

***Environmental elements in Maltese literature.
Nature as metaphor in Dun Karm, the national poet***

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Abstract

This essay seeks to establish the importance of the role played by the natural environment in Maltese romantic poetry. The landscape is seen as a physical as well as a spiritual context within which various aspects of a poet's own existential anxiety are expressed and transformed into poetic images. Nature is treated on a double level; it is both a reality and a metaphor, varying in significance according to a writer's inner state of being. The sea is equally recognised as a place and as a symbol since Maltese literature is greatly determined by the fact that life in Malta is intimately related to the sea, whilst references to the land necessarily recall the closeness to the ocean.

Keywords: environment, nature, island, landscape.

The history of Maltese literature reflects to a great extent the gradual emergence of a small nation in search of itself and eventually fully aware of its identity. The romantic revival has meant to Malta much more than what it has meant to most of the other countries. It signified above anything else the need for the island to discover its own language and to embark on the task of forming an indigenous literature, namely in Maltese, the traditionally downtrodden language derived from Arabic, spoken by all, actually written sporadically by quite a few.

The historical premise

Throughout the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth Maltese poetry and narrative prose profoundly contributed towards the ideal definition of Malta as a typically Mediterranean island. Poets like Gan Anton Vassallo (1817–1868), Dwardu Cachia (1858–1907), Dun Karm (1871–1961), Anastasju Cuschieri (1876–1962), Ninu Cremona (1880–1972), Guze' Delia (1900–1980), Mary Meilak (1905–1975), Gorg Zammit (1908–1983), Gorg Pisani (1909–1999) and Anton Buttigieg (1912–1983) were constantly inspired by the natural elements which they believed to be the most obvious justification for Malta's claim to nationhood. They almost politicised nature interpreting natural beauty as the most direct document in merit of which the island could identify itself with the more

respected countries. Novelists like Anton Manwel Caruana (1838–1907), Guze' Muscat Azzopardi (1852–1927), Guze' Galea (1901–1978) and Guze' Aquilina (1911–1997) sought refuge in the remote past in order to be able to go into detail in describing the countryside. Alleys, narrow streets, the village's main square, farmhouses were gradually transformed into symbols of moral correctness, aspects of the island's age-long religious tradition.

The modern period, which can be traced back to the late sixties, is characterised by the radical contestation of the thematic content of the whole romantic period. The island is frequently conceived as a highly restricted space, symbolised by a cage, and refuge is normally sought in the open expanse provided by the sea. This is highly paradoxical since in substance both poets and novelists were still subtly being inspired by the idealisation of the countryside which is so typical of all the romantics. Poets like Victor Fenech (b. 1935), Achille Mizzi (b. 1936), Daniel Massa (b. 1937), Mario Azzopardi (b. 1935), are all frightened by the direct and indirect effects of rapid urbanisation and violently deplore the destruction of much land for building purposes. Novelists like Frans Sammut (b. 1945), Oliver Friggieri (b. 1947), Alfred Sant (b. 1948) set their plots somewhere midway between the traditional village and the modern city, thus striving to localise the identity crisis underlying the personality of their respective protagonists.

The pattern had been definitely set by Dun Karm, Malta's national poet. This short account will try to identify the environmental elements standardised by him, thus leading to the conclusion that he has practically exhausted the subject and largely determined the mode subsequent writers were bound to treat environmental themes.

Nature as the image of divinity

Dun Karm Psaila, a humble and poor priest popularly and officially known as Dun Karm, is Malta's national poet. He is the best interpreter of his country's natural and historical heritage and identity, both of which he blends into one unique whole. He was born in October 1871 in a small village, Haz-Zebbug, which was later to feature as a microcosm of the whole island in his poetry. His humble rural origin never played second fiddle to other aspects, and this fact may account for the paramount importance he gives to the landscape even in dealing with transcendental arguments. The island's natural identity provided him with a secure point of reference in the treatment of all universal themes. When he died in October 1961 he was already a myth, revered by all as a major national figure. The late twenties and throughout the thirties Dun Karm reached the peak of his creative ability, principally owing to his transcending the particular and perceiving the universality which actually transforms routine into uniqueness and thought into intuition. In *Zaghzugh ta' Dejjem* (An Eternal Youth) he describes the sea in terms of its apparent immutability. All empirical experience conveys the idea that life is transient; change only leads towards utter destruction. Only the sea is static, supreme in its uniqueness. The Maltese archipelago, known for its relative serenity, is built up into an image of philosophical significance: timelessness, therefore, can be perceived in the local environment itself. The land is opposed to the sea, mobility to immobility, history to eternity. The purely descriptive motive soon becomes a point of departure for an inner voyage towards self-discovery.

The theme is best developed in *Il-Gerrejja u jien* (The Drifter and I), composed in 1933 to recall two periods of deep depression which he went through when still very young. The poem is based on the description of a Maltese boat which goes through three different stages: the enthusiasm of the early morning, the maturity of mid-day, the expectation of death in the late evening. The three classical phases of human life (youth, adulthood, old age) are engulfed within the limits of one whole day. The sense of sight easily gives way to the sense of feeling, synesthesia being one of the most consistent psychological aspects of Dun Karm's poetry. The opening stanzas directly recall the normal condition of the Maltese sea:

Kif hamret fuq il-bahar
f'roghda ferrieha taz-zerniq id-dija,
u z-ziffa ta' filghodu
qajmet is-sigar ta' gnejniet mohbija,

rajtek, dghajsa hafifa,
tifrex il-qlugh ghal majjstral sabih,
u, helu, taqbad triqtek,
taht ir-razan tat-tmun, ghal xejrt ir-rih.

When crimson over the sea
trembled joyous the radiance of dawn,
and the breeze of daybreak
awoke the trees in hidden gardens,

I saw you, nimble skiff,
spreading your sails to the fair mistral,
and gently taking your way
under the rein of the helm, in the wake of the wing.¹

The heat of the sun, the blue sky, and finally the "colourless veil" of the night play the role of physical aspects of a profoundly sad personal condition. The poet makes full use of the elements he is provided with by the environment to give an almost concrete coherence to what is spiritual, inner and undescrivable. He is equally meditative and descriptive, but essentially he is sensory; he passes on from seeing to feeling. Psycho-physical situations of this sort, which abound in his works as well as in those of most other Maltese writers, are all due to the influence exerted by the visual dimension of living on a tiny island.

The sea has eventually emerged as a major tourist resort, and it can be safely claimed that numerous images of Dun Karm have, at least subconsciously, been fully utilised for tourist advertising. But this is only to prove that the whole point in the poet's constant treatment of the sea is sorely missed. He is enchanted by its beauty; he takes pains to describe, at times too minutely, its rhythmic movements, change of moods, subsequent calm and

¹ The English translations of Dun Karm's poems are taken from A.J. Arberry – P. Grech, *Dun Karm Poet of Malta*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961.

rage. The motive, however, is much deeper, or perhaps should be looked for at a completely different level of consciousness. The ocean embodies mystery, typifies solitude, and is finally conceived as final oblivion. The two closing stanzas of *Il-Gerrejja u Jien* are definitely a unique example of the extent to which Maltese environmental inspiration is actually philosophical, not empirical:

Hawn issa t-tnejn nitbandlu
 qeghdin fil-qala jien u d-dghajsa tieghi,
 ghaliex iz-ziffa raqdet,
 u x-xemx ta' nofs in-nhar ma ghadhiex mieghi:

nizlet, u biss xi hmura
 ghadha titnikker fietla-fuq l-gholjiet ...
 dal-waqt jinsatar kollox
 fid-dlam tal-lejl ... u jkun sultan is-skiet.

Here now we two are tossing
 motionless in harbour, I and this skiff of mine,
 because the breeze sleeps
 and the sun of noonday is no more with me:

it has sunk, and only a glow
 still lingers faintly above the hills...
 soon everything is shrouded
 in the darkness of night ... silence reigns supreme.

It should be pointed out at this stage that fatality is closely associated with certain aspects of the environment in the whole of Maltese literature. Gan Anton Vassallo, the major Maltese poet of the nineteenth century, had already shown the way. Melancholic, solitary, lamentive, in lyrics like *Lil Gannina* (To Gannina), *L-Imsiefer* (The Migrant), *Iz-Zghozija* (Childhood) he had already shown how the physical aspect, derived from a keen observation of the environment, could be integrated with one's own psychological condition. Dun Karm has remained faithful to tradition even in this respect, and has subsequently determined the way most writers ought to transcend description through intuition. At its best Maltese literature is never purely descriptive, although it deceptively looks so.

Wied Qirda (The Valley of Destruction) is a Petrarchan sonnet Dun Karm composed as well in 1933. The valley is one of the most beautiful to be found in Malta; it is a solitary spot and is seldom frequented by either tourists or local residents. It still fails to attract sufficient attention, in spite of its highly picturesque, evocative character. It is said that a terrible battle took place there during the insurrection of the Maltese people against their French occupants in 1799. However, this is only remotely, if ever, implied in the sonnet, and such information does not in any way contribute towards a better understanding of its real message.

The sonnet is highly tense; it is made up of one whole complex compound sentence. The octave is constituted of a number of subordinate clauses of time, and the sestet rises up

towards its climax through a sequence of main statements. The valley is sombre, almost macabre, and its sheer beauty is made subject to the metaphysical role it now assumes. Transience is again, as in so many other instances in Malta literature, a feeling one can only get through physical experience, which is mainly visual, and finally tactile.

The sense of movement, which most Maltese environmental literature probably derives from the fact that Malta is a small island, evokes the passage of time in such a manner that immobility itself becomes ambiguous, indicative of something else, its real opposite. Dun Karm is struck by two trees which abound in Malta, the ash-tree and the carob, so frequently referred to in many other poems of his as to become archetypes. Their old age challenges and contradicts the truth that human life is relatively very brief. The time factor is again conveyed through aspects of nature. In their concreteness these objects fail to instil a sense of permanence; they defy time whereas man, as a thinking substance, becomes their inferior. Non-human nature is superior and in beholding it man can only become more aware of human finiteness:

Nisma' gol-fraxxnu u gol-harrub tal-plajja
bhal karba twila tal min q lghed ibati
u jigdem l-art fl-ugigh tal l-ahhar firda;

u hsiebi jarga' lura lejn il-grajja
ta' min ghalina kien bil-bosta hati,
u nhoss ghaddejja l-Mewt minn fuq Wied Qirda.

In the plain, amid the ash-trees and the carobs,
I hear as it were the long sigh of one in anguish
biting the earth in the agony of the last parting;

and my thoughts go back towards the history
of those who committed many crimes against us,
and I feel Death passing over Wied Qirda.

The tragic treatment of the environmental theme, however, does not exclude other approaches and interpretations, although it is perhaps the most important one. Dun Karm himself dwells at length on the charm of typical sunny days and "shining" nights. This time the elements of nature, always treated as vehicles of a transcendental truth, convey the message that life itself is actually worth living. What is generically termed optimism is not a condition which largely characterises Maltese literature, or the whole of Mediterranean culture for that matter. It would be more correct to speak of a deep sense of inner contentment derived from the contemplation of the landscape. It is, however, limited, subject to superior criteria, which are not environmental at all.

Nofs in-Nhar Sajfi (Summer Midday) is a sort of vignette typifying solitude as a source of serenity. The moon is shining "tranquil over the tranquil houses". One can only hear in a distance a watchdog barking. From a nearby garden come the rustle and scurry of rats. The most intriguing aspect is provided by the shrilling of crickets which are now instinctively

lulling people to sleep. The clock's warning, as the poet calls it, echoes over the whole village. The air is like a silvery azure linen sheet spread over one and all.

God himself is depicted as the supreme environmentalist in *Alla mhux Hekk* (God is not Thus). The underlying theme of the poem is the contrast between the inexhaustive creative power of God and the limited capabilities of an excellent painter. Landscapes are formed and rubbed off every day as night follows day whereas a painter can only produce a fixed image of that same process caught in its instantaneousness. The artist has thought long and deep how to steal colours from the rose and other flowers, and his work marvelled people. That is as far as an artist inspired by nature can go. There now come the descriptive component of the poem. Dun Karm describes sunset at Il-Wardija, one of the most beautiful natural places in Malta. In the summer sky there was "a fine spray of liquid gold and powdered topaz". The sea moved quietly "in a tremor of joy and love". The overall effect of the beholder immediately becomes metaphysical. Human genius is infinitesimal in contrast to the daily process of nature which produces the real source of a painter's visual inspiration. The artist has depicted "a setting sun that shall never set". God is not so: he performs hundreds of such wonders every day, and then he cancels them only to repeat them the next morning.

Theology is thus translated into a series of images which can be easily identified by the average inhabitant of Malta. Abstract concepts, such as the infinite wisdom of God, are thus illustrated through the charm of a well known landscape. In *Bjuda* (Whiteness) Dun Karm passes from the particular to the universal in a typically Aristotelian manner. He is struck by the intense whiteness of daybreak, over which there is the crimson that is bursting "afire at the birth of the kindly sun". As in all other instances, whatever is abstract is transformed into an identifiable, sensory figure. Anthropomorphism is an underlying feature in Dun Karm's literary strategy and conceptual process. He glimpses whiteness again at noon, which now takes the shape of an "ornament of the highlands". Here is where the empirical experience comes to a halt; from now on, it is intuition which takes over. Whiteness kindles in him love, the supreme law of nature, and finally transforms itself into a vision of the Virgin Mary.

Gunju (June) is inspired by one of the hotter months in Malta. The sun is burning forcefully and a fine breeze reminds us that the earth will soon be "roasting underneath our feet". June personifies the hope of ploughmen; the farmer will soon be repaid in abundance for his toil. In January men will be able to stay happy and sheltered in their homes. Nature will have worked out for them its annual miracle. Similar motives recur in *Dell u Dija* (Shadow and Light), *Lis-Silla* (To the Clover), *Ward* (Roses), *in-Nissiega* (The Weaver), *Zjara lil Gesu'* (Visit to Jesus), *Non Omnis Moriar*. Typical aspects of the Maltese landscapes all gradually construct a unique system in which sensory perception leads to reflection on the fundamental ethical values embraced by most Maltese throughout history. Autobiography itself is registered by means of the discovery of the local environment. *Inti ma Targax* (You Return Not) is an elegy to his mother, an average village woman. The verdure returns "over the draught of autumn's dryness", as the sun reappears after winter. A fine breeze returns with all its fragrance amid blossoms and buds. On the contrary, his mother will never come again and her sweetness and compassion are lost for ever. Nature itself provides Dun Karm with the elements constituting the description of his mother. It is the same metaphorical strategy with which he defines Malta itself in his patriotic poems.

His resentment towards urbanisation, a sentiment which somehow surfaces also in various modern Maltese poets, is best declared in *Xenqet ir-Raba'* (Country Yearning) and *It-Tifla tar-Raba'* (The Country Girl). In both he derives a sharp contrast between traditional life in the village and the modern trends prevailing in the cities. He is actually contrasting nature with culture, echoing the romantic dictum "God made the country, man made the city". He would not tarry any longer in city-streets, nor would he tread under his feet pitch and limestone. He only yearns for a small house "ornamented with the green of vine and orange-tree". In *It-tifla tar-Raba'* he vehemently advises the girl to keep aloof from urban culture which he identifies with a sort of distortion of the natural process and the moral order derived therefrom.

The inner voyage typified through nature

The long experience of Dun Karm as a poet in Maltese (he wrote exclusively in Italian up to 1912, when he reached his forties) can be divided in at least three different phases. The first one is characterised by the exploration of the most immediate aspects of intimate life, such as family ties, personal solitude, the Maltese landscape, and by the classical commemoration of historical events. Lyrics like *Minghajr Omm* (Motherless), *Id-Dar* (The House), *Wahdi* (Solitary), *Lill-Kanarin Tieghi* (To my Canary), mostly relying on the depiction of natural elements, illustrate the hidden anxiety of an apparently peaceful and calm spirit. Colourful descriptions of his surrounding, frequently resolving themselves into nostalgic vignettes, and an aptitude for subjectively involved narration already point out towards what was to be his typical preoccupation: the quest for the sense underlying existence, itself a mystery perceived only mistakenly and approximately through empirical experience. He was only waiting for the right moment to look more deeply into nature to arrive at the central conclusion of all his poetry.

In the late twenties and throughout the thirties Dun Karm reaches the peak of his creative ability, principally owing to his transcending the particular and perceiving the universality which actually transforms routine into uniqueness and rationality into intuition. *Zagh-zugh ta' Dejjem* (An Eternal Youth), *Wied Qirda* (The Valley of Destruction), *Naf u Nemmen* (I Believe and I Know), beside being sublimated expressions of the constant state of solitude the poet lived in throughout his life, are glaring examples of the way in which he gives a metaphorical shape to the conflict between the dictates of life and the force of violation, as well as to the need of reconciling human knowledge with a definite theological interpretation of existence. Although each lyric emphasises some particular aspect and ignores another, this group constitutes a homogeneous whole in which the physical environment and the metaphorical level are fused and reorganised according to the demands of a personal sensibility. The Maltese landscape has again played the leading role, a sort of rite of passage from the purely empirical to the essentially spiritual. In so doing he succeeded in giving universal, philosophical significance to a natural heritage which has been traditionally grossly underestimated. He actually anticipated by numerous decades the decisive role the natural heritage of the island was to assume when tourism became the most important industry in Malta.

The anxiety about the significance of being and the problem of evil, epitomised in death, imposed upon him the need of concentrating on a major work which really affirms his truest world vision and automatically his firm belief that the natural environment is the most reliable source of knowledge of the unknown. *Il-Jien u Lilhinn Minnu* (The I and Beyond Self), published in 1938 and since then universally acclaimed as his *tour de force*, is his most valid contribution to Maltese poetry and the best evidence he could ever provide to prove his inner need of going beyond human experience in order to arrive at a spiritual justification of the mystery of being.

An inner condition of a disturbed self is immediately rendered poetically through the systematic construction of a physical itinerary. The Maltese landscape, mostly the one he knew best as a man hailing from Haz-Zebbug, is utilised for purely philosophical purposes. As always Dun Karm betrays his rural origin and subsequently relates to the feelings of most Maltese, who still feel their country is essentially a "village", namely a country whose primary resource is its natural heritage. The opening lines immediately set the rest of the whole long narrative poem:

Hsiebi bhal aghma: biex isib it-trejqa
 itektek bil-ghaslug kull pass li jaghti;
 jimxi qajl qajl u qatt ma jaf fejn wasal;
 dalma kbira tostorlu l-kif u l-ghala,
 u d-dawl li hu jixtieq qatt ma jiddilu.

Minn gol-Hondoq
 Tad-dwejjaq kiefra jien ghajjatt imbikki:
 Ghejjew ghajnejja thares bla ma tara,
 u qalbi nfniet.

My thought is like a blind man: to find the way
 he taps out with a stick every step he takes,
 shuffles slowly, never knowing where he has got.
 A dense darkness shrouds from him the how and why,
 and the light he yearns after never illumines him.

out of the deep abyss
 of cruel anguish weeping I cried aloud:
 My eyes are weary of peering and never seeing,
 and my heart forspent.

The thematic content is philosophical whereas the symbolic structure is wholly environmental. Throughout the poem Dun Karm establishes a set of relationships with various antropomorphized elements of nature. The spiritual itinerary takes the shape of a weary walk in the countryside. Birds, trees, the sun and the sea play decisive roles in determining the various stages undergone by the traveller. The contrast between the troubled condition of the soul and the serenity of nature is the major unifying factor; stylistically it provides the

poet with the elements he needs to sustain the figurative dimension of his work, and thematically it enables him to translate empirical data into a set of inner experiences.

The importance of *Il-Jien u Lilhinn Minnu* in the history of Maltese literature has contributed significantly towards the development of an ecological awareness both amongst writers and the in the community at large. It established the need for the writer to further discover the analogical significance of the landscape and to relate the emotions derived from its observation to philosophical principles. It has also enabled writers to go beyond the mere description of their own environment and to detect hitherto unknown implications. Younger romantics such as Karmenu Vassallo, Ruzar Briffa, Anton Buttigieg and Gorg Zammit are all largely indebted to Dun Karm in this respect. What Dun Karm actually managed to do was to underpin the possibility of developing Maltese literature into a fusion of environmental awareness and intellectual relevance. Eventually the preservation of the island's natural heritage has been prominently included in the political agenda and frequently played a decisive role which far outreaches the confines of literature.