Giovan Francesco Buonamico – A *Flâneur* in Baroque Style

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The Baroque disposition in traveller and poet

The twentieth-century German critic Walter Benjamin, who studied the Baroque temperament in depth, provides us with his famous figure of the *flâneur*, the stroller who wanders about, along unending and intersecting city roads and arcades. In this wandering habit, the *flâneur* embodies the essential Baroque principle of roaming without a specific destination in mind, without a definitive point of entry or exit in his physically executed arabesque. Well before Benjamin's time, Giovan Francesco Buonamico had betrayed the same Baroque tendency in both his writings and his extensive European travels, executing the art of wandering as an end in itself. That is, he personifies the well-known saying that the journey matters more than the destination. The same preference for a winding movement rather than a linear progression towards a clear end is evident in Buonamico's works. His memoirs, for instance, easily digress from historical narrative, to some collected fable, then to a descriptive or reflective paragraph on the behaviour of a townsfolk, then on to the etymology of some curious term dug up from the local heritage, or a speculative passage on the town's economic and industrial prospects. He is thus a man of his time in both his authorial and his travelling roles. No less is this evident in his single poem in

Maltese, whose intricate weave of figurative and rhetorical devices will be discussed in the following section.

Buonamico's love of intricate detail could only have been enhanced by his anatomizing mind as chief doctor of the Order of St John's Fleet, an appointment he received from Grand Master Cottoner at the age of 28. The scientific outlook typical of such a key medical position is displayed in his scientific papers on, say, flora and chocolate (a recent discovery at the time). Taking together Buonamico's travelling, literary, and scientific methods brings out the common denominator of flâneury – that is, the constant habit of roaming for the sake of the journey's intrinsic and accumulating details, without a predetermined goal or sharply demarcated area of realization. The German critic Benjamin attributes this sort of mindset to the twentieth-century city and its arcades, which he defines as a location where the old intersects with the new, the inside converges with the outside, and the individual blends with the crowd. But the same flair for crossing boundaries between artistic and scientific aptitudes, between old and new perceptions, between familiar and foreign geographies already characterizes Buonamico's apprehension of his seventeenth-century Baroque world, a world whose artistic expression alone already constantly overflows its boundaries into its typical arabesques.

The poem: a meandering art

What insights does Buonamico's Maltese poem *Mejju Ġie bil-Ward u ż-Żahar* ('May is Come with Flowers and Blossoms') provide as regards this mindset? Even in its own right, the poem is a powerful illustration of its author's predisposition towards a meandering composition. It abounds in florid encomiastic figures with which the local Maltese crowd eulogizes Grand Master Cottoner. In his grammar, the prominent eighteenth-century scholar Agius de Soldanis mentions other poems in Latin by Buonamico, amongst which the collection entitled *Laudes Cotoneriae,* published in 1672 in Lyon, betrays from its very title both its encomiastic function and its classical medium, Latin. This publication suggests that the Maltese poem, probably

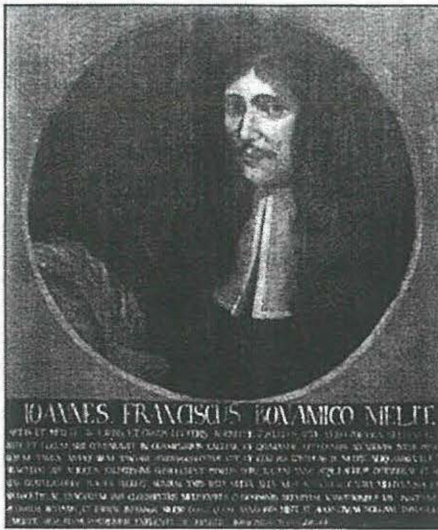

Figure 1. Portrait of Giovan Francesco Buonamico.

produced at around the same time, was composed not for the Grand Master's own reception, but for recitation by the local populace. The Maltese poem would then seem a means of preconditioning its common listeners (hardly readers at the time) into a collective voice glorifying their ruler's benevolent and industrious governance. Given that Grand Master Cottoner already had Buonamico's published collection in his name and in his own administrative and classical medium, Latin, the vernacular poem could only have been a literary strategy for converging the masses into an hymnal chorus, uniform in singing the praises of their ruler. In short, the poem's local audience also constitutes its only possible speakers, in a way that integrates the roles of listener and speaker, reader and author in a single voice. Such a strategy confuses the discursive points of origin and destination: from whom did the words really originate (poet or populace) and to whom are they really addressed (the Grand Master or his subjects)? As will be argued shortly, the absence of clear origins and destinations is an inherent principle of the Baroque mindset, practice, and artistic execution.

'Mejju Ġie bil-Ward u ż-Żahar' is an intricate composition in ways other than its play between the listening and speaking roles assigned to the same Maltese populace. For instance, the poem also wavers between different genres of public enunciation: it plays between the encomium form that eulogizes the Grand Master's admired rule and the more euphoric utterance that joyously welcomes spring, which is evidently derived from the long established Italian tradition of the *calendimaggio*, an occasion of merrymaking customarily taking place at the beginning of May as the poem's first line makes amply clear. A distinct characteristic of the Italian *calendimaggio* was the celebration of regenerated life by its popular singers, who would receive food, wine, and sweets from the urban inhabitants whom they called in on, in compensation for their somewhat carnivalesque embodiment of springtime. Bearing vegetal emblems of life and fertility (branches, flowers, fruits, and so forth) from the countryside into town, the *calendimaggio* singers embodied an approaching spring in an anthropomorphic band of merrymakers physically and playfully conveying the season's abundance into an urban habitat.

Evoking this custom, the poem equates the personified month of May with the return of floral life to earth: '*Mejju ġie bil-ward u ż-żahar*' ('May is come with flowers and blossoms'); '*Tgħattiet l-art bin-nwar u l-weraq*' ('Earth's overlaid with blooms and leaves'). The image allegorizes May as a flower-bearing person scattering blooms and leaves as he goes, comparable in this respect to one of the *calendimaggio* singers who would physically bear flowers and blossoms to urban dwellers. In idiomatic Maltese, however, the phrase 'flowers and blossoms' ('*ward u żahar*') also conveys the idea of a smooth, easily accomplished endeavour, its negative application ('*mhux kollox ward u żahar*') being similar to the English idiom 'not a bed of roses'. Thus, the personified image of flower-bearing May incorporates the poem's more essential allusion to a period, under Grand Master Cottoner, of smooth-running administrative and entrepreneurial accomplishments. Interwoven into this already intricate weave of natural and political forms of well-being are two syntactically parallel verses depicting the

signs of a receding winter: '*Għadda l-bard, ix-xita u l-beraq*' ('Gone are the cold, rain, and thunder'); '*Heda r-riħ, siket il-baħar*' ('Ceased has the wind, calmed has the sea.') This rhetorical technique of parallelism pervades Buonamico's poetic composition, deepening its sense of studied symmetries and calculated correspondences.

The play of Maltese speakers and listeners, the fusion between the different genres of encomium and *calendimaggio*, the intricate figure of May as a flower-bearing reveller alluding idiomatically to a smoothy run government, and the intervening images of a receding winter are all interwoven into the single elaborate weave of the poem's first stanza. This gives a good idea of Buonamico's ability to roam in a very compact poetic space, accomplishing what the critic Benjamin calls a constellation of disparate standpoints or an intersection of perspectives, rather than a fixed or clear point of departure or destination. This poetically realized arabesque, a meandering art entailing a shifting viewpoint, is thus the literary parallel to the stroller without a predetermined destination, the *flâneur* who roams unrestrained by any prearranged endpoint to his ambling.

The poem's May figure is not the only locus where a vegetal image of fertility merges with the image of national well-being. The composition's overall motif of welfare, achieved in both the natural and the political realms, finds a third aspect in the people's spiritual regeneration: '*U fil-ferħ kull qalb tirtema*' ('And in delight each heart is tossed'), a metaphor concretizing the people's festive abandon with the half tangible half abstract image of being physically tossed into the very substance of a jubilant mood, an elated atmosphere that is made palpable. Such extravagant elaborations are plentiful in Buonamico's bold imagery: a personified May bearing 'flowers and blossoms' that idiomatically imply a smooth-running state, the heart tossed into a palpable delight as a synecdoche of man giving himself over to abandon, the simile already depicting Malta as a defenceless female figure famished were it not for the manly protection of the Grand Master ('*Li ma kienx min iħarisha / Kieku tibki l-ġuħ bḥal lsira*' ['Were it not for her protector / she would lament a slave's hunger'], and the

use of '*Sema*' ('Heavens') as a metonymic figure for divine intervention in the island's rule. These figurative devices are matched by the poem's structural consistency, its parallelism of syntax ('Ceased has the wind, calmed has the sea') fitted into a tight octosyllabic structure with its closed rhyme scheme: a-b-b-a. For all its appearance as a popular celebration of nature's revival at the start of May, Buonamico's poem is manifestly ornate and complex in its figurative, rhetorical, and structural features, showing a cultured man's endeavour to embellish a popular octosyllabic structure with a florid style that overflows its apparent formal constraints. It is this comingling of artistic trends (Baroque and popular), genres (encomiastic and celebratory), and functions (hearing and speaking) that give the poem its uniquely hybrid character.

Buonamico wanders from one register to another, one literary function to the next, with the same facility that his roaming gaze and feet wandered urban Europe undaunted by cultural, political, and georgraphical frontiers. His resultant experience of various overlapping and interpenetrating perspectives anticipates, once again, Benjamin's definition of the city stroller as the *flaneur* who feels 'at home' in arcades where glass roofs blend exterior light with interior darkness, where shop windows and corridors merge, where 'a shiny enameled shop sign' serves the same ornamental function 'as an oil painting' on a bourgeois living room wall,[1] in other words where perspectival limits are constantly crossed, allowing disparate viewpoints to conflict and merge. It is no accident that Benjamin, too, approached the integrating perspectives offered by the city as an 'inexhaustible wealth of permutations' between outer and inner, past and present, individual and collective standpoints. John Rupert Martin notes the same principle of transcending physical and artistic barriers in seventeenth-century Baroque 'church facades by Pietro da Cortona, Bernini and Borromini, where the interpenetration of exterior and interior space is especially

1 Walter Benjamin, 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire'. In Michael W. Jennings, ed., trans. Howard Eiland, Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingston, and Harry Zohn, *The Writer of Modern Life*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 2006), 68-69.

marked'[2] or in the play between 'the real space of the observer and the perspective space of the painting, or, in the case of sculpture, in the statue that transcends the limits of the niche within which it stands'.[3] To roam within a space of continuously crossed boundaries and interpenetrating perspectives, whether that space is geographical or intellectual, is thus an essentially Baroque principle.

Yet, apart from this tendency of the Baroque mind to spill over its spatial, artistic, cultural, and perspectival boundaries, there is also the inherent tendency of the Baroque composition to unfold not in a linear progression, but by exploding its inner structure into ever more intricate flourish, thereby fulfilling its progress in terms of a ramifying growth of inner detail. This enables the audience of Baroque art to lose itself in the augmenting inner richness of the perceived design, marking its progress through the further segmentation and reorganization of the work's intrinsic pattern.

Like Benjamin's *flaneur* for whom strolling becomes an end in itself, the Baroque mind often loses itself in its own densely executed motifs, whose increasingly extravagant pattern provides the only means of gauging a growth in meaning and perception. The arabesque becomes the artist's means and end. In Buonamico's poem, this lack of linear progression in favour of an ever-increasing inner richness of the medium is further exemplified by the device of antithesis, that is, the play of opposite views that leads to no final resolution, but merely enhances perception through entangling its audience in its unresolved contrasts.

The boldest instance of antithesis in Buonamico's poem occurs when, after exalting the heavens for preserving the Grand Master's benevolent rule over the Maltese population, the Maltese crowd proclaims, with gratitude, that from 'severest cold we [will now] take warmth'. Apart from endowing the people's collective voice with a highly rhetorical style, this antithetical device presents the Grand Master in bold paradoxical terms: he is, in effect, a warm spring in wintertime.

2 John Rupert Martin, *Baroque*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 15.

3 Ibid., 14.

It is now almost pointless that May should take on the anthropomorphic figure of an approaching band of merry singers, bringing natural icons of springtime's fertility to town, since divine will has already decreed that a continuous time of plenty be embodied in the Grand Master's person. Even if one were to go by Arnold Cassola's observation that in Buonamico's original orthography the final verse should read 'At the cold term's end we get warmth' rather than 'in severest cold we take warmth',[4] there still remains the rhetorically bold hyperbole of equating Grand Master Cotoner with an unchanging natural order, with the implication that to have his rule is to have spring's warmth and happiness arriving at their proper yearly time.

Malta personified as a female figure vulnerable to enslavement and hunger (anticipating Dun Karm's prevailing motif of the island as a pure maiden), Grand Master Cotoner's metaphorical identification with the people's joy and happiness, the evoked 'heavens' implying divine intervention in political as much as natural events, the predominating sense of a perennial or an annually returning spring with its inference of a smoothly run government and the people's well-being – these interwoven poetic and rhetorical features are hardly the stuff of the people's voice. Their effect is rather a complex of extravagant metaphors, inversions, contrasts, and associations which makes for an intricate weave of techniques and the consequent elusiveness of any fixed standpoint.

As the Baroque critic Martin observes, 'Not only is there no

4 Cassola Arnold, *The Literature of Malta – An Example of Unity in Diversity.* (Malta: Minima Publishers, 2000) 19-25. Cassola observes how Agius de Soldanis gives two versions of Buonamico's poem: one in the poet's original orthography and the other in his own. However, since 1924, it is Agius de Soldanis's version that continued to be cited, and this version transcribed the phrase '*fl'achar*' as 'in the severest' ('*fl-akbar*') not 'at the [cold term's] end' ('*fl-aħħar*') or 'at the [cold term's] worst ('*fl-agħar*'). Various later publications of the poem persisted in presenting Agius de Soldanis's version. Others (like G. Wettinger and P. Fsadni in their 1968 study and D. Fenech in his 1977 publication, *Wirt il-Muża*) render the phrase as even more antithetical: 'in the worst cold we will have warmth' ('*fl-agħar bard ikollna s-sħana*'.) Cassola argues that in Buonamico's original orthography the letters 'ch' are repeatedly used instead of the letter '*ħ*': thus '*reich*' for modern '*riħ*', '*Bachar*' for '*Baħar*', '*schab*' for '*sħab*', and so forth.

homogeneity of style in the Baroque period, but one is almost tempted to speak of the very diversity of styles as one of its distinguishing features'.[5] What Martin defines as the freedom, spontaneity, and immediacy of the Baroque mode of execution[6] can be seen as a motivating principle operating not merely in Buonamico's art, but in his traveller's disposition, primarily his penchant for crossing borders in a culturally, politically, and religiously divided Germany, a hybrid world of intersecting and interwoven viewpoints. As Dr. Albert Friggieri, Ambassador of Malta to Germany, points out:

> Buonamico was very conscious of the fragmentary nature of 'Germany'. In his memoirs, he often refers to the political divisions that characterised the German territories in the second half of the 17th century. In the course of his travels, he often had to cross borders separating the many German states, to which he refers quite systematically in his memoirs.[7]

To inhabit this dense mosaic of traditions, architectures, economies, and histories is analogous to meandering through the maze of allegorical, rhetorical, and generic qualities governing Buonamico's poetic art. In both cases, the underlying principle is to dwell in an intricate design with several points of entry, to inhabit one's world as a complex of colliding and interpenetrating viewpoints. Once again, this is the kind of roaming gaze that Benjamin the critic reserved for the *flâneur* – the leisurely and observant stroller of the European City whose movement amidst multiple intersecting points of view actualizes a Baroque existence. It is the same multiple or exploded vision that enables Buonamico to be fascinated by '*ogni sorte di gente, e Nazione, è una sentina d'ogni setta d'Eretici*' in a city such as Mannheim,[8] whose

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5 Martin, *Baroque*, 26.

6 Ibid., 37.

7 Albert Friggieri, *Foreword*. In Arnold Cassola, *The German Memoirs of a Maltese Intellectual – Giovan Francesco Buonamico (1639-1680)*. (Malta: ProMinent, 2013), 13.

8 Giovan Francesco Buonamico, *Memorie de viaggi di Giovan Francesco Buonamico nella Francia, Germania, Olanda, Fiandra, Lorena, Svizzera, Italia, Sicilia,*

'indiscriminate mixture of peoples of all different hues and creeds', as Cassola puts it, compelled the seventeenth-century doctor to liken the place 'to Noah's Ark, where one could hear all sorts of voices and encounter all kinds of dirty animals ('*s'udivano ogni sorta di Voci, e si vedevano assieme ogni specie di piu sozzi animali*')'.[9]

If the Baroque impulse towards a drifting, curving, and spiralling design (whether in sculpture, architecture, or literature) also impelled Buonamico's wandering gaze and feet in a multifaceted Germany, then it is perhaps correct to speak of this intellectual's fascination with accumulating detail as a fashionable seventeenth-century mode of existence, a manner of being that was physically, as much as poetically, accomplished. It would hardly be doing justice to such an intellectual figure to restrict his multifarious disposition to just its geographical, or poetic, or medical concerns, thereby missing the fundamental Baroque principle of subjecting such disciplinary boundaries to an overarching extravagance of detail. Aspiring to a sense of infinity not through linear progression, but through an inner growth and profusion of perspectives – that is the common denominator of Buonamico the traveller, the doctor, and the poet.

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spiaggie e varie isole della Grecia (f. 49 Aquisgrana – f. 66 *Ritorno da Friburgo in Aquisgrana per via alquanto diversa*). In Arnold Cassola, *The German Memoirs of a Maltese Intellectual – Giovan Francesco Buonamico (1639-1680)*. (Malta: ProMinent, 2013), 69.

9 Cassola, *Giovan Francesco Buonamico*, 33.