A cross-cultural study of rural and urban landscapes in Russian and British poetry of the Romantic Age

Michele Russo and Mariantonietta Fiore

(University of Foggia, Italy)

Abstract

Agricultural systems affect and ‘forge’ rural landscapes, as a result of plant cover in wide areas and anthropic activities. The production of food and fibres (i.e. primary goods and commodities) is vital to society and plays a major role in shaping the rural landscape. The protection and preservation of the landscape is, at the same time, of the utmost importance, as its anthropic ‘modelling’ exerts a significant influence on the human quality of life, a multidimensional concept which includes emotional, relational, and social well-being. Rural landscapes represent the environment where many people live. The rooted cultural values and heritage of landscapes add their aesthetical quid pluris, thus enhancing the sense of well-being that they convey.

Set against this anthropological-agricultural background, our paper will focus on pastoral elements and their linguistic realization in British Romantic poetry. Given that the mutual influence between the rural landscape and the emerging urban landscape became more and more marked in Europe in the Romantic Age, we will discuss how poetry enhanced people’s sensibility to the landscape and its relationship with the newly-born urban context in the decidedly different geographic and linguistic environment of Russia in the Romantic period. The anthropic changes to the landscape produced positive effects on people’s ontological sphere in the British context. However, it was not the same in Russia, where the urban landscape was affected by the changes that humans introduced into their surrounding environment, the countryside.

We mean to highlight the different depictions of rural and urban landscapes in the Romantic Age from a linguistic perspective in, respectively, Great Britain and Russia. The methodological approach of our analysis will consider Sapir’s (2007) cross-cultural theories on the relationships between languages and cultures and, more in particular, Bakhtin’s (1979) theories of stylization as, generally speaking, they lend themselves to interlinguistic and intertextual comparison between the two areas.

Firstly, we will look at Wordsworth’s and Clare’s idyllic depictions of the British countryside in ‘The Solitary Reaper’ (1807) and ‘The Harvest Morning’ (1820). We then examine some Russian lines from Pushkin’s ‘Mednyj vsadnik’ (‘The Bronze Horseman’) of 1833, a narrative
poem recounting the flooding in Saint Petersburg in 1824. In particular, we will dwell on the lexis referring to the description of the Russian urban landscape and on the semantic value of nature as a destructive force. The methodological approach of this part of the work will employ Propp’s (2003) theories about the supernatural elements of nature and their effects on man.

The paper, therefore, will underscore the contrasting aspects of rural and urban landscapes in the British and the Russian contexts by carrying out a contrastive linguistic analysis.