanthus,

I listened attentively to the varying sound of high
mountains.

At the beginning, my singing was slow and my voice
low,

Expressing a tender emotion, with a subtle impact.

Then I summoned clouds to fill the air;

My voice rose with force and it became powerfully
effective.

The sound of my music floated and spread out,

As if climbing the Kunlun Mountains, facing the
Western Sea,

Places so far away and obscure that no one is sure of
their whereabouts.

My heart was pressed by the waves of yearning
but found no place to moor,

My thoughts lingered but could hardly go half-way
through the maze.

開丹桂之琴瑟兮，聆崇陵之參差。

始徐唱而微響兮，悄悄慧以逶迤。

遂招雲以致氣兮，乃振動而大駭。

聲寥寥以洋洋，若登昆侖而臨四海，
 超遙茫渺，不能究其所在。
 思濛濛而無所薄兮，思悠悠而未半。(44:10b-11a)

It is precisely at this moment of confusion, however, that the poet unexpectedly arrives at the chamber door of a goddess, who is bestowed with the celestial blessing of perfect beauty:

Having bathed in deep water for freshness and
 refinement, her body was pure and immaculate.
 Her face was so fair, it rivaled white jade; she
 then put on rosy cloud-mist as her robe.
 She borrowed the sunlight absorbed by multifarious
 kinds of flowers, and wore the glimmer of fine jade
 for her subtle eminence.
 沐浴淵以淑密兮，體清潔而靡譏。
 厭白玉以爲面兮，披丹霞以爲衣。
 襲九英之曜精兮，珮瑤光以發輝。(44:10b)

Taking a closer look at her, the poet is then able to smell her fragrance, admire her splendid figure, watch her movement, and listen to her voice, while her shining beauty radiates like the remaining rays of the sun and the moon. (11a) With ardent sincerity he begs the goddess for eternal love, and wishes to fly with her to another world:

The pleasant sight of her deprived my peace of
 mind;
 Unable to finish my words, my heart was filled
 with sorrow.
 Alas! Clouds could be turned to vehicles,
 And together, we would take wing and fly away . . .
 觀悅怍而未靜兮，言未究而心悲。
 嗟雲霓之可憑兮，鶴揮翼而俱飛。(44:11b)

But suddenly, a sad look looms on her face:

Look at the layers of the morning clouds,
 They were like the sad look on her face.
 She needed to find multiple colors to make a pattern,
 But suddenly she left, and was gone!
 She seemed to want to say something but was unable to
 do so,

The air changed and she floated away [like mist]...

瞻朝霞之相承兮，似美人之懷憂。

採色雜以成文兮，忽離散而不留。

若將言之未發兮，又氣變而飄浮。(44:11b)

The poet then begins a hasty pursuit but encounters only darkness, thunderstorms and awful phantoms:

At that time it became dim and dark,
 And suddenly I could no longer discern the place I used
 to be.

I climbed over the high tower of the Yellow

Creature,

The Master of Thunder was now angry and pouring
 out storms.

時黨莽而陰暖兮，忽不識乎舊宇。

邁黃妖之崇臺兮，雷師奮而下雨。(44:11b)

In vain the poet tries to recover his lady, even when he has reached the "cold gate" of the North Pole. In the conclusion of the poem, he makes a decision to give up the quest and return to the ground of rationality and good sense: "If a true gentleman is free from the burden of all things, how can a woman deserve so much of his attention?" 既不以萬物累心兮，豈一女子之足思。(44:11b) The self-mocking tone reveals the poet's helpless recognition of his inability to

sustain an inspired vision.

Here we see a pattern of "return to reality" similar to Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" and Rimbaud's "Drunken Boat." Although the symbolization of the spiritual quest as an erotic experience may be considered a relatively conventional element of the prosepoem in the Chinese context, it is a poetic device not at all unfamiliar in the West. A fascinating example is *Hymns to the Night* (*Hymnen an die Nacht*) by Novalis (1772-1801), which shows a descriptive structure of nightly visions and heavenly encounters with a beloved woman almost parallel to the *Prosepoem on Pure Thought*. Like Ruan Ji's poet who claims that his ideal lady does not put on her make-up under bright sunshine ("白日麗光，則季后不步其容。" (*Quan Sanguo wen*, 44:10a)), Novalis's poet also turns to the "holy, ineffable, mystical Night," (Passage 3) the world of dreams and reveries, where the mind is free from the enslaving Light of logic and concretion: "Far below lies the world, sunken in a profound pit: waste and solitary is its place." (Passage 5) [*Fernab liegt die Welt-in eine tiefe Gruft versenkt-wüst und einsam ist ihre Stelle.* (41)] Everything the poet perceives in this vast underworld is strangely transformed and colored by the "grey raiment" and the mystical twilight of the Night. He feels "lonely, as none before was ever lonely, goaded by unspeakable dread, bereft of strength, no more than a thought of wretchedness." (Passage 5) [. . . *einsam, wie noch kein Einsamer war, von unsäglicher Angst getrieben-kraftlos, nur ein Gedanken des Elends noch.* (43)]

But it is precisely in such a state of debility and yearning that the poet suddenly receives the light of "Night-inspiration," and through the "cloud of dust" beholds the "transfigured features" of his Beloved in a "new and unfathomable world" of eternity:

I grasped her hands, and my tears became a glittering chain that could not be wrenched asunder. Millennia

passed off into the distance, like storms. Upon her neck I wept ecstatic tears unto the new life. It was my first and only dream, and since then only have I felt everlasting immutable faith in the heaven of the Nights and in its Light, the Beloved. (5)

[. . . ich faßte ihre Hände, und die Tränen wurden ein funkelndes, unzerreißliches Band. Jahrtausende zogen abwärts in die Ferne, wie Ungewitter. An Ihrem Halse weint ich dem neuen Leben entzückende Tränen – Es war der erste, einzige Traum – und erst seitdem fühlhewigen, unwandelbaren Glauben an den Himmel der Nacht und sein Licht, die Geliebte. (43)]

In such an elevated moment the poet feels that he has transcended the isolation of his physical being in time and space and has become part of eternity, an experience that would change the poet for ever, even though it lasted only temporarily.

The significance of Ruan Ji's *Prosepoem on Pure Thought* similarly lies in its insight into the phenomenon which has been commonly described in the West as "inspiration." It is a creative drive growing within the poet but beyond his conscious grasp. In Lu Ji's 陸機 (261-303) words, "While the Secret may be held within oneself,/It is none the less beyond one's power to sway." (Chen 213) 雖茲物之在我，非余力之所戮。(*Quan Jin wen*, 96: 3b) An inspired vision is not something one can wait for, plan on, or sustain by the force of will, but is immensely rewarding in its larger-than-life dimensions and entrancing beauty. By setting the event in a milieu of nightly tranquility and inward concentration, by vividly describing the mind's ineffable feeling of trance and intoxication, by conveying the sensation of the visionary moment with dazzling colors and imagery, by symbolizing the poet's unsuccessful effort to sustain the vision with a desperate pursuit, and finally, by bringing him back to the flat but constant world of

reality, Ruan Ji makes a rather complete account of the mind's inner experience in a typically inspired mood, an account which suggests some first-hand knowledge of the visionary process.

Unlike the early Daoist masters, such as Laozi and Zhuangzi, who often seem to have rejected the experience of rapture as a typical way of attaining truth, Ruan Ji perceives it as an authentic moment of spiritual enlightenment and aesthetic fulfillment, an experience that has a value in itself, beyond moral or rational judgment. The ideal poetic subjectivity, according to Ruan Ji, is one that resists practical, moral, or political inclinations and retains "purity." In other words, this is a mind that gazes inward, and has an introverted personality. The sensitive and sustained observation on the feelings of the mind in the "Prosepoem on Pure Thought" suggests an intense focus on the inner self, which is the trademark of the Neo-Daoist discourse of the Wei-Jin Period (224-420).

In his *La vie et la pensée de Hi K'ang*, a study of the life and works of Ji Kang 嵇康 (223-263), Donald Holzman observes that Ji Kang, another major author of Neo-Daoist inclinations in Ruan Ji's time, differs from earlier Daoist masters in that he is "no longer a man who tries to understand the world and adjust himself to it accordingly; this is a man who tries to understand himself and to attain self-improvement. . . . The thought of Ji Kang turns to 'the nourishing of life,' . . . although still imbued with the philosophy of antiquity, it makes a difference by orienting its concern towards the person, the individual." [. . . *ce n'est plus l'homme qui cherche à connaître le monde et à s'y ajuster: c'est l'homme qui cherche à se connaître lui-même et à s'améliorer. . . . Mais la pensée de Hi K'ang est tournée vers la "nourriture de la vie," . . . bien qu'il reste imbu de la philosophie antique, il innove en s'orientant vers la personne, vers l'individu.* (77)] Undoubtedly, this inward orientation prepares the way for the

later development of a "creative theory" in Chinese criticism, most notably in Lu Ji's *Prosepoem on Literature* 文賦, where the problem of creative psychology is in the foreground.

Ruan Ji's fascination with the allusive and the intangible also to a large extent shapes the aesthetic taste of his time. The aesthetic ideal embodied in the *Prosepoem on Pure Thought* finds its echoes in many of Ruan Ji's other works, most notably in some of his "Songs of My Innermost Thoughts" 詠懷詩 and the *Biography of a Great Gentleman* 大人先生傳, which soar in their transcendent aspiration and free-ranging imagination. This spiritual quality becomes then an integral part of a tradition known as the "Wei-Jin style," which imbues the poetry, music, landscape painting, and especially calligraphy of this period with its characteristic intuitive spontaneity and charming allusiveness.³

In all these contexts of comparative poetics and historical retrospection, Ruan Ji's *Prosepoem on Pure Thought* stands out as a triumphant study of the spirituality of the mind, a moving portrait of the "Wei-Jin personality," and a major achievement in Neo-Daoist aesthetic discourse.

Notes

¹ All translations are mine unless noted otherwise.

² For a major study of Ruan Ji's life and works in English, see Holzman, *Poetry and Politics*. His translation of *Qing si fu* is, however, often unreliable, though it should be said that the difficulty of the work is daunting to any translator.

³ For a general study of the Wei-Jin poetic vision in English, see Tu Wei-ming, "Profound Learning, Personal Knowledge, and Poetic Vision."

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