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URBAN AND RURAL EPIPHANIES: RECAPTURING NATURE WITHIN A RUS IN URBE SETTING

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Abstract

The contemplation of cityscapes often leads to poetic mirages of the urban oasis: a place that is constructed as a bricolage of the poet’s experience within a rural setting. The poet as a castaway from the safe country landmarks of their poetic material becomes aware of new creative potencies. This paper considers John Archer’s ideas on the rus in urbe phenomenon about its manifestation in the poems of Patrick Kavanagh and Dimcho Debelyanov. The analysis of several poems follows the recaptured texture of the rural within the urban as a form of epiphany, where the poet reaches beyond the established tropes of longing for the lost countryside of the past and settles into a world of pristine contemplation of the present. The synthesized experience of the rus in the urbe setting lends a new perspective on a poetic past and offers a re-evaluation of the image and conceptualization of the city and its attributes.

Keywords

Poetry, Rural, Urban, Nature, Rus In Urbe, Comparative Studies

1. Introduction

The experiences of Kavanagh and Debelyanov during their periods of living in the city were marked by an appreciation of *rus in urbe* settings. Kavanagh's Grand Canal poetry echoed the parochialism of his Inniskeen-based and themed work in that it appropriated this geographically new location into a self-styled country of the mind. What united Inniskeen and the Grand Canal in Dublin was nature, which transpired through the imaginary boundaries of the country and the city. Kavanagh had the same poetic skill set to apply to this new place, as its manifestation of nature was no more nostalgic and plaintive, but something as worthy of poetic attention as the fields of his home. It was a realization of the present moment through a memory that did not discard it but only affirmed its legitimacy. Nature was, after all, placeless, just like the "placeless Heaven" (Kavanagh, 2005, p. 182). The parochial devotion of the past only aided the building up of the poetic skills of perception which could now detect beauty more readily and unrestrictedly, regardless of the location. The green isles of the city were no longer places to escape but places to enjoy. It is interesting to note an observation that

the definition of Irish poetry is always going to be short of the mark, because for a long period the term "Irish poetry" seemed to suggest poetry of rural life, of pre-industrial simplicity, of a certain romantic interaction with nature. The urban experience featured almost not at all, and it was like nothing had happened since the beginning of the 19th century. That leaves great space to maneuver. Then in the middle of the 20th century, the urban landscape started to appear more overtly, and that led to two Irish poetries: the urban and the rural. (Villar-Argáiz, 2019, pp. 567–568)

Thus, in terms of its position and function in the world, the Grand Canal might be seen as a compromised version of country experience, yet what Kavanagh gained from it was part of his poetic re-birth, and it represented a state rather than physical space, the mid-state of the reconciliation of opposites and, ultimately, "not caring", which meant that "[a]way from the noon-glare of Dublin and moonless lanes of Mucker, he had discovered a canal half-light conducive to contemplation" (Casey, 1976, p. 78). This space was devoid of the warring emotions related to his country and urban poetic homes, yet it encapsulated both in unexpected serenity.

Debelyanov also found his green spots of nature in the city of Sofia. His inspiration was kindled by the Borisova Garden, Sofia's largest park, which he visited every evening:

“He wandered on his own. He was in solitude and wrote there. Nature-inspired him.” (Shumkova, 2009, p. 123, my trans.). It was this solitude that he needed for his creative process, just like Kavanagh enjoyed the complete July quietness of the Grand Canal park. They found these natural spaces in the middle of the busy cities, but they both realized they needed the cities to be able to participate in the cultural life they strived for. The journey to the city was never fully completed, and the green spaces there did not let the connection with nature be severed. It was a journey towards worldly experience into which neither of them managed or wanted to become fully melted.

2. *Rus in urbe* as a poetic phenomenon

The *rus in the urbe* phenomenon was studied by John Archer, who traced back its history to illustrate its implications in terms of architecture. Archer (1983) states that

*The period of most innovative experimentation with plans for the marriage of country and city spans more than a century and a quarter, from the early eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. But the desire to overcome the divorce between country and city extends back much further, to classical times — in particular, to Horace’s use of the terms rus and urbs in his satires, epistles, and odes to express frustration with, and ambivalence about, the disparity between city and country life.*³ (p. 160)

Overcoming the divorce between the usual opposites was always a challenge, but this intentional endeavor, for Kavanagh, was transformed into an organic process. While in his earlier poetry he expressed polarised attitudes towards the advantages and disadvantages of both city and country, later he settled into the contemplation of a blended environment, such as the Grand Canal in Dublin, and discovered a space which welcomed both sentiments without judgment. At a physical distance from his country background, he was able to see nature without any biographical burden. He claimed nature in this new environment as his own, and included it in his poetic wish:

*O commemorate me where there is water,
Canal water, preferably, so stilly
Greeny is at the heart of summer. Brother
Commemorate me thus beautifully
Whereby a lock Niagarously roars
The falls for those who sit in the tremendous silence
Of mid-July. No one will speak in prose*

Who finds his way to these Parnassian islands? (Kavanagh, 2005, p. 227)

The poet's contemplation creates an urban epiphany, where the Canal takes on gigantic, mythological dimensions, and becomes worthy of "tremendous" descriptions, while the Parnassian islands ultimately mythologize this urban scene. Debelyanov also envisions the symbiosis between rural and urban settings by placing the "town" at the bottom of a stanza steeped into natural images:

*With unheard steps, it leaves for its dark end,
the day that brought its parching thirst and swelter
and louring heavens, the desert night
sheds its tears over the town fallen quiet. (Buxton, 2017, p. 18)*

The vastness of the "louring heavens" and the "desert night" collapses into the human-made town, which quietly receives the elements as its attributes.

Kavanagh's sense of place also fluctuates between his native land and its transformation into a space beyond the concept of locality. As Heaney observes,

Kavanagh's later 'places' are not firmly and inextricably rooted in soils which represent local experience and realities, but lose 'their status as background, as documentary geography'; consequently, they become devoid of the earlier historical, topographical, and cultural significance and are altered into unprecedented 'luminous spaces within his mind' (Washizuka, 2019, p. 34)

3. The City as a Literary Environment

Kavanagh's city experience also highlighted his role as its critic and his bitterness towards this peopled environment bears the disillusionment of a person encountering the reality of their idealized notions of cultural circles and their sophisticated internal struggles. His constant critique of almost everyone and everything related to his new literary environment made his progress a difficult but very idiosyncratic journey. He did not win his place in Irish literature by agreeing. What Antoinette Quinn described as a constant antagonism with his environment and an authoritative assertion of the self (Quinn, 2003a), might have been a desire to adjust without blending in, an instinct of preservation of the self among the others. Kavanagh did realize the good parts of city life: the proximity to cultural life was also coupled with financial opportunities which could promise a future of safety. Debelyanov was also aware of the importance of work outside

literature and although he sometimes struggled with the disinterested mediocrity of his work environment, he maintained his non-literary jobs.

The necessity to be part of a literary life that was in contact with western literature for Debelyanov, and world literature for Kavanagh, was as important for them as the connection with their past localities. This was not only literary curiosity but a desire to be acquainted with the times and to be able to present their work to a wider audience, to voice their worldview among their contemporaries. Their country of origin was not the only reason for this difficult adaptation, it was also the idiosyncratic desire to stay true to one's perceptions and not to bend them to please the environment.

They never blended in because they maintained an aesthetic distance from the tradition where they ultimately wanted to belong. They saw themselves as builders of a richer tradition: Kavanagh did this with his voluminous critical work related to his contemporaries, and Debelyanov, apart from his similar endeavors in some essays, did it by participating in the compilation of *Anthology of Bulgarian Poetry*. This was an enterprise that entailed lengthy communication with the "old masters" such as Vazov, but also with the new, still unaccepted literary youth who were finding their feet among the authority of their predecessors and the uncertainties of the new times. He wanted to unite these voices into his vision of a new, inclusive canon, for which this *Anthology* was a significant building block. This enterprise in itself was proof enough that Debelyanov considered himself competent enough to summarise and anthologize what he considered worthy of a book representing Bulgarian literature, possibly a format which could be more easily exportable to the world than separate poems.

They both wanted to recreate nature through language. The authentic cinematic approach was so directed as to express a Romantic assertion of the self, it focused on images only to illuminate them better through language. To be able to detach themselves from local tradition, they needed a way to represent the same natural phenomena in a linguistically different way. One way of representing nature idiosyncratically was used amply by both poets. Compound epithets and nouns were a creative tool of pouring personal meaning into overtly poeticized form. Formally, this type of expression could easily be associated with Romantic ornateness, and it creates a poetic texture that pleases rather than disturbs a traditional readership. Yet, many of these compound words are the creation of their authors, they are not part of the respective lexicons, and the only rules they follow are of word-formation. The layers of these compound words are indicative of

many nuances of distilled meaning, which, rather than being stretched out into lines, is succinctly curbed into lexical units.

4. Recapturing New Experiences with Compound Epithets

Debelyanov's language abounds in compound words and collocations which entrap natural images into new functioning units of meaning (such as "amber-gold", "spring-dream", "fire-flowing"). His poems are often devoted to the seasonal cycles, and while they can be lent various symbolic readings, they also contain the "surface" layer of their language material: concrete references to natural phenomena. A group of his poems is devoted exclusively to intricate descriptions of springtime. The poems are entrenched in color. Movement and repose are given the impressionistic unstaged quality of the passing moment, where the poet-observer "catches" it only to memorize its magic:

*At dawn, light zephyrs briskly flow
on gentle wings of butterflies
, and their sap of life bestow
were fields and valleys quiet lie. (Debelyanov, 2005, p. 18, my trans.)*

The initial tentative movement subsides into the silence of the captured moment. The movement is only a movement of light, it is the awakening stir of the morning rather than any physical motion. This moment of silence is a photograph of a morning in the fields, it is imaginatively cinematic.

The images of awakening nature are intertwined with the belief in a new beginning. Springtime or morning-time imagery are the harbingers of a new world for both poets. The poems "April" (Kavanagh) and "Bright Faith" (Debelyanov) both start with the destruction of the old and the "wintry" which resides in darkness:

*Now is the hour we rake out the ashes
Of the spirit-fires winter-kindled.
This old temple must fall,
We dare not leave it
Dark, unlovely, deserted.
Level! O level it down!
Here we are building a bright new town. (Kavanagh, 2005, p. 14)*

and

*The old world is breathing its last,
chain by chain is shattered away
and high above these ruins cast
the altar of justice rises today. (Debelyanov, 2005, p. 46, my trans.)*

The end of the old winter happens as a result of conscious action: the chains are broken and it ends up in ruins (Debelyanov) and ashes (Kavanagh), which are willingly raked out. Debelyanov's synecdochic altar creates the impression of a temple, which is the token of the new righteousness/justice ("правда"). Conversely, Kavanagh's "old temple must fall", is the opposite of justice and freedom. In this parallel reading of the two poems, a certain distancing from the concrete religious associations of "altar" and "temple" might provide a broader interpretation of the meaning-bearing quality of these words. Debelyanov's "old world" is Kavanagh's "temple": they both need to be destroyed to provide creative space for the new world. After the destruction, Debelyanov's altar promises a new beginning, similar to Kavanagh's "bright new town". Kavanagh ventures into a linguistic as well as a symbolic secularisation of reality: by the leveling down and replacing, in alliterative opposition, "temple" with "town".

Debelyanov seems to use the altar more arbitrarily: it is the only religiously loaded reference in the whole poem, and it is never explicitly re-affirmed by another reference to Christianity, unlike Kavanagh's poem, which ends with "the Holy Ghost". Debelyanov's altar could be of any faith, pagan, or even personal. It is "the altar of justice", a building-block word that scaffolds an idea. It echoes back to the title of the poem "Bright Faith". The word "faith" in Bulgarian poetry has a long tradition of being demystified, starting with Botev and his "My Prayer":

*Oh, you, my God, my fair God,
who doesn't live in Heaven up,
but you, who is in me, my God,
into my soul and in my heart. (Botev, n.d.)*

It is more a belief in humankind, focused back on the abilities and prospects of the self.

In Kavanagh's poem, the brightness of faith is reflected in the new town: the hope, the desire to build a new place to inhabit rather than be a passive dweller of the wintry temple of the past. The "spirit-fires" in the second line holds a sickly, unwanted light, it haunts and disturbs, in

an uneasy reference to the underworld. They are oxymor “winter-kindled”, fuelled by fear rather than hope. These sparks of light, remnants of a passive existence, are contrasted by the active brightness of the town, in who’sonic building the poetic persona participates. This participation pervades both poems: a collective “we” and “them” gathers a force to fight against the dark past.

Kavanagh creates a new complexity with the potency of colloquial expressions and builds his compound words out of the everyday. This complexity, however, resurfaces after a process of unpacking and rejecting the socially accepted literariness whose burden is often carried by poetry. This is reflected in Kavanagh’s critique of the language used by his predecessors Yeats and Synge. Kavanagh illuminates Synge’s representation of everyday speech by placing it within the space of the unreal:

Synge’s plays and writings would be tolerable to me if they had been set in Never-Never-Land, the Land in which the plays of Congreve and Sheridan are set, but one can never get away from the “Irish” thing that hangs over them; we cannot forget that Synge in some way is claiming to portray real people. (Quinn, 2003b, p. 191)

This assertion shows Kavanagh’s critical approach towards the artificial portrayal of Irishness and his craving for truthful poetic representation of life. Kavanagh is wary of any invented realities imposed over what he experiences during his interaction with the world, which includes both the tangibility and uncouthness of the every day and the natural flow of language. He criticizes Synge’s approach to language and states,

“[h]is peasants are picturesque conventions; the language he invented for them did a disservice to letters in this country by drawing our attention away from the common speech whose delightfulness comes from its very ordinariness (as cited in Kelly, 2008, p. 46).

In Debelyanov’s poem, collectivity is expressed by “a numberless army” and “countless legions”. These legions with their proud flags are nameless, they are not fighting for a country; they are the harbingers of spring coated in human language. Fighting back the darkness of winter takes on a personal dimension: the army is the united forces of hope and light fighting against the oppressive shadow of dejection and sorrow. This sorrow’s origin is also nameless, it is no known enemy, so it might be projected to be part of two warring spaces within the poetic persona’s being. This personalized reading goes in tune with the natural unfolding of spring: its cyclical turn has come, and it cannot be disturbed by what preceded it:

Their eyes are lit by morning rays,

*they fear not encounters in the night:
united, their power will erase
the dreadful ghosts of misery and blight. (Debelyanov, 2005, p. 46, my trans.)*

If we extend this into a historical reading, it might be seen as encompassing a spirit of new hope in a new post-independence world, where re-building was as much a literary as a worldly trope. In the case of Debelyanov, such a reading on its own would oversimplify the nuances of his poetical voice. History as an echo is acceptable, as it surrounds but does not indoctrinate the poet into nationalist sentiment. The historical is relived and personalized into a primordial intersection of the cycles of nature with a struggle that goes beyond the collective and delves into the individual and spiritual. Religious and societal concepts (such as altar and army) work as tools of language, as texture-out of which expression is molded, in a similar pattern as Kavanagh's Catholic references are the lexicon out of which the poet builds his intimate reflections.

5. Reimagined Perceptions of Nature

The natural armies of sunlight are also the light side of the Self: they are winners against the confusion and darkness of self-doubt. The morning rays are consequently nested into the human eyes, the incite and *are* hope at the same time. In Kavanagh's poem, old and cold are internally rhymed to echo death, and in the next line they are immediately opposed to "the green meadows" of new life:

*And in the green meadows
The Maiden of Spring is with child
By the Holy Ghost. (Kavanagh, 2005, p. 15)*

In Debelyanov's poem, this new life is signaled by the reference to faith. It is the faith in new life, which is gradually generalized from the collective spirit of "them" to crystallize into an exclamation:

*They found the ford of their strife
and saw a shore in purple-gold aglow...
O bright faith in our brave new life,
you lift our hearts and warm them so! (Debelyanov, 2005, p. 46, my trans.)*

The final two lines are inclusive of the speaker and the world as the philosophical makers of a statement extending beyond inner personal conflicts. The "O" interjection echoes classical

poetic expression, addressing the abstract faith as a confidant-interlocutor, as a tangible image of reincarnated belief in the future. This “O” address is also reminiscent of Kavanagh’s early poetry, which critics would attribute to his close apprenticeship to the classics, while he was still mostly adhering to their formal example.

Kavanagh’s poem, the maiden of Spring is this capitalized version of the new faith. The pagan reverberations of the pregnant spring are cut out of Christian language, yet it does not oppress the new image. Christianity flows through the poem as language, it does not prescribe but only observes and describes. The holiness of nature’s renewal is spoken in a language that would be understood by both Kavanagh and his readers.

Debelyanov’s last stanza presents a completed act in the past tense: the shore of the new life was found; the mission of spring and light has been accomplished. Yet, the tense changes back to a present-tense full of expectation: they have only seen the shore but they are still to reach it in the future, so it is only an image of the spiritual promised land. This glimpse into the future in Debelyanov’s poem is presented as a shore bathed in purple-gold, which is then explicated by the last line as “you lift our hearts and warm them so”. The word “purple” in Bulgarian as well, suggests the ornate abundance of royal attire, as well as the saturated color of blood. It intensifies “gold” to create a sense of the richness the future might hold. The natural connotations of these golden-red nuances can also be attributed to the rising of the dawn, whose promise of a new beginning (rather than a menacing presence) is affirmed by the warmth in the last line. The new future is coated in regal idealist preconceptions, with light exuding from its golden luster, it is a reflection of the sun, which is individually perceived as a new life, a new haven. This idyllic representation of the perfect life expected to be found on the shore is represented by Kavanagh in the expecting maiden traversing the green meadow: this is the new, undisturbed, perfect natural scene to be experienced as an opposition to the human-created temple which needs to be leveled down. The human, the building, the chains, are dismantled to give way to freedom epitomized by natural serenity (sunrise, green fields). Yet, the human agents are, in both poems, collectively and actively destroying the old and reaching for the new, their communion with nature is conscious.

The collective agents of both poems can also be the aspects of a Self-re-gathering its creative potency: an antipode of the (also multiple) shadows of menace overarching from within and without. The light as a sign of awakening as opposed to the “impenetrable darkness” and “dozy skies” (Debelyanov, “Bright Faith”). It is a journey from slumber to daylight, and the destruction

of the chains might be read as the alternative side of his poems dealing with reconciliation and acceptance, as a personal intertextual dialogue with his dejected and hopeless self in poems such as “Worry” and “Remember, remember”. In other poems, both these aspects of the poet-speaker are woven together: in a dance of alter-egos with the visual contrasts of darkness and light.

In the poem “Sombre Song”, this contrast is also related to destruction and building, but this time they are happening as the anxious musings of a troubled mind. They lack the collectivity of “Bright Faith” and insulate the persona into a prison of constant self-reflection. This poem is the closest to auto-psychoanalysis that Debelyanov reaches. It echoes Yavorov’s “Two Souls” and “I suffer”.

Debelyanov’s poems are different from Yavorov in that they lack the extreme, fiery edge of the latter. Debelyanov’s subdued hues resemble impressionistic strokes of his outside as well as inner world. The sounds, even of storms, are soft, they show the distance between the poet-experiencer and the actual external event, this type of language is the idiosyncratically processed, internalized impression of phenomena. Sounds are only heard through the wall of perception, and this gives them the symbolic overtones of distancing from the real and tangible. These sounds are reflected out of an unknown source, they are not piercing but subdued. This vague sonic texture mystifies nature into a magical ring from unknown lands, it is and is not the known nature at the same time, like a vaguely familiar, but distorted and reverberated sound.

6. Conclusion

Kavanagh’s early poetry also veils the tangible with epithets such as “ghostly”, which creates a feeling of uncertainty and the uncanny about the objects of the everyday. This linguistic use of lighting marks clarity instantly and sends the interpretation on an imaginative route. Although these epithets are seen by some critics as an immature manifestation of his early bend towards the mystical and the esoteric (as a possible influence of his then patron AE), they might also be considered as literary prompts towards an immediate change of perspective, a distancing poetic tool which sets an imaginative tone not necessarily leading to the mystical and the obscure, but as a re-imagining of personal perception and the self. It might also be a re-structuring of the Revival narratives, where the myth was based on a collective conscience, while with Kavanagh, myth-making is a personal endeavor. As “Kavanagh’s sense of place invokes a mixed feeling of attachment and alienation at the same time” (Shokouhi, 2019, p. 149), this creative chaos provides

the middle ground between the local and the universal, where this new personal mythology can thrive.

For both Kavanagh and Debelyanov, this restructuring of perceptions happened when their city and country experience became an amalgamation of reconciled visions rather than warring opposites. This poetic endeavor was akin to what the poets' classical predecessors already envisioned:

Given a choice of environments, Horace preferred the so-called "retired" existence — withdrawal into the country from society. But others, both in classical times and in succeeding generations, occasionally tried to obtain the best of both worlds. (Archer, 1983, p. 160)

Yet, the rural and urban epiphanies experienced by Kavanagh and Debelyanov happened when they let go of their conscious effort to reconcile the opposites and this natural fusion created space for their new poetic achievement.

Some possible research limitations related to the issues discussed in this paper could be the need for more general background information regarding the two poets' experience and perception of nature, as well as more samples from their poetic work representing how these perceptions were gradually altered throughout their lives. This would probably give an even more stable basis for comparison and discussion of their work and how the *rus in urbe* setting became integral to their philosophy. However, the detailed discussion of this historical poetic development within the poets' oeuvres would entail the necessity of a more comprehensive study reaching beyond the length of the current paper.

Thus, the scope of future research, probably in terms of a study of greater length, would include the development of a more focused discussion related to the various stages of the poets' relationship with the countryside and the city, considering more poems and possibly expanding the study to include more examples of their body of work which are not limited to poetry. This would provide a richer background for the future research of *the rus in urbe* phenomenon in art.

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