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978-1-107-64023-8 - The Commemoration of the Dead: A Study of the Romantic Element in the "Sepolcri" of UGO Foscolo: An Inaugural Lecture

E. R. Vincent

Excerpt

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THE COMMEMORATION OF THE DEAD

It is usual for an inaugural address to be one of two kinds, a general survey of the subject concerned or a consideration of some special or typical aspect of it. My three predecessors in this Chair chose the former method, and spoke generally, from their different points of view, of the importance of Italian studies for English people. It is not suitable that I should attempt to say in other words what they have already said so well. I have therefore looked for a subject of sufficient importance to be of some little interest to specialists in the field—even if that interest arises from the opportunity of flatly contradicting my conclusions—and not too detailed or pedantic to distress those of my present audience who have come here today chiefly, perhaps, out of the kindness of their hearts.

The subject of the poem I propose to

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consider is a melancholy one, sooner or later of interest to us all, and only too appropriate on this occasion—the commemoration of the dead. Italian studies in general, and Cambridge in particular, have recently suffered heavy losses. Edward Bullough had barely succeeded the late Raffaello Piccoli in this Chair when he was prematurely removed by the hand of death from the position he would have graced so well. Only a few months ago we had to mourn the passing of the Professor Emeritus Thomas Okey, and even since that day another Cambridge man, a beloved leader in our studies, has left us, Edmund Gardner. In the face of these numerous bereavements, which to many of us are personal as well as academic losses, I find it impossible to attempt any kind of formal eulogy, still less an estimation of the considerable contributions to their subject made by these distinguished scholars. It is in the choice of my theme that I can best pay respect to their memory.

The poem *Dei Sepolcri* of Ugo Foscolo

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has been recognised as a masterpiece in Italy since its first appearance in 1807, but it is almost unknown in this country. Even amongst those whose literary taste has led them to seek out Dante, Petrarch, Ariosto, and amongst moderns at least Leopardi and Carducci, I find an ignorance of Foscolo unfair to his position in the Italian Parnassus and unfair to his great poetical merit. My hope is that by calling attention to Foscolo today some may be induced to read him. Perhaps this is the most useful function of literary criticism.

My statement as to the neglect of Foscolo in this country is not based only on my own observation. It is significant that, unlike many nineteenth-century Italian poets, he has failed to attract translators. During his stay in England a fragment of the *Sepolcri* translated into English blank-verse appeared in the *European Review*,¹ and there

¹ *European Review*, June, 1824, p. 123. For the whole question of translations of the *Sepolcri* v. G. Calabritto, *The Teacher*, Malta, fasc. 100–102, 1932.

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exists in the British Museum the only known copy of another complete translation by an unknown hand, of unknown date. As far as I am aware there was no other until January of 1934, when an English version appeared in the *Bollettino* of the British Institute of Florence.¹ Translators, however, are usually the first to admit that such a poem as the *Sepolcri* can only be appreciated in the original. It is perhaps because a knowledge of Italian was more common amongst literary Englishmen of Foscolo's generation that we lack a complete translation of that time, and in the next generation the interest in Italian letters had unhappily diminished. It is necessary to search for external explanations for the lack of English appreciation of the *Sepolcri* because, despite its *italianità*, there is very

¹ Lorna De' Lucchi, in *Bollettino degli studi inglesi in Italia*, Gennaio, 1934, Firenze. In regard to the translation reported to have been made and destroyed by R. Finch (v. Ottolini, *Bibl. fosc.* item 3035) I have found nothing relevant among the Finch MSS. in Bodley.

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much in the poem to appeal to English taste.

Before attempting any critical observations it will be well to give a résumé of the poem and the ideas it contains, without straying very far from the text.

For Foscolo death is the inscrutable servant of change to be faced courageously without the aid of any transcendental philosophy. Death is deprivation of what we know. All is finished, even hope! Man is swept along through unceasing mutations by an unwearied force of change that soon consigns him and his works and his memorials to oblivion. The opening of the poem describes this desolate fate and Foscolo returns to it again.¹ It would appear that in the face of this inevitable material destruction any attempt to distinguish and commemorate the dead by stone and epitaph is idle. The question underlying the poem, "Should we commemorate the dead?", appears to have

¹ Vv. 95, 231.

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found a materialistic negative answer in the first lines. But now begins a magnificent protest against unmeaning annihilation, a protest based on a purely human and historical, rather than a moral, appreciation of the spiritual capacities of mankind. In this consideration we are led far afield from contemporary Milan to renaissance Florence, to England, past the field of Marathon to the plain of Troy. For this reason some criticise the poem as disjointed, but they seem to me to fail in appreciating the inherent unity of thought behind the varying scenes. In the imagination of such a poet the epochs of time meet, and under the scythe of death mankind is one family.

Half musing, the poet gradually moves from the materialism of his exordium. Even if our memorials are to perish, why should we renounce them and thus deny ourselves some brief remembrance on earth. There is a kind of existence, illusory though it may be, in the spiritual bond between the mourner and the mourned:

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*Celeste è questa
corrispondenza d' amorosi sensi,
celeste dote è negli umani....*

The persistence of love beyond death is a gift from Heaven to be cultivated with pious rites, and such rites demand a place to attract and hold the imagination. It is at the grave that we can best perform them. It is the function of the tomb to strengthen the bond of affection between the dead and the living. In fact an abandoned grave and a life without love are implications one of the other.

From these general ideas of wide appeal the poet suddenly turns to an immediate political point. In allusion to certain contemporary decrees he complains that the dead are now to be buried beyond the walls, beyond easy access of the living, and even the commemoration of their names is to be obstructed. He indignantly upbraids Milan for her neglect of the dead body of Parini, whom he reveres above other moderns. All that is gloomy and foul is imagined in order

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to impress on us the tragedy that the bones of the venerable poet should be for ever lost. The nostalgic mood, the shocked indignation at the fate of the man Foscolo had known and loved, lend a moving personal note to this passage. For a moment it seems as if the poem is to be more of an elegy, but immediately the onward march of thought is resumed.

Ever since man has raised himself above the level of the beasts, his institutions have taught him to respect the remains of the dead. Nature, we know, has destined them for change and dissolution, yet man, as far as he can, strives to protect them. History tells us that tombs have not only been altars of family affection but have also served as national records. They were held to be sacred and were credited with oracular powers. Throughout the ages this religion of tombs has persisted.

What is Foscolo's conception of an ideal place of burial? Not at any rate within a church, for such a custom is not only un-

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healthy, but grim reminders of death, as such tombs tend to be, depress worshippers and fill the minds of the apprehensive with supernatural fears. The memory of classical rites and his appreciation of what he has heard and read of the rustic English graveyard, paint for the poet the picture of a place of trees and flowers and fountains where mourners find solace and nature lends beauty to love and death. In such a burial place the living may well imagine an intercourse with the dead, especially if a traditional ceremonial gives reality to it.

A scene suddenly presents itself to the poet's imagination and he sees young girls in an English churchyard mourning in charming garden surroundings for their dead mother. For Foscolo, love and patriotism are kindred emotions, and it is not surprising that these English daughters should find it in their hearts in such surroundings to send up a prayer for the hope of their country, the national hero, Nelson. Here,

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again, the tomb has a two-fold aspect, personal and national. And such it may have in a virile nation—but in Italy? Irony raises its voice. There is indeed no lack of pompous monuments in Italy but they are useless and inappropriate in a country whose national life is base. The ruling classes are entombed already in their own palaces and their boasting crests must serve as epitaph. Yes! the poet's world is dominated by the wealthy and the vile, and he himself can only hope for some tranquil grave at the end, his only legacy a memory of warm affections and of poetry.

But the poem is not to descend to the pathetic, the personal motif is not developed, rather an idea appears that is new, though implicit in what has gone before. The urns of the great are an inspiration to the living. Here for the first time Santa Croce in Florence is consecrated as the Westminster Abbey of Italy. What is it indeed that distinguishes Florence above all other cities? Not only her mild air, her smiling hillsides,