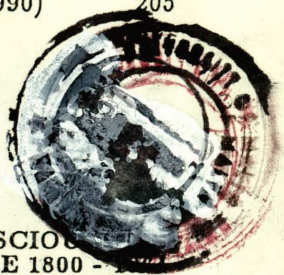


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MALTESE LITERATURE AND NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS DURING BRITISH COLONIAL RULE 1800 -

The influence of British colonialism on the development of Maltese national consciousness was both positive and negative. It involved a positive relationship, namely a linguistic one between English and Maltese, which encouraged social rapport between the British colonizers and the Maltese indigenous inhabitants; and the negative relationship between the sophisticated British culture and the uncultivated popular culture of the Maltese, which deteriorated into a violent psychological confrontation between the two highly disparate nationalities and traditions. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, an indigenous Maltese literature had gradually emerged and sought recognition. The elitist cultural orientation of Europe, including Great Britain, at first hampered such a process. As Europeans gradually accepted the esthetic values of folk culture, the Maltese popular heritage was able to attain a level of dignity. This study examines the social and political factors underlying the formation of a collective Maltese national consciousness.

For the Maltese people colonial domination, in a sense, was psychologically equivalent to submission to bureaucratic authority. The traditional Maltese character had been nurtured by an ancient Christian culture that encouraged collective passivity and resignation to destiny. The Order of St. John (1530-1779) guaranteed political security in Malta, especially in terms of defending the island from foreign invasions, and it also enabled the people to continue their typical modes of cultural behaviour. Maltese adhered to the canons of the Italian Renaissance and neo-classicism, which the Order established on the island. All the forms of cultural expression, including architecture, music, and literature, testified to the profound influence the Order wielded in Malta. The official use of Italian, the language of sophistication, was the most significant aspect of its impact.

The rising of the Maltese against French occupation (1798-1800) signified the birth of an early form of popular nationalistic rebellion typical of modern Europe. The rebellion also marked the beginnings of Maltese patriotism and protonationalism. The new democratic beliefs also reached the shores of the island in due course. Napoleon's arrival in Malta in 1798 triggered modern Maltese history's principal events. It sparked an elitist rebellion that served as an example to the common people and to the few Maltese who eventually became unofficial leaders and the authentic popular motivators of a modern national awareness. Numerous Italian exiles, including eminent writers and journalists, found refuge as well as sympathy for their cause in Malta. The Maltese soon followed their example.

The political activities of these foreign rebels in Malta challenged the traditional passivity of the Maltese. This was reflected in the poetry and prose produced in Italian, the traditional classical language of Malta. In turn, Great

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Britain's democratic traditions inspired many activists of the Italian Risorgimento residing on the island.

The traditional Maltese spirit of resignation clashed with the modern sense of activism and rebellion. This duality soon left its impact on Maltese society. All the ingredients for the confrontation among British, Italian, and Maltese cultures matured during these early twentieth-century decades. British culture primarily promoted a political system that offered the Maltese no effective constitutional rights, whereas Italian culture resembled Malta's ancient classical heritage. This dichotomy, in turn, spurred a controversy in the language question, involving at first linguistic struggles over the primacy of either Italian or English. Subsequently, the debate expanded to include the neglected native tongue, Maltese. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the language struggle had expanded into a complex political battle that encompassed all social sectors, and finally assumed the nature of a quest for a Maltese national identity.(1)

In 1796, Mikiel Anton Vassalli (1764-1829) was the only member of the Maltese intelligentsia to insist on the need to cultivate Malta's "lingua nazionale," which for him was Maltese, not Italian. He wanted to mould it into a refined vehicle for popular education and for the adequate development of a sophisticated indigenous literature.(2) Vassalli received his education in Rome, where he published some of his works, and nurtured liberal ideas on the principles of popular participation in culture, and on the democratic diffusion of erudition, including the elevation of the vernacular of the uncultivated masses to literary heights.(3) He recognized the Maltese language as a unique and useful instrument testifying to the island's antiquity, worthy of scholarly research, and deserving of adoption by cultured people.(4) He conceded that, at a first glance, Maltese appeared undignified, even barbaric. He became convinced, however, that this state of affairs was due only to its having been neglected for a long time.(5)

Vassalli was heir to two apparently distinct, mutually exclusive European cultural movements, namely, the Enlightenment and Romanticism. In fact, he fused and synthesized the fundamental tenets of both. He valued the concept of *patria*, and devised a political programme for the island in the light of his experiences. He regarded Malta as a spiritual and physical organism, the centre of individuality which was to be nurtured through the recognition and encouragement of national traditions, history, culture, and, above all, the Maltese national language.(6)

Vassalli's influence was felt most of all in the first decades of the twentieth century. Dun Karm (1871-1961), in a number of popular poems, such as *Lil Mikiel Anton Vassalli* (To Mikiel Anton Vassalli), and *Lil Haz-Zebbug Rahal Twelidi* (To Haz-Zebbug, the Village of my Birth), transformed Vassalli into a national figure. Guze' Aquilina (b. 1911) gave him a significant role in the novel *Taht Tliet Saltriet* (Under Three Kingdoms). Ninu Cremona wrote Vassalli's biography, which became an important resource for scholars. In Vassalli, Maltese writers perceived a symbol of national awareness, which animated the Maltese peoples' quest for independence. Dun Karm highlighted these merits in the final tercet of *Lil Mikiel Anton Vassalli* (To Mikiel Anton Vassalli), published in 1933:

but because you have loved this gentle land
and were the first one in our race
to plan for us the right to become a nation on our own.

During his lifetime, Vassalli was unable to get the recognition he deserved. In 1839, however, the British government granted the Maltese the right to establish printing presses. But the colonial administration rigorously controlled the press laws, and denied requests for the setting up of printing establishments.

Only certain religious institutions and the missionary society of the Anglican Church were able to publish books, and these were all religious works distributed throughout the Mediterranean, in the Adriatic, and in the Middle East.(7)

The British government finally yielded to requests by Maltese,(8) despite objections lodged by Austria and various Italian regimes, which disliked the distribution of the controversial printed word in Malta. Their concern was understandable. Many Italian exiles had sought refuge in Malta. These politically active individuals were determined to make full use of the press. There were also fears that newspapers would exploit the social and political frustrations of the Maltese people, and that Maltese liberals would succeed in escalating and combining their hitherto isolated efforts. The British government, and eventually the local colonial authorities, ignored these objections.(9)

Journalism proved enormously effective in arousing Maltese popular interest in politics, and simultaneously provided literati with an outlet for their publications. Authors and journalists joined forces, and collaborated on behalf of similar objectives. As the political situation became increasingly more complex in Italy, and later in Malta, this literary cooperation had a two-fold result: it bred an Italian cause, and wound up with a Maltese effect. Maltese writers were inspired by the example set by the Italian rebels fighting for Italian independence. At the same time, however, the traditional Maltese sense of prudence kept these Maltese patriots from seeking a confrontation with the British authorities. There were certain subtle exceptions. George Mitrovich (1794-1885) frequently evoked Giuseppe Mazzini's passionate exhortations, and in some instances patriotic appeals of Italian leaders to his compatriots found an echo in Mitrovich.(10) It was not yet time for the Maltese to be fully aware of the concept of an independent nation, however. Mitrovich's *rigenerazione* was a giant forward step, reminiscent of Mazzini's *risorgimento*, that had galvanized the Italian liberation movement. Italian journalists living on the island spoke out in eloquent, unequivocal terms, as did many Maltese patriots. They exploited any occasion provided by their foreign colleagues to give vent to their anger, and urged the Maltese people to become conscious of their fundamental political rights. The prophetic spirit of Mazzini provided Maltese literature with some of its typical patriotic images and nationalistic phraseology. This rhetoric could be easily detected whenever the Italian and Maltese writers' analysis of the contemporary local situation included visualization of future national achievements.(11)

In due course, these sentiments became transposed from the domain of political discourse to the realm of literary production. Nationhood, a concept defined and expressed in typical romanticist terms, soon became the main theme of Maltese literature. This included a historical and cultural evaluation of the island's ancient identity, essentially composed of Christian religious tradition, the heroic events of the remote past, the enchanting beauty of the countryside, the moral and physical beauty of the average Maltese citizen, especially the village women, and the Maltese language as the most distinctive feature of the Maltese national community.

The various sectors of Maltese society appreciated the relevant political and social issues, assisted by the vividness and expressive richness of the Maltese language. The themes were sufficiently broad and profound to embrace the tensions and aspirations of a subdued colonial people possessing a culture, a religion, a language, and a history distinct from those of its rulers. Maltese regarded the English language from a purely political standpoint, namely as the colonizers' speech pattern which, if imposed through legislation, would silence politicians and most of the writers and men of culture. From Vassalli to De Soldanis, Guze' Muscat Azzopardi, Anastasju Cuschieri, Dun Karm, and Ninu Cremona, Maltese literature enjoyed a cultural continuity. They all had an Italian-orientated approach, and produced many works in Italian. Subse-



quently, they discovered in the Maltese language a harmonious quality. The transformation from Italian to Maltese occurred as a logical democratic step in the authors' growth as faithful interpreters of Malta's literary evolution.

Within the framework of romantic ideology, and especially in terms of its nationalistic component, the adoption of the Maltese language amounted to the recognition of Maltese national identity. Almost all the thinkers of nineteenth-century Europe shared Edmondo De Amicis' dictum—"dove non c'e' lingua non c'e' nazione" (where there is no language, there is no nation). From the cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment the romanticists derived their own concept of cultural democracy; they soon realized that their political cause had to be focussed on the concept of the nation, and on the unreachable vision of world government. Popular unity could be attained on a national scale through the adoption of the people's own language, or even through the transformation of the refined literary idiom into a faithful image of popular speech habits. There is much evidence to identify this awareness as the key motive of whatever had happened in Maltese literature in the nineteenth century. Maltese writing strode ahead of journalistic standards and reached aesthetic levels. Appreciation of the Maltese language gradually became sufficiently broad to enable writers to thoroughly evaluate the country, and define it primarily as a fully fledged nation.

Patriotic sentiment developed into a creed when writers invested their true personalities in its expression, and promoted its message among the people in various literary forms. Maltese writers adopted the Horatian principles of *prodesse* and *dilectare*, according to which the duty of literature was to teach and to give pleasure, or better still, to be pleasantly instructive. The earliest exponent of this literary approach was Gan Anton Vassallo (1817 - 1868), professor of Italian at Malta University and a poet of considerable merit. He declared that he intended to use his works to teach the people.⁽¹²⁾ Utility and relevance, as well as enjoyment, became the cornerstones of his literary production.⁽¹³⁾

A prominent feature of Vassallo's inspiration was the application of historical events and nationalistic sentiments to the contemporary situation. He selected significant historical landmarks and related them to the immediate experience. Even in this respect, Vassallo utilized psychological techniques typical of various Italian romanticist poets. Through the evocation of remote events, and by relating them to identifiable contemporary conditions, the poet, according to him, succeeded in being relevant and prudent. His implications are clear, frequently enough, yet they are always veiled behind a thin layer of imagination, which renders the subject ambiguous and open to various interpretations. Like most of his successors, he rarely, if ever, indulged in the direct speech technique typical of politicians.

From among the epochs of Maltese history, Vassallo chose the times of the Knights of St. John. Therein he identified the characteristics of a colonial condition. In *Mannarino*, Vassallo depicted the Maltese patriot in four different moments of his life; he spoke to the Maltese people, subsequently became a prisoner, and finally made his plea to Napoleon Bonaparte, who eventually terminated the entire episode. Vassallo dramatized patriotic sentiments by constructing an imaginary event set against a known historical background. During the rule of Grand Master Ximenes, the Maltese endured various political abuses, which bred considerable popular discontent. The Order disregarded the complaints of the people, whereupon Gejtu Mannarino, a priest, organized a protest against the foreign rulers. Vassallo constructed a political situation in which the people had to fight to gain their emancipation. The theme of national subjugation, the urge for rebellion and civil agitation against the irresponsibility and abuse of the foreign dominators, the prophetic vision of a free future, the appeal to the citizens to arise and fight for their own liberation, the solidarity among the inspired Maltese, all faithful to the same "mother" summoning

them to battle: all these features typified the Italian model of patriotic poetry prevalent during the Risorgimento:

My heart has long been sick
because of what happened to this island...
In a word we want to say
that we are slaves, Malta is a slave!

We'll overcome them! Do not be afraid,
let us get united
and swear to overwhelm them,
I'll be the first to swear.(14)

Various other poets, such as Richard Taylor (1818 - 1868), Dwardu Cachia (1858 - 1907), and Guze' Muscat Addopardi adopted similar literary techniques to render nostalgic incidents of the past relevant and to discover a sense of continuity between the past and the present. Although not all of these literati expressed themselves with the same degree of intensity regarding colonial rule, they all utilized poetry as a vehicle for the dissemination of anticolonialist sentiments and encouraged the growth of collective self-confidence. These poets filled the pages of many papers and magazines with verses, which provided enjoyment as much as they expressed national solidarity. As a group, they contributed considerably to the development of a national democratic culture that later inspired the works of Dun Karm, acclaimed as Malta's national poet in 1935.

These sentiments rarely combined with political action directly. The anti-colonial subject matter of most poets did not find the proper form of translating itself into active rebellion. After all, the role of the poet is verbal, essentially distinct from the politician's and should be assessed as such, in terms of his degree of literary efficacy. Some politicians might discover, *a posteriori*, the intrinsic force of the literary exercise and make full use of it to convey a political message. This was precisely the case with Manwel Dimech (1860 - 1921), who was essentially a political agitator, but who discovered that poetry could serve him well in arousing national consciousness.

In this sense, Dimech may be considered a rebel poet who combined action with literature. From a certain stage onwards in his life, it is difficult to distinguish his contributions as a journalist, novelist, and versifier from his achievement as a social reformer and a ferocious opponent of the British colonial government. The persecution he suffered at the hands of the Church and the government was mainly due to the nature of the subject of his written work. In his poetry, he made full use of emotions and of various rhetorical devices that urged the people to rise against the colonial rulers. His patriotic poems conveyed a strong religious feeling, and although they rarely reached high literary standards, they anticipated Dun Karm's patriotic poetry. They have a spiritual link of sorts in this respect. Dun Karm translated lyrical elements into epic poetry form, which utilized literary dignity to convey identical emotions that Dimech expressed with exuberance and passion.

Dimech advocated freedom from foreign rule and demanded the complete emancipation of his countrymen. He repeatedly urged them to prepare themselves intellectually for the task and to take immediate action. His poetry reflected the vision of a liberated *patria* first proposed by the Italian poets of the Risorgimento. Dimech exemplifies the vast impact which the Italian intellectuals exiled in Malta exerted on the local intelligentsia. From the rebellious spirit of Italian culture, he derived the fundamental concept that the writer and the politician must work hand in hand to attain, through different means, similar objectives. In his case, as with numerous contemporary Italian person-

alities, literary and political dimensions became fused into one unique identity, although the political activity served as the motivating force of the literary one.

In adopting the language of the Maltese people, poets collaborated with politicians. Poets also set the pattern of behaviour to be assumed by average citizens who were sufficiently conscious of the right to have their national culture officially recognized. The main items on the political agenda were recognition of the uncultivated Maltese idiom, and the attainment of limited constitutional freedom, as Dimech exclaimed:

Servitude never! Servitude for us
never, no never! Death is better;
yes, death! Oh within us
how strong is the fire burning
Tremble,
go away
for rapidly are approaching
the bold children of Malta.(15)

Like poetry, the narrative prose produced throughout the nineteenth century was partly aimed at detecting the existence and the essence of a national identity through the reconstruction of past history and the recognition of its immediate moral relevance to the contemporary situation. The shifting of facts relating to the remote past was not merely a nostalgic adventure but also a strategic measure. It drew people out of their apathy, and reminded them of the valourous achievements of their forefathers. Novelists sought to identify resemblances and parallels in comparing previous dominations with the contemporary one. In this respect as well, it is possible to detect the enormous impact exerted by Italian romanticist literature on Maltese prose. Whereas the language question focussed on the conflict between two eminent linguistic traditions within the narrow context of a small island, the traits of this conflict could also be identified in the literary realm. The influence of Italian novelists helped Maltese writers to assimilate and adopt the typical narrative pattern of the historical novel, and to apply it to the local situation. In other words, the Italian romanticist heritage enabled Maltese writers to discover for themselves the appropriate methods of narration and forms of expression they required to project their own anti-colonial sentiments.

In reviving the memory of the heroic achievements of past generations, Maltese novelists wanted to reanimate half-forgotten national myths and dignify the heroic claims of their country. These authors idealized and enshrined historical experiences. By raising historical episodes to the level of perfection, novelists joined the past and the present and projected a new, different, rapidly approaching future. In searching for an ideal *patria*, they endowed past glories with highly spectacular scenarios. They applied them to current concerns, such as gaining Malta's freedom from foreign rule. Structurally, such novels treated sublime historical events in a manner to gain the admiration of readers. The authors would summon the readers to awaken and fight for freedom. In essence, this was the fundamental metaphorical nucleus that characterized Italian risorgimental inspiration: the country was one family; the national heroes were the fathers; the citizens were brothers and sisters, sons and daughters; and the *patria* was the mother.

The logical sequence of events forming the basic Risorgimento plot was coupled with the gradual formation of a patriotic philosophy. Documented facts and imagined episodes, real heroes and legendary figures, popular customs and beliefs, and a set of moral qualities, such as courage, faithfulness, and solidarity: these were blended to form a variety of national mythology, itself the ethical foundation for Malta's claim to nationhood. The various novelists made heroic efforts to rescue from oblivion and imbue with dignity personalities such as Dun

Mikiel Xerri, Mikiel Anton Vassalli, Nazju Ellul, and Dun Gejtan Mannarino. These were national leaders, whose personalities embodied the characteristic features of the people. Under the impact of such powerful stimulation, the Maltese people enthusiastically followed their leaders. Nothing more remained for the novelist than to depict in a negative manner the foreign aggressors, courageously opposed by heroes, who had arisen from popular roots.

The Maltese historical novelists who wrote in Italian, such as Gan Anton Vassallo, *Alessandro Inguanez* (1861) and *Wignacourt* (1862); Ferdinando Giglio, *La bella maltea ossia Caterina Desguanez* (1872); Ramiro Barbaro di San Giorgio, *Un martire* (1878); and Gaetano Gauci, *Il condannato al supplizio del rogo* (1905); *L'ultimo assalto del Forte San Michele* (1907); *Maria Valdez* (1909); and *Notte di dolore* (1915) gradually created a social and literary environment which explained to the public that the national identity campaign and constitutional emancipation could be best expressed in the language of the people, and not in the refined cultural language, Italian.

This psychologically sound approach led Maltese writers to appreciate their native language, and not solely for abstract or sentimental reasons, but mainly for solidly practical ones. Only through Maltese could they hope to be understood by the broadest possible cross-section of the population, and only through the native tongue could they inspire a high level of emotional and intellectual involvement. The use of Italian could impart dignity to the writer, whereas the rich cultural heritage of Great Britain did not ensure popular participation.

Maltese was an ancient vernacular spoken by the uneducated for many centuries. By the nineteenth century Maltese needed rehabilitation in all respects. Until the 1920s, for example, the Maltese alphabet had not yet been standardized, and the language lacked a respectable literary tradition. Anton Manwel Caruana (1839 - 1907) launched the twin-programme of linguistic reconstruction and patriotic self-expression in Maltese. His *Inez Farrug* (1889) combined stylistic achievements with patriotic idealism. Some of the linguistic and literary features illustrated in the novel have influenced the development of Maltese literary style. Caruana selected his lexical stock from the Arabic component of the Maltese language, whereas his sentences he constructed on the Latin pattern. *Inez Farrug* narrated the misadventures of a young Maltese lady, who, prior to her marriage was kidnapped by a Spaniard. Since the story occurs during Malta's Spanish domination, the kidnapping of a single girl resolved itself into a complex symbolic image of the island (poetically Malta is always portrayed as a woman or a mother) bereft of freedom. The sentimental motive, therefore, was not only fused with a political intent, but became transformed from the personal level to the collective one. The solidarity among the natives and their ruthless exploitation by the Spaniards were the two principal points of reference, around which the novel developed in terms of conflict, and its transformation into a metaphor of the island's contemporary condition.

Guze' Muscat Azzopardi (1853 - 1927) was another protagonist to fuse the cause of linguistic emancipation with political awareness. *Toni Bajada* (1878), *Viku Mason* (1881), *Susanna* (1883), *Cejlu Tonna* (1886), *Censu Barbara* (1893), and *Nazju Ellul* (1909) evolved around the figure of a "historical" yet radically transformed and recreated hero enshrined in a historical background. This enabled the writer to keep in view the authentically historical data and to adapt them imaginatively in a manner simultaneously pleasant and instructive. Guze' Aquilina further developed this narrative model in *Taht Thiet Saltinet* (1938), and Guze' Galca, in *Zmien l-Ispanjoli* (1938) and *San Gwann* (1939), further developed this theme. The fact that these novelists chose their protagonists from among national heroes constituted a political challenge, itself an example of the deep sense of democracy the writers embraced in a period when the country's real rulers were foreigners.



These heroic figures counterbalanced the image of sheer power identifiable with the British governors. Their substance was basically democratic and nationalistic; they played the role of the true, legitimate representatives of the native community, and their personalities imposed themselves in direct opposition to the characteristics of the contemporary colonial system. The unanimity binding the central hero and the people betrayed the awareness of a proper parliamentary democracy which in practice still had to make many strides to reach an acceptable form. Alongside the subtle concept of parliamentary democracy one could detect the will of Malta to reduce its dependency on the foreign government. With the exception of Aquilina's *Taht Tliet Saltriet* this awareness, expressed in a properly defined theoretical system, is difficult to find but there is sufficient ground to assume that the basic aspects of democracy were shared and professed by nearly all Maltese.

Whereas the historical novelists insisted on the necessity of attaining constitutional emancipation, the social novelists concentrated their efforts on the need to rehabilitate the disadvantaged and unprivileged strata of society. The historically orientated plot illustrated the urge for political freedom; the socially inspired plot resolved itself into an inquiry of working class conditions. Since colonialism meant, in its broadest and simplistic definition, power possessed by the foreigners and denied to the natives, the basic confrontation underlying all literary plots of the 1900 - 1950 period (and with significant modifications also the plots of the following decades) involved an arrogant aggressor and a prudent victim. Manzoni had divided the human race into two opposite groups: the rich, who in political terms were powerful, and the powerless poor. In moral terms, they were the bad and the good, respectively. Verga had slightly modified this distinction by speaking out in favour of the oppressed and declaring himself against the oppressors. His vision of humanity was reduced to a battle between the *vinti* and the *vincitori*.

Maltese literary awareness trod the same path as did the Italian masters and others, such as Charles Dickens and Fjodor Dostoyevski, who always arrived at a moral interpretation of facts through a far-reaching analysis of purely economic and social conditions. All of these works, whether historical or social, overlapped in various senses and frequently identified economic problems with wider political implications, and *vice versa*. In other words, all Maltese writers were fully aware of belonging to a fortress colony, and not as yet to a totally sovereign nation responsible for the welfare of the entire population. Consequently, internal strifes lost their impact, overshadowed by the political campaign for independence.

Guze' Ellul Mercer (*Leli ta' Haz-Zghir*) (1938), Gwann Mamo (*Ulied in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerka*) (1930), John F. Marks (*Tejbilhom Hajjithorn*) (1937 - 1938), Guze' Bonnici (*Il-Qawwa ta' l-Imhabba*) (1938), (*Helsien*) (1939), Wistin Born (*Is-Salib tal-Fidda*) (1939), Guze' Orlando (*L-Ibleh*) (1948), and Guze' Chetcuti (*Id-Dawl tal-Hajja*) (1958), (*Imhabba u Mewt*) (1961), (*L-Isqaq*) (1962); (*It-Tnalja*) (1964) assumed the role of keen, sensitive observers and critics of characters, situations, and environments typical of the working class, and sought to detect in them the real causes and motivations of social and economic exploitation. More than ever before, the writings in Maltese identified themselves with the feelings of the "lower" classes, which still had not reached a decent standard of living. Consequently, these reformists' analysis evolved around the possibilities of employment, working conditions, emigration, poverty, and ignorance.

Much of this social inquiry rested on the principle that political and social emancipation would be unattainable if the workers did not become enlightened through education. Nearly all of these novelists insisted on granting the workers the right to educate themselves and to broaden their knowledge in all respects, particularly with reference to the availability of adequate employment. The British authorities tried to stem this social zeal by bringing a case of sedition

against Guze' Orlando under the terms of the Seditious Propaganda Ordinance of 1932. Orlando, together with some of his intimate friends, was brought to court in 1933 and accused of possessing "seditious" literature following a raid on his house by the police.(16) In August 1933, Orlando was found guilty and sentenced to two months imprisonment and a fine. According to Orlando, the Prosecutor, besides indicting him for all his writings and his political activities since 1921, also found him guilty for possessing books by such authors as George Bernard Shaw, Jack London, Upton Sinclair, Sidney Webb, and Leo Tolstoy. The court insisted that these authors were seditious.(17)

Of all the Maltese writers, the social novelists became the most directly involved in party politics, even if their works did not betray any particular ideological affiliation. Most of the other authors active during this period were equally discreet. Their main sources of inspiration were the Maltese people, with emphasis shifting periodically from one social class to another, but always in opposition to the forces of the powerful colonial system.

Dun Karm's poetry, which reached its zenith during the 1930s and 1940s, dealt with two opposing positions. On the one hand, it professed to respect colonial rule, considered it as legitimate and in certain respects a fruitful and beneficial system. After all, the British had succeeded in maintaining order and tranquillity and in winning the sympathy of many people. On the other hand, however, he forcefully declared that Malta was a nation possessing a unique identity, which ought to progress towards full independence. The poetry of Dun Karm thus fused traditional Maltese prudence with patriotic resolution. He never failed to point out Malta's natural limitations, but he also stressed the islanders' national dignity, based on an ancient historical heritage and rich cultural tradition.

Dun Karm promoted a pacifism that was typically Maltese, yet proved the influence Manzoni had had on his spiritual and literary evolution. Manzoni, too, had restrained his patriotic convictions and avoided any type of violence. In this sense, Dun Karm inspired the cautious and conciliatory political and diplomatic attitudes of Pawlu Boffa, Duminku Mintoff, and Gorg Borg Olivier. Essentially, Dun Karm aimed at conveying Malta's image as a unified homogeneous community. His works celebrated the glorious events of Malta's past (*Il-X ta' Frar*, *Il-Ghanja tar-Rebha*, *Fil-Muzew*, *Nhar San Gwann*, and *Dehra tat-VIII ta' Settembru 1565*), the beauty of the local landscape (*Xenget ir-Raba'*, *Lil Haz-Zebbug Rahal Twelidi*, *Otia Aestiva*, and *Zjara lil Gesu'*), the value of traditional popular customs (*Lill-Mithna tar-Rih*, *Il-Ghodwa*, and *In-Nissiega*), yet he was also aware of the needs of the working class, and appreciated the central role it played within Maltese society (*Ghanja ta' Malti fl-Amerka*, *Xenget ir-Raba'*, *In-Nissiega*, *Kennics*, *Lid-Dielja*, *It-Tifla tar-Raba'*, and *Haddiem*). *L-Innu tal-Haddiema* (1912) is one of his earlier works written in Maltese.(18) His profound social awareness was rooted in the fact that he was proud of his rural origins, and often thought of the island as an enchantingly beautiful village. But the central dimension of his concern was not essentially social but national. His works constitute a set of moral, cultural, and historical justifications for Malta's claim to be recognized as an independent nation.

Dun Karm's patriotism was guided by a deep sense of faith in history, a tendency he inherited from a combination of Enlightenment and romanticist principles. *Lil Malta* (1939) affirmed Dun Karm's absolute conviction in a unique Maltese nationality. Dun Karm admired the cultural wealth of neighbouring Italy and Great Britain's sense of democracy, hoping to merge Malta's Italian cultural heritage with the British political system. In *Lill-Bandiera Maltija* (1946) Dun Karm again demonstrated a healthy middle course: the two colours of the national flag, he declared, should not be mingled either with the green Italian component or with the blue British part, because such an artificial amalgamation would occasion the loss of Malta's national identity. A political in-

terpretation of this sonnet reveals the poet's opposition to plans that would integrate the island with either Italy or Great Britain.(19)

It is difficult to assess the enormous literary, cultural, and political impact that Dun Karm exerted in his time and since his death on the Maltese political outlook, on culture in general, and on the poets and novelists of the twentieth century. He strengthened national self-confidence, and developed a healthy sense of prudence, practical wisdom, and discretion, in the Maltese people. In blending two apparently distinct and clashing instincts, Dun Karm subtly adopted an attitude typical of Maltese traditional character. Maltese are proud of their identity and hospitable to foreigners.

The history of literature in Maltese(20) pertains to the corpus integrating the sentiments and aspirations the Maltese expressed during British colonial rule. The first efforts in verse—simple narratives, and descriptive and devotional literature—date to an earlier period. The nineteenth century marked the first significant steps towards developing a mature, literary Maltese language. The first decades of this experience were characterized by the acquisition of a new awareness of the ancient Maltese identity that was previously either unsung, ignored, or both. Consequently, the typically nineteenth-century anti-colonial sentiments did not merely react to the prevailing state of affairs, but also responded to an intensive stock-taking by the country's literati.

The conflict between the two great cultural forces, the Italian and the British, which exerted tremendous influence on Maltese sensibility, expressed itself indirectly through the recognition and emancipation of the hitherto despised Maltese vernacular. The assertion of the indigenous popular language, implying the affirmation of ethnic, cultural, and political prerogatives, was executed by intellectuals well versed in the foreign and local speech media. This is precisely what happened from Vassalli and De Soldanis to Cuschieri and Dun Karm.

The mediation process demanded contact with either or both of the two foreign cultures, the British and Italian, in Malta. Maltese national identity became consolidated through the radical modification of the central role which Italian traditionally played. It was the culture of the Italian peninsula that shaped the personalities of the Maltese writers. Most of them, in fact, spent many years writing exclusively in Italian before turning to Maltese. Like nearly every Maltese author, Vassalli wrote in Latin and Italian, whereas Dun Karm passed his fortieth year before producing his first lyric in the Maltese vernacular. The influence of the English language on Maltese was negligible. British political culture constituted a threat to the development of Maltese national identity. The imposition of British administration and political ideology on the community signified a break with the traditional past and inaugurated the island's steady process of Anglicization.

Time and the course of events healed Maltese anti-Italian and anti-British prejudices, but in the meantime the two languages became identified with different values, which the Maltese people traditionally regarded as completely alien to them. For instance, following World War II, the status of Italian changed from being the traditional classical language of culture to the language of a country that had bombed the island intensively. English ceased being emblematic of colonial domination, and assumed the role as the language of the country that had defended Malta, and as a necessary medium for international communication. This resolution of Maltese culture demonstrated the soundness of Dun Karm's analytical powers. Dun Karm had not adopted a rigid, extremist position on the language question. In 1937, he summarized his creed, which may also be attributed to most of the poet's colleagues: "I am not a follower of Strickland now that I am writing in Maltese, as much as I was not a follower of Mizzi when I used to write in Italian. I hate politics and am proud that I have never belonged to any political party. I am Maltese, only Maltese, and nothing else but Maltese."(21)

The Maltese literary experience stretched over such a long period that it may be considered from different perspectives. It was a coherent self-consciousness movement that impelled the Maltese to affirm their identity and to seek the necessary means to achieve constitutional emancipation. Literature also served as a strategic oppositional instrument versus the colonial government. It presented as well an alternative way of thinking for a people languishing under foreign rule. Literature enabled Maltese writers to utilize traditional Italian culture, in order to mould and enrich in form and content the emergent Maltese literature. They were gradually also exposed to the influences of British culture. Poets such as Ruzar Briffa (1906 - 1963), Gorg Zammit (b. 1908), Gorg Pisani (b. 1909), and Anton Buttigieg (1912 - 1983), all bore witness to a partially new mentality. They were conscious of being Maltese writers, yet most of their cultural roots were embedded in the soil of British literature. Maltese authors frequently echoed Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth, for instance, as they did G. M. Hopkins, T. S. Eliot, Edward Thomas, and numerous others in the post-independence period.

By the time Malta attained its independence from Great Britain in 1964, the affirmation of Maltese national identity was an accomplished task, at least constitutionally and on the literary level. Effective traits of self-awareness had emerged by then. Diffuse anxieties and unfulfilled aspirations were not yet totally detached from those of the past, and various traditional thematic contents and forms were still alive, even if modified according to more recent criteria. The responsibility of independent statehood, however, was bound to produce both nostalgia for bygone standards and resentment against a submissive way of life. Mixed feelings, therefore, confirmed the assumption that the basic problem that the Maltese addressed and overcame during British colonial domination — self-identification — might still remain the one which, multifaceted though it might be, lingers on in the Maltese literary spirit.

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Résumé — La formation d'une conscience nationale maltaise remonte au temps de Mikiel Anton Vassalli (1764-1829) qui offrit, grâce à ses écrits, une définition culturelle de la nationalité maltaise et posa le fondement de l'étude scientifique de la langue maltaise. Le développement d'une littérature en maltaise à la fin dix-huitième siècle et au début du dix-neuvième témoigne des premiers pas d'un peuple peu nombreux vers la réalisation de son individualité. L'histoire politique et celle littéraire, par conséquent, ont progressé ensemble et ont servi une seule cause. Le thème fréquent de la littérature est la confiance du peuple en lui-même, le meilleur interprète de ce thème étant Dun Karm, le poète national. Les romanciers historiques participent de la même manière à cette conscience collective en réveillant le passé et en le revêtant d'une pertinence actuelle. Puisque cette expérience coïncide avec la présence coloniale anglaise, la fonction principale de la littérature était celle d'aider le peuple à se comprendre dans le cadre de sa dignité historique, ethnique et culturelle. Pour cette raison, le dix-neuvième siècle maltais constitue une partie intégrante du cadre romantique européen; on rencontre l'ancienne culture italienne de l'île et la nouvelle culture locale exprimées dans la langue populaire. La synthèse a un intérêt particulier car elle fait rencontrer une langue sémitique avec une culture latine dans le fond d'une domination coloniale britannique.

1. For further reading on these aspects of the language question, which approximately cover the period 1880 - 1939, see H. Frendo, "Language and Nationality in an Island Colony: Malta," *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism*, 3 (1975), 26-27; and O. Friggieri, "Il-Kwistjoni tal-Lingwa - Gharfien ta' Identita' Nazzjonali," *Azad Perspektiv*, 4 (1981), 25-42.



2. "The fresh expression and sentences produced by a vivid Maltese imagination, simplicity and captivating nature welded with the natural gifts of the language, even though the ideas may be at times restricted, constitute the beauty of our songs. It would be worthwhile if one were to take the trouble of illustrating this point." M. A. Vassalli, *Ktieb il-Kliem Malti* (The Book of Maltese Words) (Rome: Fulgonio, 1796), p. XIX.
3. "In a century when the arts and sciences have made such great and admirable progress, which almost leaves nothing in their fields that bears further illustration, it seemed that one could not leave uncultivated, in utter oblivion, one of the most ancient monuments, such as the Maltese language." *Ibid.*, p. VII.
4. *Ibid.*, p. XIII.
5. "But let one cultivate it first, even for a while, and then it will show that it is worthy of culture more than any other." *Ibid.*, p. XIX.
6. "The culture of a nation consists of an education, from which flows its morality; it consists of prudence and national politics, that make the country endearing, and whose quest is the common weal; it consists of the promotion of arts and sciences, because it is these which give perfection to the others, thus enhancing national activity and commerce; it consists of the knowledge and observance of the law, which makes the state peaceful and calm, and therefore produce happiness and individual security.... From this one therefore deduces that wherever the national language is ignored and not written that nation which only speaks it, can never achieve its total greatness." *Ibid.*, p. XXI.
7. K. Sant, *It-Traduzzjoni tal-Bibbja u l-Ilsien Malti 1810 - 1850* (The Translation of the Bible and the Maltese Language) (Malta: Royal University of Malta, 1975), p. 10.
8. In July 1835, George Mitrovich went to London to champion the cause of the Maltese people and to consult the British cabinet. See *The Claims of the Maltese Founded Upon the Principles of Justice by George Mitrovich, a Native of Malta and a Faithful Subject of the Crown and Great Britain* (London: Mills & Son, 1835).
9. Between 1839 and 1870 about 180 different newspapers were published. See V. Bonello, B. Fiorentini, and L. Schiavone, *Echi del risorgimento a Malta* (Malta: Comitato della Societa' Dante Alighieri, 1963), pp. 30-110.
10. The following extract is typical of Mitrovich's style: "The times of persecution are over. Get off your mind the least shade of fear, because this is a question of resorting to an assembly of a free people, which gives you full faculty of speaking out freely, and of making your demands. This is the moment, my dear brothers, and you should not lose it. A day will dawn when the Maltese will be happy, free from slavery, respected and held high. The hour of our regeneration is approaching." G. Mitrovich, *Indirizzo ai maltesi da parte del loro amico* (An Address to the Maltese from Their Friend) (London: Mills e figlio, 1835), pp. 14-15.
11. Mitrovich wrote: "The nation will soon triumph, the success of a noble and just cause, like ours, is certain; another while, and you shall see." *Ibid.*, p. 24.
12. See G. A. Vassallo, *Moghdiya taz-Zmien fil-Lsien Malti* (Leisure Reading in Maltese) (Malta: Stamp. Cumbo, 1843), p. 5.
13. All contemporary Maltese writers shared Vassallo's principles enunciated in these stanzas:

I belong to the people, to which I pledge

love from the little that is possible
through the pen of a poor talent,
which describes its events and customs.

Whether serious or jovial, let my word be,
Greek or Latin, all I want is
That it will never go wasted.

Irejjef u Cajt bil-Malti (Fables and Verse of Mirth in Maltese) (Malta: Tip. Industriale G. Muscat, 1895), p. 7.

14. Vassallo, *Moghdi ja*, pp. 7 and 10.
15. *Il-Habib Malti* (The Maltese Friend) (Malta: Matteo German, 1908), pp. 21-22.
16. See *Malta Chronicle and Imperial Services Gazette* (20 March 1933), 15.
17. J. Orlando Smith, *The Sedition Case: Official Correspondence between Joseph Orlando Smith and the Imperial Authorities* (Malta: n. p., 1934), p. 4.
18. *Il-Habib* (The Friend) (13 March 1912), 1.
19. In the manner that Italian romantic poets strove to discover in history the heroes who best embodied the spiritual heritage of the country, Dun Karm transformed Mikiel Anton Vassalli and Dun Mikiel Xerri into national figures whose personalities reflected what was intrinsically Maltese. The two sonnets written in 1933—*Ghal Dun Mikiel Xerri* and *Lil Mikiel Anton Vassalli*—celebrate the two patriots and give homage to the Maltese people. For a detailed account of the nationalistic component of Dun Karm's poetry, see O. Friggieri, *Storia della letteratura maltese* (History of Maltese Literature) (Milazzo: Edizioni Spes, 1986), pp. 222-254.
20. This study does not consider Maltese literary tradition in Italian prior to the birth of literature in Maltese. The Arabs conquered the island in 870 A. D. and laid the foundations for the formation of modern Maltese. Following the Norman conquest in 1090 A. D., the language opened up to various non-Arabic influences, and has grown into a rich medium owing to its exposure to European influxes. See J. Aquilina, *Papers in Maltese Linguistics* (Malta: The Royal University of Malta, 1961), pp. 42-62. Maltese writing started on a relatively large scale in the seventeenth century, and expanded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; but Italian had already established itself as the only and unquestionable cultural language of the island. The basic conflict to be resolved was, therefore, linguistic. The native speech medium of Maltese had a Semitic origin, whereas its cultural content was Latin. The British period, which largely coincided with the influx of romanticist principles in the political and cultural realms, introduced an additional source of conflict, namely, between English and Maltese. Once the debate gathered momentum, it was bound to resolve itself into a question of national self-awareness.
21. Letter to Laurent Ropa, 21 May 1937 (Ropa Collection, "Mclitensia," Library of the University of Malta). Prime Ministers Enrico Mizzi (1885 - 1950) and Gerald Strickland (1861 - 1941) of Malta favoured the use of Italian and Maltese, respectively.