

Gürgeç KORKMAZEL

GREEN LITERATURE

Poetry → Nature

“My biggest school was the soil and the forest.”
– Eugene Guillevic

I was born in Stravrogonnou, a small mountain village of 450 people, among vineyards, almond orchards and springs. Because of the war and division of the island in 1974, when I was five, I was evacuated with my family and villagers, and resettled in northern Cyprus, in an empty house in Lyssi, a village that had been evacuated by Greek Cypriots, in the region of Mesaoria.

The first few days we couldn't find any food, so we ate the wild greens and herbs, especially mallow, that my mother found and gathered in the plains. It was just after the war and we were in deprivation; despite this, I can say I had a lovely childhood in the fields, orchards and on the hills chasing after the birds, lizards and foxes. My relationship with nature today got established then. My family traditionally lived off the land, so I also learned to work the land and the ways of nature.

I also inherited from my ancestors shamanism and paganism. Although Cypriot Turks are supposedly Muslim, as rural people we have many beliefs, rituals and practices that I witnessed since my childhood and which have left deep traces in me, traces related to old shamanistic and pagan beliefs. On the first days of spring, all the villagers went into the fields before dawn to wash their faces with the dew they collected from the meadows. Then there was the fear-expelling ritual, the tree-scaring ritual, the vows for an offering, and other rituals. Also, I think I learned to be in a romantic relationship with nature, having taken a little from Romanticism. Mostly from the Lake Poets.

All of these, but most importantly this nature and climate that I was born in, and its accompanying mythology, have played a large part in how I became a poet. For example, some of the stories that my grandfather told me when I was a child, and that fed my imagination, I later found in Greek Mythology.

Although I grew up in a village and was a war refugee, I eventually had access to poetry books and poets like William Wordsworth, John Clare, Rene Char, Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, İlhan Berk, Li Po and Tu Fu, who held my hand and helped me while I was growing up.

My relationship to the city is not a post-modern one, nor am I an urban person who escapes to nature. I guess it's because I wasn't born or didn't grow up in the city that the space of city and the metropolis always makes me dizzy and I do not know which way to go. Furthermore, if I stay too long in a big city, my health and my psychology start

to deteriorate. I remember 1975, when I was just six years old, and went to the capital city (Nicosia) for the first time, my mother held my hand and I held a long reed in my other hand, to protect myself against the crowds and cars.

Even if I come and go between cities, staying for temporary periods of time, I have mostly lived and still live in a village. Even though I have lived or stayed for a while in cities like Ankara, London, Manchester, Frankfurt and Nicosia, I always chose places that were as far from the city centers as possible, places facing the countryside, woods, isolated places with slow rhythms of life.

When I move to somewhere new, I first ask and find out about its nature, not its art. Wherever I am, I first get close to the trees, flowers, birds, I first try to get to know them. My starting point is nature, art comes later. Before museums, galleries, libraries, I go to see the forests, parks, gardens, woods. I am more interested in nature, than art. And my poetry is born from this interest.

I feel much closer to the gods while wandering in the forest than while in a church, mosque or any other holy place. Just as the natives of the rain forests say: "God is great, but the forest is greater."

The wind blowing through a majestic tree, the swaying of its every branch to a different rhythm, the trembling of its leaves, its glimmer, its rustling sound all make me ecstatic, turn me back to my nature. Maybe it is this intersection of the tree with light and wind that I am searching for in poetry, this meeting of human and nature. Anyway, if we try to take away nature from the art of Poetry, what do we have left?

In general, yes, I am a member of humankind who created the concepts of time and eternity in order to survive and to not be crushed by the greatness and loftiness of nature, but at the same time I oppose the system that uses concepts like these to break the ties between humans and nature.

Among all of the arts, poetry is the best one in its way of representing and giving us greater access to nature.

Poetry questions, criticises, corrects, makes you pull yourself together.

Poetry is an intermediary, through its deeper rhythms, to nature and has the capacity, when it works well, to turn us into other people, animals, plants and even lifeless objects. Thanks to poetry, I mend the broken ties between myself and nature, just as it should be; I am trying to live as a part of the whole, harmonise my being with nature.

I am both an islander and a provincial. That is to say, not only am I from a small island, but I was born and chose to return to live in one of its villages, in nature, and not in one of its cities. The city represents modernity for me, and what is rustic represents, that which is far from modernity; naturalness and the philosophy of returning to nature. You may say I have a peripheral perspective but this perhaps may give another angle or glimpse of literature and what it can do.

I, as a poet get my creative power and energy not from any political party, ideology, institution, book etc. but from nature (from the sun, planets, water, soil, air and every kind of living being). No matter how much I try to adapt myself to contemporary life and society, secretly, I am quite a primitive, and this primitiveness, and also art itself, protects me against the fury of civilisation, responsible for all of this change in the ecosystem.

Since Charles Baudelaire (and especially with 'Paris Spleen') poetry has moved to the city. Today, the majority of European poets, actually poets of the world, lives in cities. This being the case, urban poetry has become mostly homogenous.

In spite of this, there are also poets who have chosen to not live in the cities, the centers, but in small settlements (or who like myself happened to be born there and chose to return there after living temporarily in the city) And it is in their poetry that I find myself the most.

Novel → City

"The key to my novel... is in my relationship with nature, in the trees."
– John Fowles

If poetry feeds above all on nature, the modern novel feeds above all on the city, its labyrinths and the human relations within urban life.

Undoubtedly, since the 19th. century, the novel has risen to prominence as the popular genre, and gained the attention of the majority. You find novels on best seller lists, and often they are made into movies. And for this reason, many writers chasing rainbows in other areas of literature have also tried their hand at novel writing because of its popularity, often because of the profit it might bring.

As well as poetry, I also read many novels since I was 11 or 12 years old. In these last few years, I read fewer novels but have not stopped completely. I have not given up on old favourites such as Lev Tolstoy, Louis Ferdinand Celine, John Fowles, Thomas Bernhard, Yukio Mishima, Romain Gary, Yaşar Kemal. But instead of the novels I now prefer to read diaries, letters, memoirs and autobiographies. In these I often find an intimacy that you find in poetry. Besides these, I go back and re-read poetry, short-story, philosophy, essay, critique, biography, history, archaeology, ornithology, botany, entomology-- but I do not often go back to reading a novel I have already read.

For instance, I have never felt like going back to read any of D.H. Lawrence's novels I had read in my youth, but I can read over and over his short stories like 'The Prussian Officer' and 'Love Among The Haystacks.' Their compression is more poetic.

The short story has completely taken the place of the novel for me. In my view, poetry comes first in literature. Then the short story. Novel, at most, is poetry and the dump of the short story genre... The multi-meanings, the silence, the empty spaces and

the depth that exist in poetry and in short stories do not exist in the novel. Very few novels reach the intensity and poetic quality of the short story.

In many novels there is unnecessary surplus. The shorter novels are less troublesome, but more often than not long novels are inflated, hard to swallow. Even though I may enjoy reading some sections, without fail there will be sections blown up forcefully with ideas and concepts which are boring, and detract from literary and poetic value. With time and experience, I have learned to appreciate the shorter well-wrought pieces of literature.

It is true that in the modern novel, ones that give the inner world are more in demand than ones that give the outer world. This is the modernist aesthetics, and there is an understanding that the more emphasis on the inner world the better it is. However, frequently, even in great writers such as Dostoevsky, the inner life depicted is lacking in trees, birds, sky. Human relationships and the depths of human psychology seem to be the most important thing.

I have difficulty reading novels about the inner world of the depressive individual who lives in the city. If they do not touch on nature, if they do not show the changing of seasons, mention the weather, plants and animals, they seem dull. I have even less endurance for such novels when they do not address the imbalance between the inner and outer descriptions in novels. Maybe it's because I come from a village that I do not easily relate to urban novels that re-create the depression of industrial relationships. They do not relate to me in any immediate way. I also find quite unconvincing, as we often find, attempts of 'urbane' novelists to capture the experience of less 'worldly' characters.

For me the world of the novel cannot be complete with just humans and social relationships. There is a need for plants, animals and seasonal changes, and the hidden worlds they evoke. If it does not include nature, but is critical of a human-centred world, however, then it still may be of interest for me.

Of course, there are novelists like Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence, John Fowles and Yaşar Kemal who explore the human-nature relationship in their novels beautifully. In an interview Yaşar Kemal says: *"This is what I always want to emphasise in novel: in spite of all our consciousness, all of our independence, our happiness or our humaneness comes from our being a part of nature."*

Don't get me wrong, I am not against novels. I haven't concluded my reckoning with novel yet. Anyhow, even if you are against novels there is no getting away from them. In bookshops and libraries they still have the seat of honour, and we have to reckon with them as we have to reckon with the city.

Poets, journalists, teachers, anyone who has read a few novels and knows how to write, tries their hand at writing one. Writing a novel is in fashion, has become cheap, perfunctory. That's why I have lost my love, desire and enthusiasm for novel. For me the novel has dropped down to the end of the list of all literary genres. From now on it's no

special talent to write a novel, but maybe it is to resist writing one. Maybe because he didn't believe in novels as he did in poetry, Ezra Pound burnt the two novels he had written in his years of youth.

Conclusion

The novel has been on rise ever since Descartes said that humankind was the master of nature. I cannot help but ask, is the modern novel against nature? Or, does the novel represent the majority who only read novels and newspapers and remain insensitive to the destruction of nature?

In one respect, modernity is humankind's dominance over nature, confusion, hubbub, and extravagance. When this is the case, a poet who has chosen an ecological way to live in harmony with nature must make concessions to modernity as a lifestyle. Modernist aesthetics has responded to this, and has also developed the aesthetics of the city and modern metropolis, though maybe the literary linguistic style that modernism used expressed a different position *vis a vis* the city.

In my opinion, today's poet should have an ecological consciousness. Of course this is not enough for writing a good poem. But if in the poet's life there are such environmental concerns and sensitivities, they will somehow find place in her/his poetry too. They will be seen.

And if we are to come back to the novelist, the garden that opens to the city will not be enough for him/her, s/he will become blocked and in the end be forced to return to nature. From now on, a person who will write a new novel will not be able to undervalue the changes in the ecosystem, the living species that have become extinct.

At one time, the novel developed an aesthetic through man's alienation or rebellion against nature. Now we need an aesthetic to recover our relationship with the ecosystem and rebel against those who are destroying it.

It has been argued that the novel rose to prominence with the rise of capitalism, which is responsible for destroying nature. Perhaps the novel is not altogether complicit with capitalism, but how far has it gone to challenge capitalism, which has changed nature and continues to do so. As long as we establish a scientific, not poetic (literary) relationship with nature, we will not only lose our health, but our home too which is in nature. Science may tell us about the greenhouse effect, which is very valuable, but we also have to learn to feel again that we are part of nature and the earth. Green literature, sensitive to nature, is an imperative for the future, and I believe that poetry has greater possibilities of recovering that. I am not simply returning to Romanticism but I am proposing finding a new aesthetic for the contemporary context. I think it is important to remember that not all peoples of the world have the same relationship to the city and to nature. Our cultural memories because of our personal histories differ and for this reason I wanted to explain my own background. We can learn from our differences and our

different relationship to nature and not only receive our aesthetics from the big literary metropolises.

Afterword

After our meeting in Morocco, when I read all the papers and listened to all the poets and writers, I realised that in general, for them, nature is not even a footnote.

Talking to them, I understood that most of the writers don't think of literature as one of the means of preserving what we are losing and if we don't take action it will eventually get lost.

Another thing, again listening to all of the participants, I saw that they are lovers of this or that city. I must say that I am not a lover of any city, but that I am a lover of nature (of course, I admit I like some of cities, but that's all.) I know when one becomes a lover of this or that city, one usually loses his or her ties with nature, and becomes alienated from her. The cities are basically producing evil for the nature, and when this is the case, one who loves nature more than cities has to take the right action.

What I'm trying to say, nowadays writers and poets who from head to toe live in the cities are not paying attention and doing enough for the nature, either in their work or personal life.

Lastly, I predict that, in the future we will have more body of work about the lost cities. The cities have to pay the price of blocking the course of nature.

Translated from the Turkish by Oya Akin

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