

POETS: GENRES CONQUERED

ROMAN KISYOV OR THE ARTIST THAT TRANSCENDS BOUNDARIES

Yoanna Gudalova, Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv
Academic Advisor: Prof. Lyubka Lipcheva-Prandzheva, DSc
Translated by Polina Petkova

What different arts have in common is the Spirit,
which in-spir-es ('spirit' comes from the Latin 'spirare' or 'to breathe'),
and the Word (as a primary substance)¹
Roman Kisyov

Drawing on Nikolay Raynov and his ideas about the origin of art, we have to agree that it is the result of a need to communicate with others and the expression of collective experiences. There is an additional quality that distinguishes the work of art from all else and this is inspiration. Inspiration is the reaching of a higher level of the mind, the acquisition of a new way of looking at the world and of being. It possesses the mind in its pursuits and motivates us to express what we are feeling.² This is what different kinds of art have in common. Regardless of the differences between them, their boundaries are vague and the primary energy that unites them is inspiration.

Roman Kisyov's inspiration drives him to share his thoughts and feelings through words and imagery. It is difficult to say whether he should be classed as a poet or an artist. In his work in an interesting way poetry and visual art are combined. Born in 1962 in Kazanlak as the son of the poet Zdravko Kisyov, Roman holds a degree in Painting from The National Academy of Arts. Tempted by poetry, he started writing at the age of 25, which could be considered rather late by contemporary expectations. He wrote poetry in spite of the resistance he felt – resistance that arose from the fact that his father was a poet.

With Roman Kisyov, the metaphor 'my father in me' is to be found only in part. Despite the similarities we can find between the two, e.g. the choice of titles, Bible imagery, and the propensity for ancient plots, what seems to bring Roman Kisyov closest to his father is the trail of the artist that both of them choose to take. We are so used to thinking of Zdravko Kisyov as a poet that we often overlook the fact that he began his artistic path as a visual artist. Later, he gave up this occupation but as a connoisseur he continued to lend his advice to his son. 'My father in me' or 'against the father in me' – in spite of all of the inner resistance that Roman Kisyov felt, he inherited the propensity for both kinds of art from his

¹ The quote is part of a special interview Roman Kisyov gave for the project.

² Райнов, Николай. "Що е изкуство? Произход на изкуството" [What is Art? Origin of Art]. *LiterNet*. 11 Sept. 2023. <<https://litenet.bg/publish4/nrainov/shto.htm>> [in Bulgarian].

father, and he still managed to carve his own path. He combines words and imagery, insisting on channelling his talent into both art forms in equal measure. Those who appreciate him are drawn to the unity between the two arts and that is why it is intriguing that in an interview he gave for this project he shared with us that in his early work there was tension between his poetry and his visual art, and that it was only later that the two were reconciled and began to complement each other, with poetry in the lead.

Presently, Roman Kisyov has published ten collections of poems in total and many have been translated into other languages. His debut was in 1995 with *The Gates of Heaven* and his most recent is *The World of Words* (2022). The poetry that the author offers to the contemporary reader is different, unusual even, but most definitely in line with our ideas about modernity. Through it, Kisyov tries to lead his reader into a mystical world of self-knowledge.

We find traces of this mystical world and the characteristic traits of modernity even in his first collection of poems. The publication of *The Gates of Heaven* is closely linked to the state publishing house Hristo G. Danov in Plovdiv. At the beginning of 1995, to celebrate the 140 anniversary of the opening of the publishing house, a national competition was held for one book of each, poetry and prose, for young writers under 33 years of age. Roman Kisyov won the poetry award and *The Gates of Heaven* was published and very well received. The collection opens with a couple of poems instead of a foreword that touch upon the theme of inspiration, given to us by the Spirit, the Creator, from another dimension, where every kind of being is a sign of creation:

I am the Creator
In the shadow. I am the shadow
Of the Creator, Who is also
In the shadow...^{3,4}

This short introduction, which also reveals the role of the creator, we shall come back to, prepares the reader for two lyrical cycles: “Before I was born” and “Revelation”. These two divide the book into two contrasting parts. Characteristics of the poems of the first part are: darkness, the isolation of the self, and its alienation from the world. The poem “Ithaca” talks about self-isolation. In contrast to Cavafy and the myth of Odysseus, Roman Kisyov introduces a protagonist who never leaves Ithaca and who never knows the world outside of it.

This theme of isolation from the outside world continues into the poems “Desolation,” “Home,” and “The Memory,” which are clearly in dialogue with Dalchev’s poetry. As if Kisyov insists on our understanding that Dalchev (“The Creator in the Shadow”) has never truly left Bulgarian poetry. In “Home” the protagonist did not leave for America, but is the only one living at home and is having doubts about his own being, that of someone who has and at the same time has not lived. Both he and the lyrical speaker of Dalchev’s poem “Story”

³ All poems used in the present paper, unless otherwise indicated, have been translated by PP.

⁴ Кисъов (1995: 6).

do not believe in their own existence⁵, and their only guest is the memory of the past and the life that is slowly slipping away.

Roman Kisyov presents what could best be described as a sense of loss. Lost in his own loneliness, the lyrical speaker from the first cycle, “Before I was born,” feels the futility of existence, he is not able to become a part of the world of others, and he is reluctant to live locked inside himself. Condemned to exist in and through his body, he feels imprisoned. He dreams of returning to the time before he was born, to a mystical archetype of the world, where loneliness does not exist.

Despite the overwhelming feeling of being stuck, the Self finds hope. Towards the end of the first part of Kisyov’s collection, defeated by faith, darkness dissipates. A key text for “Before I was born,” as well as for the entire book, is the poem “Path”. The latter acts like a bridge between the two parts of *The Gates of Heaven*. In “Path,” through biblical imagery and mythological figures, Kisyov shapes the two counteracting powers of the world: that of good vs. evil, and light vs. darkness. The lyrical speaker in the poem changes. He overcomes his seclusion and frees himself from the sense of loss. We see him full of hope and striding bravely ahead:

I walk and see:
People
Multitudes
Happy
And sad
And all of them around me
They are walking ahead
Walking
In my direction⁶

For the first time the lyrical speaker is among other people and is moving in the same direction as them. He does not wish to turn back any more and what helps him to continue on his way is faith. It is his salvation, the thread that leads him to the light:

Faith is my
Ariadne... And now
I see light⁷

Light marks a new beginning for the speaker, his *Birth* and his *Resurrection*, as is evident in the text. Light is the theme of the entire next part of *The Gates of Heaven*.

The second cycle is marked by faith, which for Roman Kisyov is a direct link to God. This characteristic of his poetry is easy to detect in the opening and its title – “Revelation”. The title reminds us of the Book of Revelation by St. John the Apostle and shapes the idea of renewal, the birth of a new beginning, of a new world:

⁵ “And as if I had never lived,
and an evil make-believe is my existence!” (Далчев 2014: 31).

⁶ КИСЬОВ (1995: 32).

⁷ Ibid.

Let there be day
And wind raise the sun disk
On its wings
And light shine in thousands of
Reflections
In a world that was just born
And is yet so ancient⁸

Similarly to Hristo Smirnenski, Roman Kisiov chooses the imperative in “Let there be day” to cite the biblical “Let there be light!”. There is a very important differentiation between the two though. Kisiov’s speaker does not seek change in the world, he witnesses a world changed. This world is at the same time ancient and born anew. The light has transformed it and has obliterated every sign of the torturous chaos of futility.

There are multiple intertextual links between this cycle and the Bible. We find epigraphs from biblical texts (“Revelation,” “The Last Supper,” “The Warriors of Samuel”), biblical figures (Salome), biblical parables take new shape (“The Parable of the Two Sowers”). All of these links aim to present a new spiritual world. The accumulation of questions in “The Last Supper” is a provocation of the Self that does not yet know who he is:

If you are a Peter, will you deny
Me three times, before
The rooster crows?...
Or if you are a Judas, will you
Betray me with a cunning kiss?

And yet, if the speaker recognizes himself in Judas, there is still a chance to change:

And if you find out you are a Judas,
Will you be able to change Faith?
Just try!⁹

The second lyrical cycle from *The Gates of Heaven* presents to readers the faith in man as the possibility for man to change.¹⁰ While some of the poems maintain the theme of the self-seeking Self, others are devoted to the image of the man, who has achieved inner peace through the belief in God. In “Revelation” we find a very different Odysseus, one who has reached his Ithaca:

And I am Odysseus
Back in the home where I was born
– so familiar
Yet so different
There will be no nights to be had
For Penelope is tirelessly

⁸ КИСЬОВ (1995: 63).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ The word ‘man’ is used here to refer to all human beings (transl. note PP).

Weaving the sun's rays
Into this eternal day.¹¹

The hero has found his home. And even though "Path" is about a journey, this is in fact a journey towards the world as it first was, towards an eternal and infinite world. The Kingdom of Heaven for the speaker in the second cycle of poems is *Locus amoenus* – a place of pleasure and harmony, where it is always the *fifth season*:

It is made of all things
The rebirth and new life of
Spring, the warmth and blaze of
Summer,
The abundance of autumn and
The purity
Of white winter... This is the Fifth season
– Eternity¹²

The cycle "Revelation" traces the development of the Self and his salvation from loneliness. This lyrical cycle shapes an image of the world in which God will walk among men again and their faith will help them live a life of harmony.

With "Revelation," a path of light begins, a path of light that will bring the work of Roman Kisyov forward. In the poem "A Pilgrim of Light," but also a fact in the collection of the same name (2003), light is seen as the salvation of man from death:

And I floated atop the full waters
And never wavering followed the dove
Of the Spirit... to stop on Ararat.¹³

The Self has found a better place and sees light everywhere: in the dawn, the moon, stars, his heart ("Light"). Light permeates Kisyov's works later on as well in different ways, it is to be found everywhere where darkness is absent. The lyrical speaker in "Light and Shadow," part of the collection titled *The Garden of Secrets*, affirms that "when the Light of the world shines on us – / every shadow dissipates"¹⁴. In this way Light is established as a primary theme in Kisyov's works. It defeats darkness and makes one stronger.

This is not the only motif that is introduced in *The Gates of Heaven* and is to be found in other works of poetry by Kisyov. For him the role of the poet and poetry in a person's life is of central importance. In "To the Old Poet," a poem from his debut collection, he describes the image of the poet, who has lost himself in his poetry:

You turned Poetry into your entire life.
All your life spent between four
Walls, writing poems about Life...

¹¹ КИСЬОВ (1995: 64).

¹² КИСЬОВ (1995: 62).

¹³ КИСЬОВ (2003: 9).

¹⁴ КИСЬОВ (2003: 24).

How mundane!¹⁵

A connection can be drawn between this poem and Dalchev's "Books," where again we find the poet isolated from the outside world, engrossed in his intellectual endeavours. At the same time though, Kisyov brings to poetry the orthodox mysticism of ascribing any creation to the Creator, he goes back to the poet, who gladly asserts that:

My poetry
Is not my own.¹⁶

The poet is a messenger and mediator between God and men. He is often absent from the world, like in the poem "Don't Speak," for example, because he is listening to what the mighty Creator has to tell him. This idea can be traced in the poem "Born a Poet," part of *Cryptus*, as well as throughout the cycle "The Poet" in *The Garden of Secrets*:

Oh, but I am not
Responsible for my
Poetry...
About this
Matter
You should
Ask
God!¹⁷

I am but his apprentice...
But one
To the Mighty –
God!¹⁸

The poet born arrives
From the land of the word
The poet born arrives
To this world to save beauty
From its hell!¹⁹

In Kisyov's poetry, the poet listens to what the Spirit tells him and passes this message to the people. The poet's primary task is to safeguard the beauty in the world and the role of poetry is to use the Spirit to birth poets, so they could spread the word of God and save humanity. Poetry is: the words the poet leaves behind after he has passed; it is the way the poet continues to be part of the world, and in this way continues to fight for the salvation of humanity.

¹⁵ КИСЬОВ (1995: 72).

¹⁶ КИСЬОВ (1995: 34).

¹⁷ КИСЬОВ (2003: 45).

¹⁸ КИСЬОВ (2004: 51).

¹⁹ КИСЬОВ (2003: 51).

The Gates of Heaven marks the beginning of all of these motifs, which take the reader back to a mystical archetype of the world, where harmony exists. The collection outlines the possibilities for the salvation of the man through faith and light. This debut book of poetry shows an avant-garde side to Roman Kisyov's works. In it we find a mix of different genres for the first time. Actually, the last two poems from *The Gates of Heaven*, "A Parable" and "A Tale," are very similar to short stories that end with a moral. This back and forth between different genres continues in all of the poetic works by Kisyov. We come across a sort of haiku as well:

Flowers
On a grave
Their roots
Stretch into the afterlife²⁰

Moving on to other texts, we find prose poetry, "The Philanthropist," "The Observer," "A Memory," as well as works whose genre and way of reading are established with the title, for instance, "A Fragment".

All of the examples above are enough to conclude that the poetry of Roman Kisyov is a combination of tradition and innovation. On the one hand, we find an echo harking back to the poetry of Dalchev. And on the other hand, through graphic shapes and the layout of lines, his poetry carries an avant-garde quality, which is very much in line with poetic traditions worldwide.

The poetry of Roman Kisyov is different from what we know. It is evocative, uplifting and enlightening, and it would not have had the same impact had the author not combined it with visual art. All of his books are complemented by his illustrations. This practice, which reminds us of Geo Milev, carries the idea of synthesis and a sense of completeness of the art in front of us.

As an artist Kisyov creates paintings, drawings and book illustrations. His visual art is also immersed in the mystical world that makes up his poetry. In his book illustrations one discovers existentialism and metaphysics. When Roman Kisyov chooses to illustrate the books of other authors, he seems drawn to those which focus on the philosophical aspects of being, such as *Desert Psalms*²¹ (1998) by Christine Busta, *Freedom has no name* (1990) by Stoyan Ranenski, to name a few. The illustrations that are found in Kisyov's books of poetry are a combination of drawing and painting art. His art does not restate his poetry, rather it relies on the mode, lines, colour, dynamics of the visual to express meaning. Observing and reading come into one simultaneous act:

²⁰ КИСЬОВ (2003: 78).

²¹ Here a reference is made to the Bulgarian rendition of the German title (transl. note PP).

over And when death
 cross arrives
 will then it
 soul will
 and the take
 close into
 will its arms
 of life the fragile
 the circle body
 then of the
 and child
 of light which
 milk will
 the start
 breasts nursing
 full death's from

The circle of life, graphically represented by the layout of the text, describes the perfect course of being: it calms and harmonises; it suggests the inevitability of the circle of life through the birth of the Holy child and the celebration of light.²²

The illustrations found in the books of poetry by Roman Kisyov take the reader a step further into the mystical world, already suggested in the texts. Thus, the illustrations themselves are visual poetry and together with the texts they evoke the imagery of the salvation of man, on the one hand, and on the other that of light, possible only in a world where God is constantly by man's side.

"Some literary critics were quick to label me as a 'religious poet'," the poet shares and one could tell he is not too unhappy with this categorisation, rather it seems that both his religious sensitivity and his work have been misunderstood.

Kisyov's visual art speaks its own language, somewhere on the boundary between realism and mysticism, between traditional concepts of iconography and painting. He has taken part in many joint exhibitions and has organised solo exhibitions in Bulgaria and abroad. In these exhibitions Kisyov offers us works that have a strong connection to the mystical world of faith and God. And if we happen to believe that the talent of Roman Kisyov's visual art is also to be found in his poetry, then we have to admit that his poetry, in turn, also has a strong influence on his exhibitions. On March 22, 1995 Kisyov's exhibition *The Fifth Season* was held in Seasons gallery in Sofia. The date is symbolic of the start of

²² Thanks are owed to Angelina Mateva for her help with the graphic representation of the poem for the English version of the text (transl. note PP).

spring and the title of the exhibition is a direct link to the poem of the same name, which is published concurrently in his debut collection. Thus, *The Fifth Season* becomes at the same time the title of a series of poems about complete harmony, as well as the name of the exhibition, which showcases paintings with elements of iconography (at the opening the artist himself dedicates the pieces to Jesus Christ).²³ The paintings in the exhibition carry a sense of timelessness and a sense of time running out, at the same time. In this opposition we find another link between the poetic and visual art of Roman Kisiov.

The dual art of Kisiov problematises the concept of time. In his poetry he often talks about the man on the brink of death or the man in a race against time. In poems like “The Time in Me” the concept of time seems everchanging. The time that is part of every one of us runs in a vertical direction, connecting us to our roots and the heavens. The time that is outside of us can only run in a horizontal direction and it links birth and death into one. If we explore Kisiov’s works starting from his juvenilia up to today, especially evident in his self-portraits, we cannot but notice that he traces the changes that are the make-up of this horizontal directionality of time. Change is easily noticed in the three paintings: *Path* (1992), *Path II* (1995), and *Path III* (1997). We see a man on a path in a forest. The person changes in appearance. In *Path II* (1995) we see the man with aureole. 1995 is the year Kisiov turns 33 or commonly referred to as Christ’s age. In the poem “Monologue of the One Reborn,” the speaker admits that at this age he has taken his first breath from eternity and is born anew. Death and eternity are juxtaposed in this work. Death grows with every passing day, until eternity sweeps away the lyrical speaker and allows him to continue his existence unburdened by the passing of time. This is represented in *Path III*, where the presence of light is evident in the symbolic use of the colour yellow.

The artist’s poetry and art discussed here help us form a grasp of his philosophical ideas. His work is a harmonious whole of image and text, a journey to an unknown world of salvation, where each and every one of us is an Odysseus, trying to know ourselves on our way to Ithaca. In his essay “On poetry or the secret hierarchy of words” Roman Kisiov reflects on the poetry of mysticism:

*This is the poetry that possesses Words of Strength – the hidden words that are capable of building new worlds, to transform beginnings, to bring forth and take away souls where they could never go alone, to open and close invisible doors... This poetry is sacred and few are those who we could call its priests, who use it to serve but in reality these truly are the greatest poets mankind has ever seen.*²⁴

One adjective best describes Kisiov’s work – mystical. It has the power to change. It forces us to face ourselves and reveals parts of us to ourselves. To simply label his work *religious* would be superfluous. It is spiritual and philosophical, it shares parts of Eastern Orthodoxy in its early phase, a phase that seems to be forgotten but is about salvation from solitude and happiness in a world made bright by God’s light.

²³ A recording of the opening of the exhibition is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=-sDJvBRwQ10> (23 Nov 2023).

²⁴ Full text of essay available in Bulgarian at <https://www.slovo.bg/showwork.php3?AuID=225&WorkID=12804&Level=1> (10 Sept 2023).

By crossing the boundaries of different arts and combining art and poetry, Roman Kisyov changes us. The belief in the salvation of the soul eradicates darkness from the eternity of being and makes the latter appealing. The work of Kisyov is love of mankind, it is a poetics of images and texts, it is modern but ready to stand the test of time. It is a bridge to help us reach the Spirit and the mystical world of peace. It is truly an inspiration.