

RURAL TO URBAN TRANSITIONS IN EUROPEAN REALISTIC NOVELS

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Abstract: The greatest character in the works of Rebreanu, Reymont, Verga, Hardy and Blasco Ibáñez is the countryside, the rural environment artistically reconstructed beyond geographical clues. It is a setting that transcends the novels it inspired. It is the greatest character, with its moods and a destiny of its own, celebrated in novel after novel. In minute detail, this prose points to the ancient rituals of rural life, to the unifying rhythms of man and nature confronted against the background of various landscapes. Descriptions of wind shift, soil mix, the contour of hills and hedge rows serve as more than narrative colour. They detail the texture of rural life, the daily realities that shaped its speech and fired its folklore. Even as they wrote, the pastoral atmosphere was vanishing, and its ancient regime was threatened. The typical scenery and the people were becoming a breed of the past. In charting the social consequences of urbanisation, these writers predicted the true victim: the land itself. Despite the inevitable thrust of modernization, that way of life with its archetypes remained in the collective memory due to their artistic efforts.

Keywords: rural-urban transitions, European realistic novels, rural rituals, social impacts

Since the nineteenth century, there has been a dramatic shift of population from the country-side to the urban areas, and largely rural economies gradually showed signs of reorientation towards cities and their typical industrial activities. Hence, by the middle of the century, just as many people were urban dwellers as country dwellers. It is a corner stone for socio-economic movements that, in their turn, alter characters' destinies, most in dramatic ways, with exceptional people tragically falling in the clash of epochs, ways of life, and primary passions. Drastic rural to urban transitions in European realistic novels are evident in Rebreanu, Reymont, Verga, and Blasco Ibáñez, who, like Hardy, considered that 'a story must be exceptional enough to justify its telling [... and it must have] something more unusual to relate than the ordinary experience of every average man and woman'; these novelists attempted 'the adjustment of things unusual to things external and universal', so their realistic fiction showcases the following traits most prose writers in the realistic trend display:

- the stage is mainly rural, artistically re-created by authors from his childhood life and memories;
- it is topographically specific, to a degree unparalleled in the previous national literature;
- it deals with local farmers, and shows sympathetic insight into the life of this class;
- it does not avoid an impression of artificiality whenever 'polite society' is involved;
- dialogues seem broken, and there is occasional language stiffness, with short sentences;

- contrast with rhetorical defects, frequent phrase focus on land descriptions, and the protagonist's alert senses leave their mark.
- nature interests the artist for its own sake, and the writer's approach is often poetic;
- literary allusions and quotations exist, with references to painters, musicians, and architects;
- use of coincidence and accident is overdone, with plausibility often stretched to the extreme;
- there is a secret marriage yearning;
- there is a pervading note of gloom, only momentarily relieved;
- it all comes to a tragic end in a sudden death.

Although village life is often seen as stable, even unchanging, the rural realities of economy brought a number of challenges: firstly a more scientific approach to farming involved crop rotation and new machinery with storage systems were implemented; secondly, much land was enclosed, which gradually led to agricultural unemployment as poor farmers were forced away from own land. Other rural workers were put out of business by industrial manufactures, agglutinated in urban areas. Rural poverty becomes a central issue. Wars slowed this process, but to a little extent. Instead of secure employment, many labourers had to become migrants in their quest for work. By contrast, landowners profited from new machinery and growing urban markets, but the countryside remained regarded as the normal working environment, which most educated people saw as quite barbaric, compared to urban life civilisation.

These writers built reputations of successful novelists, but they had poetic nuances deep inside their artistic visions as well. On the other hand, to them, their novels were primarily a means of earning a living, so, like many contemporaries, they published in periodic instalments in journals. They can neither be labelled solely as realistic novelists, nor be categorized merely as modernists: they transformed the conventions of own national literature and opened roads for new kinds of art. In many respects, they are trapped between contemporary sensibilities and more modern ones, and between tradition and innovation. They lived and wrote in a time of difficult social change, when the country was making its slow and painful transition from an old-fashioned, agricultural nation to a modern, industrial one. Businessmen and entrepreneurs, or new money, joined the ranks of the social elite, as some families of the ancient aristocracy, or old money, faded into obscurity. Their careers inspired and spanned generations, with the first novels consolidating realistic patterns and later ones exploring modernity.

The most successful and admired novels depicted the village setting, a fictional rural area with deeply philosophical pessimism and simultaneously self-reflexive and autobiographical nature. They wrote about profound rural issues while living in urban locations, and delineated human beings pitted against the vast forces of nature and implacable destiny; they stand supreme, handling plots, situations and settings that reveal the hands of superb craftsmen. They belonged to the rural working class, and were keenly interested in depicting the life of the peasantry while advocating for their

beliefs and values. When they went out of their chosen region to deal with the sophisticated life of cities, the writing lost its natural flavour, and became artificial and laboured. The vicissitudes in the life of their characters are described as occurring against the background of scenes located in the countryside. It is the countryside that abounds in various phenomena of nature in their changing aspects. Nature is closely observed and presented in novels with fidelity in all details. Though it often seems to share the feelings of humans as a whole, it remains indifferent to their suffering. It is against the background of the vast universe that the drama of human life is enacted, and the tragedy of their heroes/heroines takes place. A picture of vast elemental forces is shown working on men's life. The character of human beings is seen as being shaped by the environment around. The ancient name then denotes a space which represents the stagnant nature of rural life, creating a fissure between urban modernity and rural tradition. Therefore, the space is full of symbolic meaning and specific socio-cultural significance. Compared to other spaces, it is unique and seen as marginal with its own specific customs and landscapes, but also slightly influenced by modernism.

They are masters in the art of characterization, and faithfully portray figures by manners, speech and distinguishing features. However, only key characters are portrayed with psychological insight, the minor ones being used only to provide some relief and chorus-like comments on the existing situations. Unlike Rebreanu and Verga, Reymont and Hardy focus more on portraying the elemental powers of the universe and the world around than individual characters. Moreover, they often use characters as mouthpieces for the expression of their own philosophy of life. Hardy's 'chief character is Man, and the play is Existence', so he chooses human types from those closest to nature, those in whom the primitive impulses are the strongest. Instead of remaining preoccupied with the psychological complexities of his protagonists, Hardy shows the struggle between these characters and the indifferent universe, they have been thrown into by the accident of their birth.

The plots of all the novelists we hereby discuss are constructed with great skill, and reveal inventive powers. They are marked by causality and often by excess vitality. Such plots comprise both the internal and external conflicts, and present a blend of these two types. Sudden shifts from one scene to another put a strain on the common reader's attention. However, a careful arrangement of various events and situations is helpful in imparting a unity to the structures of all novels despite the complex nature of structures. On the whole, they make plots serve as a compact unit to convey a tragic view on life, and all the scenes and events lead towards a climax which embodies this view.

There can be no doubt about the merit of Reymont and Hardy's art as novelists, despite certain shortcomings it may betray. As story-tellers, as plot builders, as delineators of characters and as painters of scenes and situations, they are simply superb. The pessimism and predilection for tragedy may not be popular with many readers, but the authenticity of the treatment of human life and the genuineness of the concern for the tragic destiny of their protagonists, are beyond dispute. They share a cosmic view of life, and the beauty and dignity of his best work. Verga, Rebreanu, and

Blasco Ibáñez on the other hand, focus on emblematic, perennial archetypes, with destinies serving as life lessons for the community. The folk are a bridge between mere earth and moral individuality. Their characteristics are folk instinctivism, fatalism and folk magic. At times the contrast between members of the folk and individuals is closely related to the dichotomy countryside/town. The folk and the individuals coexist in constant tension. In the traditional rural society, everyone belongs to it in a completely unquestioned way, from birth: no conscious decision is needed to join, and an outsider would not normally be thought to belong. It is a hierarchical society that unquestioningly accepts the relations between strong and weak as institutionalized in property. Kinship and locality are the dominant modes of association, for most people the only two. A sudden change impedes on the old rural world, which is going to dissolve and be replaced by modern progress, and discontent.

Women are victims of economic circumstances, of hypocrisy in ethical standards, of power games and of their own emotional longings. Ana is a victim of economic calculations for an upstart. Jagna cannot restrain her vitality. Pepeta suffocates all feelings in hard work. I Malavoglia enter a vicious circle of duty which enables nothing else outside of it. Tess embodies the attack against the established society and its double standard of morality, which went hand in hand with the belief that society should be radically divided into two clearly separate spheres: the public and the private. The private sphere was quintessentially female. The idealized woman in this period was seen as an angel in the house, as an asexual being whose main mission was to protect the rest of the household members. Chastity had to be preserved at all costs until marriage, and purity was her most valued virtue. On the contrary, the public sphere was male, with men seen as superior to women, hence in charge of dealing with all types of public activities, involving danger and action. Only in the private sphere did men find security and protection; their home was their shelter, and their most precious property. This notion of separate spheres corroborated the double standard of morality. However, these ideas were by no means new. There was no halfway position in this puritan mentality; women were either pure or damned, either exemplary wives or corrupting decayed persons. Hence the woman is a socially marked character.

The authors are aware that their approach might scandalise the contemporary society. They showcase a quite advanced and lucid vision on feminine behaviour, with evident transitional traits. Despite trying to assert their individuality, women fail, being regarded as a mere vessel of emotion unspoilt by experience, as ethical rigors enforced at the time leave no place for other perspectives. Nevertheless, female conspicuous sensuality is partly responsible for her own catastrophe, or for her partner's. The female character is always forced to undertake a journey from innocence to maturity, in spite of her reluctance to do so. Women accept fate with resignation and apathy, as if everything was meant to happen. Such fatalistic idea is common in the village world, and it cradles certain survival wisdom. The novel makes it clear that mother and daughter, for example Ana in *Ion*, belong to different worlds, but the daughter is not as resilient as her mother, nor is the father as bad as the son-in-law. Many excerpts disclose the generational divide

in the rural world. However, in spite of women's effort to escape their fate, all attempts end in failure, which enhances the pessimism looming over the village as a whole. Women should have insisted and be more resolute. Naivety made them think that the past might be ignored only by not mentioning it or by covering it with a proper or prosperous wedding. However, the parents' pride and society hypocrisy are also to blame. Emotional downfall arises from an immediate and instinctive obedience to impulse without sufficient corrective control of reason. Readers and critics were especially offended by the writers' frankness about relations between protagonists, all delicate matters being dealt with obliquely.

There is a wide array of female characters: some reject both past and future in favour of an eternal now; others are epitomes of endurance, strength, passion or sensitivity; still, certain women seem meek, vain, plotting creatures of mercurial moods. Men typologies are distinct and focus on the ability to actively struggle with their destiny, form plans to oppose it, so as to finally obtain a well acknowledged place in the world. The women in the novels have no such outlet, and it makes their situation more tragic. They are limited to a very few, easily recognizable social roles, and they are always subject to domination and destruction from men. His tragic heroes/heroines defiantly work against fate, but accept their doom with an insight into and an awareness of the forces of evil that affected their downfall; protagonists command sympathy by the very strength of their passions, and we experience a feeling that someone of great worth has been lost when we see them destroyed.

These novelists were generally more ambivalent when contrasting the town and the country, as they literally kept a foot in both camps. Both cities and villages appear in their novels, with predilection to the countryside. Their rural characters do not do well in towns: they are prevented from accessing urban life or they do well there for a time, but then are cast out by a more modern generation, or by the same religious prejudices, pervading both environments.

Reymont and Hardy feel the tension of town and country, as well as the one between the romantic and realistic views of the countryside, and it is this tension that produces some of the irony in their novels. Rebreanu, Verga, Blasco Ibáñez, on the other hand, opt for realism/verism, reducing lyricism and romanticism to scarce motifs. Despite using similar settings in their novels, the rural backdrop is neither romantic nor idealized for Rebreanu and the verists. Ironically, the blind forces of destiny seem to favour certain characters, while they relentlessly pursue those who deserve better.

The plot and tragedy arise from the gradual closing in of a situation stemming from ordinary human passions, prejudices, and ambitions, by reason of the characters taking no trouble to ward off the disastrous events produced by such passions, prejudices, or ambitions. All tremendous emotions experienced by the authors' powerful and elemental characters are in profound contrast to the placid, accepting natures of the crowd seen around the protagonists. Writers intend these rustics to be taken as the symbol of the great majority of mortals, a chorus in the original sense providing the reader a standard of normality by which s/he can gauge the heights and depths to which

the main characters rise and fall. Social gatherings like the opening ones, depicting folk traditions, serve as trend setters and social measurements. Folk ways faded, alongside with old folklore and the orally-transmitted ballads and tales, altered by education, migration, and printed papers. A feeling of constant attrition and final obliteration of the human shape and all human structures permeates these writers' art. In contrast to grand ruins, both inanimate and human, a minor but normative character always goes through life in a balanced way, as measurement, maybe feeling fortunate for not having been tested by experience, still enjoying the blessings of mediocrity. Despite authors' obvious fascination for those capable of powerful emotions and tragic fates, the concentrated passion and closely-knit inter-dependence of village lives never allows their protagonists to succeed.

Rebreanu, Reymont, Verga, Hardy and Blasco Ibáñez complemented novel writing with minor roles as folklorists, anthropologists and social critics. They describe and comment on actual situations, such as the heavy work of the rural labourers and the bleak lives of oppressed women. In their fiction, not only natural forces but also human society settings are bent on crushing the active or sensitive individual. Society inflicts gratuitous suffering by enforcing outworn conventions and superficial values, as well as through the contemporary emphasis on efficiency. In their novels, time moves rhythmically, in seasons and ages, rather than mechanically, according to watch or calendars.

However, in fiction, the natural world is often described in great detail, rendering it more significant than a mere setting against which the narrative unfolds. There is a reciprocal relationship between environment and character, an interaction which demonstrates the changing position of humans in socio-economic contexts. Narrative techniques remove the sense of authority from people's hands, placing humans within the natural world rather than ruling above it. In a parallel characterisation that highlights connections between peasants and their environment, the faces of certain individuals are portrayed in terms of the landscape. The artists reveal an awareness of time and history, where the human subject transforms nature. Authors focus on the interaction between human life and immediate surroundings, and on the role of environment in determining the lives of the characters inhabiting it. Socio-economic issues again become central as the permutations of emotional advance and retreat are played out against the very setting where the characters make their living. The class-ridden system of that day is challenged by the defeat of the protagonist's earnest aspirations to status improvement. In powerful narratives, the artists trace their characters' initially hopeful, then ecstatic, but persistently troubled journeys toward eventual deprivation and death.

All rural characters travel on foot and if forced by circumstances to use other means for long distances, they feel utterly uncomfortable. In urban settings the middle and upper class characters rent carriages to move around, or take the train, or drive a car. When the locals walk, they regularly travel with their peers. They do not even talk to each other when they do so, showing the familiarity within this close-knit community.

Compared to people coming from the city, their way of life is unambiguously rural. The village characterizes itself as a modest and hard-working community, enjoying a simple lifestyle as compared to the exuberance of the city. Additionally, the way in which time is experienced is very different from how it is felt in the city. This rural population does not mind when someone is a few minutes late; this is in sharp contrast with life in the city, where precise time management is imperative for modern life to function. Space is shaped through the description of both unique landscape features and traditional customs and ways of life in a vague contrast to urban life. It characterizes a marginal rural region, which maintains an intimate relationship with nature, ancient history and traditional customs, but is at the same time left behind in the modernization going on in the cities. Because of this latter dividing line, the village also symbolizes relative poverty which seems to be never-ending. Nevertheless, people are portrayed as having a strong vitality, acting a lot freer than the urbanized middle class in the city. The intimate link between people, customs and land also impacts the characters' emotional structure. Opposite feelings may coexist and it seems that they are not contradictory at all. The characters living in the village are widely different at times, but most of them are a mixture of the new and the old. Some protagonists are young people, who undergo significant changes in the way they see and perceive the world as compared to the older generation. They are more independent, more individualistic, and attach far less value to traditional social norms.

Through the analysis of the changes of characters, it is possible to say that the countryside is not a closed and unchanging rural space, unaffected by the outside world. The authorial voice of the narrator has a close connection to his characters. He observes other characters, traditional customs and education. By exploring such meta-textual pieces of information, it is possible to grasp more of the connotations behind rural regions. Also, these novels are related to the influence of profit on agricultural production and on rural people's way of life, with a conservative view of society.

The authors' view of education is also worth paying attention to, because the novels are the products of educated local literate persons, because there is a close link between education and modernity, seen in fast urbanisation, and because education is an important issue in their novels, connected with improvement, social promotion, and the national fibre.

The greatest character in the works of Rebreanu, Reymont, Verga, Hardy and Blasco Ibáñez is the countryside, the rural environment artistically reconstructed beyond geographical clues. It is a setting that transcends the novels it inspired. It is the greatest character, with its moods and a destiny of its own, celebrated in novel after novel. In minute detail, this prose points to the ancient rituals of rural life, to the unifying rhythms of man and nature confronted against the background of various landscapes. The typical scenery and the people were becoming a breed of the past. In charting the social consequences of urbanisation, these writers predicted the true victim: the land itself. Despite the inevitable thrust of modernization, that way of life with its archetypes remained in the collective memory due to their artistic efforts.

Realistic writers such as Rebreanu, Reymont, Verga, Hardy and Blasco Ibáñez present vivid typologies deeply rooted in the rural environment whose life lessons they live and tell. They explore emotional clashes triggered by traditions impacted by perennial desires.

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