

Literature

Oliver Friggieri

The Maltese literary background

A history of Maltese culture may be said to reflect in various ways the history of the whole community. Since, much more than in the case of larger countries, Malta could never do without foreign contacts, necessarily causative of a complex process of influences, adaptations and reactions (and consequently only through a study of a set of assimilations can the scholar arrive at a true definition of a Maltese identity), such a history, be it political, social or cultural, is bound to assume a comparative character. This may be all the more so owing to the fact that what one may euphemistically call foreign contacts were nothing less than foreign occupations. The conditions which characterize and modify the process of, say, a political history of subordination may boil down to be the inalienable causes of analogous conditions in the cultural field.

The basic distinction is linguistic and not necessarily cultural or psychological. Considering the two major languages which assumed, contemporarily or subsequently, the role of primary media for the elaborate expression of a community's feelings, experiences and ambitions, one has to start by distinguishing between Italian and Maltese. (The presence of English is relatively too recent to be defined as another proper channel through which Maltese literature could seek new bearings. English-Maltese literary interaction can be traced back directly to the modern poets and novelists who effected a radical transformation in the sixties of this century). The dialectical

relationship between Italian and Maltese has been looked at, up to a few years ago, as controversial, or worse still, as the unhappy and not easily reconcilable intercourse between a Latin culture, the presence of which in the island goes back many centuries, and a Semitic one, characterized mainly by the basic Arabic structure of the popular language which, owing to the island's uninterrupted contacts with the outer world, adopted a Romance superstructure. One has to define the nature of the apparently contradictory dialectic Italian-Maltese from a purely linguistic point of view. The language question, forming a central part of the island's romantic experience, owes its origin to the active presence of Italian exiled rebels in Malta during the Risorgimento, on the one hand, and to the constant British efforts to introduce English and eradicate the traditional cultural language, on the other. After getting a clear perspective of the language question, which constituted one of the major political preoccupations between 1880 and 1939, one may proceed to deal exclusively with the literary question, since languages which find themselves in interaction within the borders of the same community are also bound to develop cultural and particularly literary cross-currents.

The Arabs conquered Malta in 870 A.D. and thus laid the foundations for the language we now call Maltese. With the Norman conquest in 1090 A.D. the language of the island started to find itself open to extra-Arabic influences, a process which has widened its vocabulary and syntactic patterns, and practically exposed it to a completely different way of life.

Considering the traditional presence of both languages in Malta, the first conclusion is that Maltese is prior to Italian as a spoken language, whilst there is hardly any proof that Italian was ever adopted as the habitual speech medium by any local section of the population. When Maltese started to be written in the 17th century and then on a much wider scale in the 18th and 19th centuries, Italian had already established itself as the only and unquestionable cultural language of the island and had a respectable literary tradition of its own. One of the earliest documents in Italian, for instance, dates back to 1409. Among the earlier literary works it is worth mentioning *La Historia di Malta nuovamente composta in ottava rima, per Antonio Pugliese, l'anno 1565 delli 10 di maggio*, published in Venice in 1585 and preserved at the National Library of Malta. The list of later works written and published in Malta by Italian writers includes *San Paolo a Malta*, an epic which Vincenzo Belloni (1839-1878) issued in 1875 after having spent five years in the island. Since the appearance of the first book printed locally, *I Natali delle Religiose Militiae de' Cavalieri* (1643) by Geronimo Marulli, Malta has seen the constant development of Italian publications, mainly historical and literary. This tradition was interrupted only a few decades ago, that is, more than a century after the real birth of a national literary tradition in the vernacular.

This considerable deposit of literary output throughout the centuries, a large section of which is still in manuscript form at the National Library of Malta, is the work of both Maltese and foreign writers (who happened to live or spend a period of their life on the island) alike. Thus, whilst Maltese has the historical priority on the level of the spoken language, Italian has the priority of being the almost exclusive written medium, for official and socio-cultural affairs, for the longest period. The native language had only to wait for the arrival of a new mentality which could

integrate an unwritten, popular tradition with a written, academically respectable one.

On the other hand, if one seeks to identify the literary spirit of the Maltese throughout the centuries, one should only find it obvious to include, and give causative prominence to, the said Italian-oriented Maltese production, thus rendering it the first, or preliminary, phase of the whole spectrum. This approach would seek to establish the extraliterary motives which debarred Maltese from all cultural manifestations, and why it was socially dishonourable to use it. Alongside this dichotomy, resulting in the co-presence of two distinct social stratifications, one should also seek to define the proper character of the Italian tradition, something which can be done through a comparative analysis of the peninsular literature and of its forms of assimilative participation in the island during a series of cultural epochs, such as Renaissance, Baroque, Illuminism and then the first inklings towards Romanticism.

Romanticism, both Latin and German, revalued the Illuminist concept of cultural diffusion and while questioning and negating the true significance and practicability of cosmopolitanism, fostered the cult of national languages. This epoch, fundamentally based on the discovery of the sense of personal and national individuality, coincides with the first serious efforts towards the rediscovery of Maltese as one of the most ancient patrimonies of the new emerging nation, as Mikiel Anton Vassalli (1764-1829) calls it in his famous *Discorso preliminare*, the introduction to his *Vocabolario maltese* published in Rome in 1796. The antiquity of a popular language featured very significantly in the concept of nationalism which European romanticism sought to form and preach. One of the more important results of Vassalli's political and scholarly contributions is the embryonic development of a nationalistic way of thinking which centred around two basic

aspects of the 19th century philosophy and aesthetics: (i) the affirmation of the singular and collective identity (an experience emanating from the absolute devotion the romantics had for sentiment and passion, as opposed to the old and undisputed right enjoyed by the "goddess reason" which underlay, as evinced in almost all poetics since Aristotle, all previous works of art modelled with architectural precision and in a state of psychological equilibrium); and (ii) the cultivation and diffusion of the national speech medium as the most sacred component in the definition of the *patria* and as the most effective justification both for a dominated community's claiming to be a nation and for the subsequent struggle against foreign rulers.

This new national religion promulgated by romantic Italy pervaded Malta during the period of the Risorgimento when writers, journalists and political rebels sought refuge in the island, and alongside their activity in favour of a united and independent homeland engaged themselves in an analogous mission: that of inviting the Maltese themselves to fight for their own political and cultural rights against the British colonial domination. This started to give rise to an ever wider utilisation of the native language and to the gradual growth of an indigenous literature fully aware of the political, social and cultural rights of the community.

The two genres which characterize the fullest development of Maltese literature are the poetic and the narrative. Theatre as a definitely aesthetic experience in the modern sense is only a recent achievement. Consequently, in giving a panoramic picture, any basic assessment is bound to be conducted in terms of the work of the poets and the novelists, with the particular contribution of the dramatists dovetailing into this mainstream.

Prose

History as a national mythology

The historical novel, based on a subjective compromise between objective data and a

personal disposition to recreate them according to one's political commitment, flourished most during the Italian Risorgimento. In recalling the heroic achievements of past generations, the novelist sought to revitalize forgotten myths and give dignity to the contemporary national cause. The idealized depiction of remote historical experiences is emotionally transformed into a vision where past and present are projected towards an immediate future. The objective representation of facts, characters and environments is simply a pretext for rendering history an epic in which the martyrdom of the individual and the national family is the only valid contribution.

In his search for an identification of the *patria* the novelist is only concerned with translating the glories of the past into a spectacular scenery which is bound to be repeated at the moment in question. Structurally, his work tends to assume the form of an alternation between the depiction of creatively sublimated historical events and the passionate exhortation of his fellow citizens towards national unity and redemption. The logical progression of facts which constitute a plot is coupled with the formation of a patriotic philosophy based on a local mythology full of well-known heroes and an anonymous multitude of faithful, and equally valorous, forefathers. The Mazzinian dialectic right-duty is translated into a pragmatic religion: God has given to every citizen the right to a homeland, but it is the citizen's own duty to build it up.

This set of thematic components synthesizes the main character both of the Italian historical novel of the Risorgimento period and of the Maltese one, written in Italian and then in Maltese, of the late decades of the 19th century and of the first half of the 20th. The reasons for this harmonious assimilation, already hinted at in broader terms, are essentially two: (i) local writers had an exclusively Italian education and consequently they either

wrote in the island's (incidentally Italian) cultural language according to the prevalent "foreign" criteria or sought to translate them into their early Maltese experiments; as a matter of fact the more important writers, such as Ġan Anton Vassallo (1817-1868), Ġużè Muscat Azzopardi (1853-1972), Anton Manwel Caruana (1838-1907) and later Anastasju Cuschieri (1876-1962), Dun Karm (1871-1961) and Ninu Cremona (1880-1972) started their literary experience in Italian; and (ii) the island's political situation easily presented itself as analogous to, if not even as the direct side-effect of, the peninsula's unification movement. This was enhanced all the more by the active presence of such prominent exiles as Gabriele Rossetti, Francesco Orioli, Luigi Settembrini, Francesco Crispi, Rosalino Pilo, Tommaso Zauli, Sajani, Francesco De Sanctis and many others.

Various rebels were very active as journalists and literary writers, and their participation in the cultural life of the island contributed a lot towards the diffusion of the concept of literature fully committed with the national cause. On the other hand, numerous non-Italian writers visited Malta from time to time and recalled such experience in their memoirs. The list includes the names of George Sandy (1611), Patrick Bryden (1770), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1804), Lord Byron (1809, 1811), Sir Walter Scott (1831), Hans Christian Andersen (1841), William Makepeace Thackeray (1844), D.H. Lawrence (1920) and Rupert Brooke (1915).

The Maltese historical novelists writing in Italian, such as Ġan 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 Valdes*, 1909, and *Notte di Dolore*, 1915) were creating a socio-literary

atmosphere which, in the long run, had to make them realize that the national cause could be expressed effectively only through the language of the people, adequately handled according to the people's own aptitudes. The new dimension which Maltese, as the traditionally neglected idiom of the masses, profoundly needed was now provided by the modern aesthetics which conceived the popular speech medium as the best one for expressing the heightened emotion of a whole nation and as the only one which could suit the new content of art: the construction of a national identity in terms of its differentiating factors, the first of which was the language itself.

The process of local political emancipation and the history of the earlier stages of literature in the vernacular amply testify to the fact that this modern conception owes its dynamic presence in Malta, and particularly within the literary circles, to the island's complex participation in the Italian Risorgimento. This immediately suggested an inherent contradiction with regard to Maltese nationalistic literature written in Italian. It was now up to open-minded writers to employ the uncultivated dialect in order to express congruently this vision which concerned literature, politics and society in an equal manner. On the other hand, the Maltese novelist, like any other colleague, was faced with an added challenge, since he was simultaneously expected not only to interpret a national experience in Maltese but also to make the dialect assume a respectable literary character.

This double programme was decidedly pursued by Anton Manwel Caruana whose *Ineż Farruġ* (1889), considered to be the first literary novel in Maltese, succeeded in fusing stylistic ambition with patriotic involvement, thus initiating a movement of language-cum-literature revival which lasted up to about two decades ago, when a new crop of writers reacted against traditional obsolete patterns in order to come to terms with a thoroughly different

reading public.

The structure of the Italian historical novel assumed a twofold nature: the author could either derive his central plot from known history and set it within a fictitious surrounding, or peripheral plot (e.g. Massimo D'Azeglio's *Niccolò de' Lapi*), or create a central plot himself and insert it harmoniously within the limits of a historically authentic, although partially transformed, background. This second structure, popularized mainly by Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi*, was chosen by Caruana whose primary aim was to establish a constant parallelism between a (fictitious) family problem and a (historical) national crisis. A structural analysis of the plot scheme would show that the parallelism is so meticulously built up that it ultimately reduces the private affair (or central story) to an allegory of the population's unfortunate condition under foreign rule (the outer plot). A synthesis of the two narrative models was attempted by Ġużè Muscat Azzopardi, whose *Toni Bajada*, 1878, *Viku Mason*, 1881, *Susanna*, 1883, *Ċejlu Tonna*, 1886, *Ċensu Barbara*, 1893, and *Nazju Ellul*, 1909, revolve around the figure of an artistically modified 'historical' protagonist who comes to life against a similarly reconstructed historical setting. This compromise reached further stages of development through Ġużè Aquilina's *Taht Tliet Saltniet* (Under Three Reigns), 1938, and Ġużè Galea's *Żmien l-Ispanjoli* (The Time of the Spaniards), 1938, *San Ġwann* (Saint John), 1939, and others. Other novels of minor creative value which fall within the general outlines of this category are G. Vassallo's *Mannarino*, 1888, C.A. Micallef's *Sander Inguanez*, 1892, S. Frenzo De Mannarino's *Il-Barunissa Maltija* (The Maltese Baroness), 1893, and L. Vella's *Bernard Dupuó*, 1898, *Isolda*, 1902, *Bint il-Hâkem* (The Hâkem's Daughter), 1907, and *Nikol Ġhâbdul*, 1907-1908.

These novelists' constant preference for protagonists chosen from within the zone of well-known national patriots is another

major step in the romantic direction. The almost religious cult of heroes (the more important being Mikiel Anton Vassalli and Dun Mikiel Xerri) was enormously fostered through their aesthetic reincarnation and furnished the hitherto submissive community with another unifying emblem and with a fundamental justification for the claim of ethnic distinction and ancestral dignity.

The main line of progression, however, seems to be the way in which later novelists have gradually moved away from Caruana's elegaic *leitmotif* and arrived at a vision of victory. This passage from the negative to the positive, from the elegy to the epic, not only implies a radical shift of emphasis (the future instead of the past) but also proves that the narrator was abandoning his former role of dignified chronicler and assuming that of a prophet or leader. This transformation is explainable through reference to the political situation which in the first decades of the twentieth century reach higher levels of development.

Together with the formative discovery of a hitherto neglected epos, this narrative tradition recognized the fundamental poetic and creative value of popular heritage. Following the footsteps of Herder, the brothers Schlegel, Tommaseo, Berchet and other famous theorists of cultural democracy, romanticism had long declared its deep respect for folklore, oral and written traditions of the lower classes, and the more primitive, or less urbanized, aspects of the people. The instinctive national family, as opposed to the tempered academic artificer, became the truest poet. (This aesthetic dialectic assumed locally the nature of a parallelism with the socio-cultural distinction between Italian, the vehicle of the restricted elite, and Maltese, the spontaneous means of expression of the less educated masses). Within this context this school of writers' insistent sublimation of the local patrimony – the language, the popular traditions, the

physical beauty of the average young countryman and countrywoman, the landscape – acquires an aesthetic, as well as political, justification.

Alongside this group of democratically oriented literary novelists, another movement of popular writers, more directly appealing to the less educated category of society, was contributing in an analogous manner towards the fusion of the narrative pattern, socio-political involvement and the newly-born awareness of the intrinsically creative value of folk traditions. Although further to the extraliterary implications of the said Italian-Maltese dialectic, the distinction between the literary historical novel and the popular historical one implies another class stratification within the restricted spectrum of readers of Maltese (as opposed to those of Italian), the basis for their being distinct, or different, is, apart from literary intentions, rather a question of varying emphasis on related aspects of the people theme: the literary type stresses the collective political and patriotic involvement, whereas the popular type dwells extensively on the socio-familiar condition, thus giving ample room for the consideration of non-political private and public events, mainly unfortunate and tragic. Whilst the literary type subdues a central plot for the sake of an ideal content, the popular one treats its own one on a purely narrative level which is exclusively concerned with arousing pathos as a personal experience and not with conducting the reader to conceive his acquired emotion as something he is sharing in common with other fellow citizens and which he should dutifully translate into action.

This segment of the historical novel, although not strictly literary, has an indirectly aesthetic touch inasmuch as its thematic content is immediately derived from the romantic vision of life, whereas the formal aspect is openly geared to the less sophisticated tastes of the majority.

Horror and social inquiry

Horror, violence, the nocturnal and the spectral depiction of life were looked at by many romantics as excellent vehicles for the formation of a tragic image of human existence. The romantic experience had a profound aptitude for terror, and consequently many novels, while maintaining throughout a light sprinkling of historical veracity, preferred the socialization, rather than the previous idealistic nationalization, of an event. Such an event normally centred around a sensational murder or an unhappy love affair which ended up dramatically. Spectres, ruthless villains, haunted houses, ruined castles, deserted palaces, secluded passages, superstitions, popular experiences of the supernatural, gloomy settings and corpses are coordinated into one suggestive whole which motivates awe and suspense. The more important novelists of the Gothic type, Arturo Mercieca [*Carlo de Von Hove, jew il-kefrijja tal-bojja Goldo* (Carlo de Von Hove, or the cruelty of the hangman Goldo), 1899, *Ineż jew bint l-imghallaq, ġrajja ta' Malta, kurjuża u tal-biża'* (Inez or the hanged man's daughter, a tale of Malta, curious and macabre), 1901, *Ix-Xebba ta' Wied Żnuber* (the maid of Żnuber Valley), 1912, *L-għerien tal-katavri jew it-tallâb Kalabriż* (The cave of the corpses or the beggar from Calabria), 1924], A.E. Borg [*Luċija jew il-vittima tat-tradiment* (Lucia or the victim of betrayal), 1907, *Marija jew vendetta ta' baruni* (Maria or the baron's vengeance), 1908, *Amalja mart l-assassin* (Amalia the murderer's wife), 1910], G. Cumbo [*Katavru spjun – qalb ta' Venezjan* (The spying corpse – heart of a Venetian), 1935, *L-id tal-mejjet jew l-iben ta' Monte Cristo* (The dead man's hand or the son of Monte Cristo), 1937] and numerous others had an enormous success and contributed very much to the diffusion of both the Maltese novel as such and the horror taste.

Analogously to this narrative production, the *tijatrin*, or popular theatre, sought to

be melodramatic either through comedy or through tragedy. Far-fetched and highly complicated plots had to develop easily into an uninterrupted series of exaggerated features. Put together, and normally divided into three acts, these were intended to motivate either laughter or horror. Substantially it is only the same technique – melodramatic reconstruction – which explains both the basic nature and the popular success of the two apparently distinct, or even opposite, genres.

Apart from focusing attention, however crudely, on socio-moral and environmental characteristics, the horror story paved the way for future writers and started to invite them to abandon the long worn-out national conception and to substitute it by a deeply felt preoccupation with the immediate social hardships of a certain section of the population. Gradually the emphasis began to be shifted from the outer to the inner world, although no novelist could ignore their reciprocal cause-effect relationship, thus admitting their inalienable coexistence and then depicting it in terms of a set of socially aware individuals who sum up in their personalities the condition of a commonly poor community silently heading for a class war.

The earliest dialectic found in the Maltese novel's characterization, the foreigner and the native, developed itself into a purely democratic one, the privileged and the deprived, although doubtlessly there is no clear-cut distinction in this direction between the historical and the social novel. For instance, Caruana's *Ineż Farruġ* had already pointed out basic social differences between the rulers and the ruled, whilst Aquilina's *Taħt Tliet Saltniet* (Under Three Reigns) had also suggested a reform of social structures alongside, or better, as a prominent side-effect of, the political emancipation.

The reformist novelists, such as Ġużè Ellul Mercer (*Leli ta' Ħaż-Żgħir*, Leli of Ħaż-Żgħir, 1938), Ġwann Mamo (*Uljed in-Nanna Venut*, The Children of Grandma

Venut, 1930), Ġużè Bonnici (*Il-Qawwa ta' l-Imħabba*), The Force of Love, 1938, *Helsien*, Freedom, 1939), Wistin Born (*Is-Salib tal-Fidda*, The Silver Cross, 1939), Ġużè Orlando (*L-Ibleh*, The Simpleton, 1948), Ġużè Chetcuti (*Id-Dawl tal-Ħajja*, The Lamp of Life, 1958, *Imħabba u Mewt*, Love and Death, 1961, *L-Isqaq*, The Alley, 1962, *It-Tnalja*, The Plier, 1964, *Nirien ta' Mħabba*, Fires of Love, 1967) and Ġorg Zammit (*Ix-Xhud li ma deherx*, The Witness who did not turn up, 1964) assumed the role of critical observers of characters, of typical situations and environments, and applied their objective investigation towards creating a literature meant to instigate social consciousness and inquiry into the problems of the lower classes. Such a critique had to be conveyed through a faithful analysis of spoken linguistic schemes. This is also what realist playwrights, such as Ġino Muscat Azzopardi (b. 1899), Ġużè Diacono (b. 1912) and Ġużè Chetcuti (b. 1914), sought to do in order to put on stage a totally faithful reproduction of what actually happened in daily life. The more important aspects of familiar and social ethics, such as love and hatred, sincerity and hypocrisy, offered the widest range for their typical thematic field, whereas characters, environments, dictions and customs aimed at rendering in an almost documented manner the objective appearance of sensory phenomena. The empirical world of these writers, therefore, was necessarily deprived of their own subjective consciousness and its depiction had to reject any sort of sublime idealization.

This socio-literary disposition provided a new opportunity for Maltese to widen considerably its lexical registers and syntactic patterns through a bare-faced confrontation with a sector of society the literary transcription of which had hitherto been seriously forbidden. The extension of both the thematic field and the stylistic stock stressed all the more the principle that literature, and particularly the narrative genre, had to exist, flourish and

justify its development only insofar as it depicted society in the light of its real problems. Man was no longer examined and valued in virtue of his being a citizen, but in respect of his belonging to a particular province, a city or a village. Instead of embracing the whole nation and bringing forth all its space and time dimensions, the new plot structure evolved within the restricted domains of a particular milieu. The present substituted the past and the former epic motive transformed itself into a social inquiry based on class distinction, a new category within the earlier unspecified grouping of all citizens forming one ethnic family.

The self and the outer region in conflict

The young revolutionary writers of the sixties, united under the banner of the *Movement Qawmien Letterarju*, the Movement for the Promotion of Literature, founded in 1967, and progressing apace with the new wave of revival which invaded universities and social structures alike in Europe and in America, proposed for themselves a radical cross-examination of all the previous literature which may be summed up in a twofold manifesto: (i) the critical reevaluation of traditional works, aimed at discarding all the thematic and formal components which led to sterile alienation and to decadent imitation, and (ii) the introduction of fresh contemporary motives and of a set of stylistic devices which could enable their adequate expression. All human experiences became aesthetically valid in themselves, and languages started to be looked at simply as a mental abstraction, potentially subject to all possible creative deviations (lexical, syntactic, semantic, etc.) and not as an already codified set of objective rules demanding full adherence and unquestionable reproduction.

New novelists like J.J. Camilleri (*Ahna Sinjuri*, We are rich, 1965, *Il-Ghar tax-*

Xitan, The Cave of the Devil, 1973, *Is-Sejha ta' l-Art*, The Call of the Earth, 1974), Lino Spiteri (*Tad-Demm u l-Laħam*, Of Flesh and Blood, 1968, *Hala taż-Żghozija*, Wasted Youth, 1970), Frans Sammut (*Labirint u Stejjer Ohra*, Labyrinth and Other Stories, 1968, *Il-Gaġġa*, The Cage, 1971, *Samuraj*, Samurai, 1975) and Oliver Friggieri (*Il-Gidba*, The Lie, 1977, *L-Istramb*, The Misfit, 1980) suggested a thorough examination of society, conceived of as an irrevocably sorrowful confrontation between the individual and the collective complex. At times the former reduces itself to a microcosmic manifestation of the latter and occasionally the two become the extreme poles of an irreconcilable dialectic. For the first time in Malta local novelists, as well as the poets, dared speak out in unequivocal terms, pinpoint the most serious maladies of their community and indirectly suggest a diversification founded on integrity, the immediate consequence of the elimination of sanctified hypocrisy which they believed to detect in religion, society and family life.

Although scrupulously faithful to the literary rendering of factual truth (whence the gradual formation of a modern style), Lino Spiteri seeks the implied significance, the enigma which may underlie empirical experience and which may follow from a sensible re-examination of the data in order to rediscover them according to the logic of purified emotion, the writer's spiritual condition, as opposed to the logic of reason, the functioning of which constitutes the preliminary stage of this double process. Heightening crude reality (the result of a peaceful fusion of Christian education and Socialist orientation) and redimensioning it in terms of his own sensibility, Spiteri transforms the factual into the possible, the stale and commonly unnoticeable event into a uniquely unrepeatable experience. Through the subjective elaboration of observed objectives, biography and reportage attain universality, and the particular, be it

personal or social, becomes predicable of all humans. This is why Lino Spiteri's short story, like J.J. Camilleri's novel, is often simultaneously explainable both through a Maltese and through an anonymously human reiteration. It is not only the said new (or better reactionary, if put in its true historical perspective) awareness of society which accounts for such a choice, but also the rejection of nationalism as an irrelevant myth (a major theme and a psychological state already exhausted in the previous decades) and the preoccupation with the idea of man the mind as opposed to man the citizen.

Spiteri's and other authors', such as J.J. Camilleri's, could not possibly take an exclusively literary, or formalistic, slant, but had to be deeply rooted in, or motivated by, a sense of dissatisfaction with the human, and then incidentally Maltese, condition. On the other hand, Spiteri's literary language, whilst striving to activate hidden potentialities, rules out all the unwanted remnants of *decorum*, simplifies commonly used structures and coins new ones, thus creating a fresh, fluent diction. Remaining faithful to his original background, Spiteri even employs dialectisms, but his constant intention is to alternate concisely detached descriptions and lyrical passages, and consequently to produce a series of closely related vignettes which proclaim the disguised poetic character of an otherwise uninspiring concrete situation. From the point of view of a history of literary technique, Spiteri may be said to be contributing to the now prevalent fusion of two different genres, the poetic and the narrative, and to be giving evidence that their traditionally acclaimed distinction is here purely phenomenological. An analysis of the two devices (description and lyricism), taken separately and also as components of one complete texture, is perhaps the best approach towards a definition of his style.

Frans Sammut, still enamoured of a literary speech which suggests the conscious choice of a convinced purist, similarly

presents an experiment in new structures and lexical adventures. His sentences, at times ironically rhetorical and at others sharp and provocative, are the eloquent recollection of a disturbed ego persecuted by a strange world which is at the same time hauntingly real and vaguely symbolic, internal and objective. The lack of a definite distinction between the two frontiers as well as their continuous interaction transform description into experience, the empirical into the psychological, a process which is both stylistic and thematic. For instance, logical congruity is frequently ignored when grammar passes from the dialogue to the monologue and vice-versa. Secondly, Sammut's characters are normally the humanized version of an environment or the ill-placed end-product of its antithesis, and therefore their external activity is always necessarily related to the internal one, an aspect which is by far the most insistent throughout his narratives.

This interpretation may explain the central role of splendid unsociability bestowed on anti-heroes whose sole problem is communicability but whose fundamental redeeming feature is their own failure to come to terms with the outer world. Whilst all this is again directly traceable back to its immediate origins (the Maltese social context), one is hardly justified in not seeing it as just a pretext for the exemplification of the human situation itself. Sammut's individual, remotely resembling a combination of the Dostoyevskyan sublime idiot and Camus' sceptical social hermit, always betrays traits of Maltesism used as prime matter for the ultimate formation of a human type. In other words, he universalizes according to the dictates of a localized version of man as such.

The substantial confrontation between the epic of the traditional historical novelist and the elegy of the modern one is only too evident. Whereas the former strove to formulate a positive definition of an idealized *patria*, the latter disclaims it

and renders it a sterile, or at least an unfortunate, anonymous territory where people are necessarily humans and only incidentally citizens. It is, however, the same *patria* in disguise and employed as the object of a critique which is the result of a love-hate relationship very typical of all modern Maltese literature. Oliver Friggieri's *Fil-Parlament ma jikbrux Fjuri* (In Parliament no Flowers grow), 1986 and *Fil-gżira Taparsi jikbru l-Fjuri* (In the island of Taparsi flowers grow), 1991, further emphasized and illustrated the sharp dualism.

Within this framework of a closely related genre one can appreciate better the historical significance of the central role played for the first time by drama. The real birth of a modern literary theatre in Maltese goes back to the first appearance of Francis Ebejer (1925-1993) in 1950. A bilingual writer, Ebejer strove hard and faced controversy and prejudice to introduce in local drama the modern idiom of a highly evocative technique which ably related crude reality to a wide texture of symbolism and suggestive relevance. The influence of European and American theatre is immediately detected, and it is all absorbed and assimilated in terms of his own personality in search of the contemporary international spirit. Since his first Maltese radioplay, *Ċpar fix-Xemx* (Fog in the Sun), 1950, he started to create a nervous awareness of what stage reality actually was. Insistently obsessed with the conception of human experience as a turbulent sequence of contrasts and meaningful absurdities, he gradually went on to identify the inherently metaphorical, or better allegorical, nature of theatre as such. The nationwide success of his prize-winning plays, such as *Vaganzi tas-Sajf* (Summer Holidays), 1962, *Boulevard*, 1964, *Menz*, 1966, immediately brought about an authentically literary approach to drama. People, especially those who usually refrained from attending a stage representation in Maltese, flocked to the island's national theatre every time Ebejer

came out with a new work. Consequently, Ebejer finally achieved in drama what Anton Manwel Caruana had done with the novel in 1889 and what Dun Karm, the national poet, started to do from 1912, when he dedicated himself to poetry in Maltese.

The implied discontent with previous popular and pseudo-literary dramatic efforts underlies Ebejer's radical transformation and, on the other hand, explains and amply justifies the categorical negation proposed by Oreste Calleja (b.1946), a playwright of significant inventiveness, in 1972: "The deficiencies of Maltese theatre are innumerable. The Maltese theatre does not exist."

Partly indebted to Ebejer's own versatility in dramatic conception and linguistic flexibility according to a variety of conditions, environments, characters and thematic contents (all elements manifesting the direct, almost obvious, influence on him of Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter and others) Calleja is similarly engaged in depicting a highly allegorical, dramatically entertaining vision of a definite set of human dilemmas. Some of his situations are the most original in the whole of modern drama. His *dramatis personae*, like those of the modern novelists and the young poets themselves, are helplessly in search of a thorough personal fulfilment of which they are fatally destined to remain deprived owing to certain socio-psychological phenomena which are always exerting their influence on them. The problem of identification (already present in some of the more important prose and poetry works of the thirties) is at the core of this version of being human and of being Maltese alike. It is actually difficult to distinguish between the localized and the universally minded critique since the two borders normally overlap. The characters of both Ebejer and Calleja are ultimately a subtle fusion of environmental and cosmopolitan features.

Ebejer's second phase, which may be said to have started with his *Il-Hadd fuq*

il-Bejt (Sunday on the Roof), 1971, is fundamentally Maltese, in the sense that it transforms a series of typically localized versions of human experience into a quasi-ludicrous national self-portrait. Its basic structure is perhaps derived from the island's popular theatrical tradition, mostly typified in the form of the *farsa*. The inevitable love-hate complex which modern Maltese writers manifest in treating environmental conceptions is present to the extent that it gives room to a plot, drastically reduced in terms of its traditional component parts, which is superficially comic or satirical and basically elegaic, deeply rooted in a hidden stratum of personal delusion. Essentially, it is a feeling shared by all writers of this period.

Alfred Sant (b.1948) is significant for his novel *L-Ewwel Weraq tal-Bajtar* (The first Palms of the Prickly Pears), 1968, and for his plays, particularly *Fid-Dell tal-Kattidral* (In the Shadow of the Cathedral), 1977. Deeply conscious of the function of every word in his text, Sant manipulates language in a manner which reveals both a tense psychology and an uncodified approach to grammatical equilibrium. Departing from a substantially negative appraisal of life, he portrays a delicately ironical image of either Maltese ways of life or of unqualified human conditions. At times his narrative tends to resolve itself into a series of vignettes which may betray his strange love for familiar and social structures he actually wants to discredit. At times, however, poetry is allowed to feature prominently, and somehow paradoxically, even in objectively uninspiring situations. This tendency to transform drama into poetry is also the most typical feature of the plays of Doreen Micalief (b. 1949).

Poetry

A cultural dualism

The aesthetic myth of the people as the

truest poet, a basic principle which determined the real character of romantic art, is the primary motive of the revival of Maltese as a means of literary, and especially versified, expression. The European movement, largely inspired and determined by the democratic spirit of great liberal thinkers, may be said to have revolved around Herder's fundamental distinction between *Kunstpoesie* (poetry of art) and *Naturpoesie* (poetry of nature). Latin romanticism subsequently started to adopt this dialectic as its creed and to see in the first component the poetry of the traditional and outdated past, and in the second one the authentically inspired expression of a new emerging generation endowed with the right to translate its own genuinely primitive feelings into poetry which was necessarily uncultivated, spontaneous and instinctive in form and content.

This dualistic conception of poetry, and of art in general, amounted to the distinction between classicism, now looked at as an elitist and socially barren culture, and romanticism, a movement fully aware of contemporary political and social features and problems which the modern artist had to interpret according to the dictates of a whole native milieu. Whereas in the major European literatures (such as the Italian, in which the heredity of the Renaissance was still alive) this new conception sought to assume an anti-classical identity, in the case of a small island like Malta, where the traditional Italian literature of the Maltese proved to be the concern of a numerically restricted and socially privileged class, it did not only imply a radical reaction against a worn-out aesthetic vision but also a hitherto unprecedented formation of a national awareness which inevitably had to be both political and linguistic.

Gan Anton Vassallo's triple contribution

Gan Anton Vassallo (1817-1868) is the

first important poetic personality to effect the earliest traces of development in the said direction. Being fully equipped with an Italian academic education, he soon started to participate in the new aesthetic vision and to form a poetics totally oriented towards democratic experience. The people were to inspire the poet and to suggest to him the lexical, structural and thematic components.

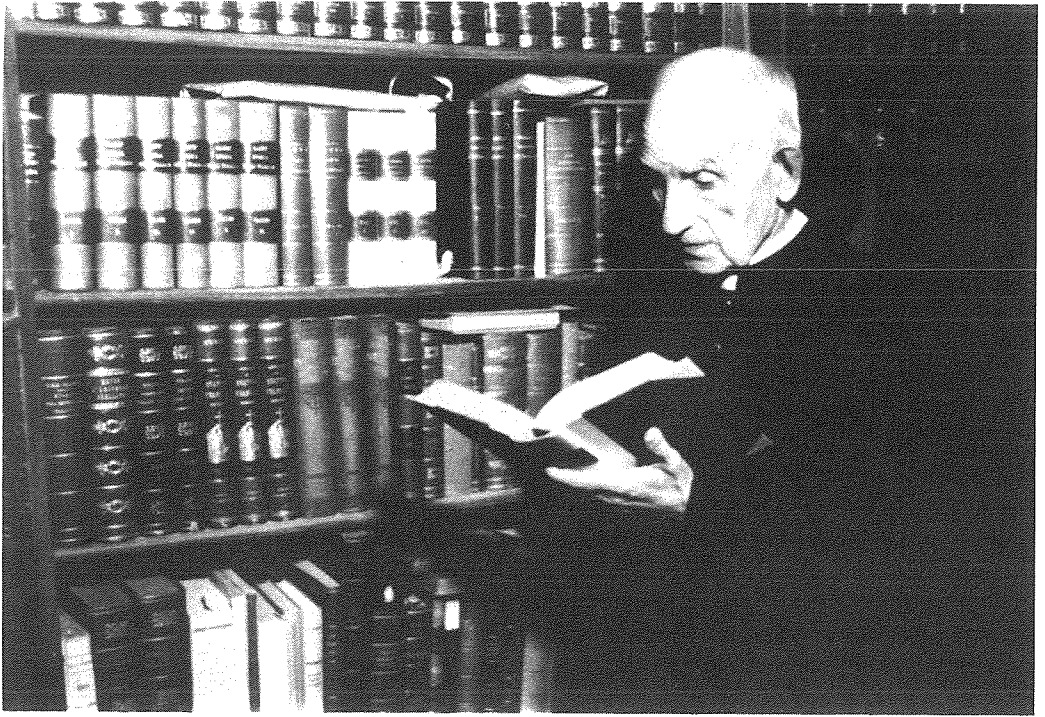
Vassallo's contribution has a triple character. He introduced into Maltese the pathetic or sentimental attitude which represents man as an emotional creature in search of self-attainment through love. The dialogue with nature which surrounds human sensibility is transformed into the intimate document of man's psychological journey. Alongside this subject-object relationship the poet presents a fresh awareness of the troubled soul as the central unit within the texture of all human experiences. The second component of Vassallo's poetry is satirical. Man is not only conceived of as a victim of superior forces which are continuously exerting their influence on his sensibility – thus motivating a type of poetry which is thematically negative and pessimistic and stylistically delicate, melodious and rhetorically direct – but also as an active protagonist of a social environment. His romantic fables seek to caricature a set of public aspects and to render stale folkloristic material a spectacular panorama of what actually underlies the truest identity of a humble class-ridden society. Animal psychology, class conscience, personified sensitive, animate and inanimate entities, dramatized traditions, dictions and situations of particular sectors of society are fused into one whole in order to create a colourfully critical interpretation of contemporary life.

Vassallo was actually trying to do in Malta what Fiacchi, Perego, Gozzi, Casti, Passeroni, Batacchi, Pignotti and many others were doing in Italy. Thematically and structurally, his fables are an integral part of the movement. This pedagogical

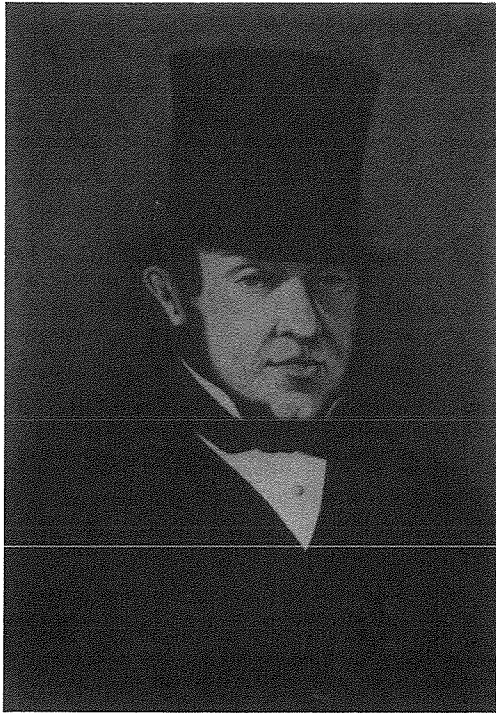
aspect of romanticism flourished enormously in the island and may be said to be one of the major means by which the native idiom acquired a nationwide justification for its popular-literary cultivation.

But the poet's focal conception of man is essentially nationalistic. It is man the citizen, as opposed to man the disillusioned lover or man the social animal, that determines to the greatest extent the character of his poetic vision. The heroic past is brought back to life through a dramatic re-elaboration which puts people, events and environments on an equal footing and which looks at history as an uninterruptedly evolving present, thus suggesting that the idealized *patria* of the romantics is potentially on the verge of being actualized in definite political terms. Through such an elimination of any mental barrier between past and future, the new image of the nation is put to life in a manner analogous to that of the all-seeing prophet.

This three-fold character of Vassallo's contribution to Maltese poetry marks the initial phase of a relatively long period conducted on the same lines by the future poets. Minor authors like Ludovico Mifsud Tommasi (1795-1879), Richard Taylor (1818-1868), Ġużè Muscat Azzopardi (1853-1927), Anton Muscat Fenech (1854-1910), Dwardu Cachia (1858-1907), Manwel Dimech (1860-1921) and others continued to develop further the democratic orientation of poetry and to widen their sources of inspiration through a better understanding of social structures and a more flexible manipulation of popular diction according to a set of literary criteria. The romantic axiom that poetry is a depository of national truth explains what actually happened on the poetic level. On the other hand, the school of Maltese poets writing in Italian sought to drive home this vision of man and the country. But since now it was only popular sensibility which could inspire works of art – a basic truth insistently proclaimed and



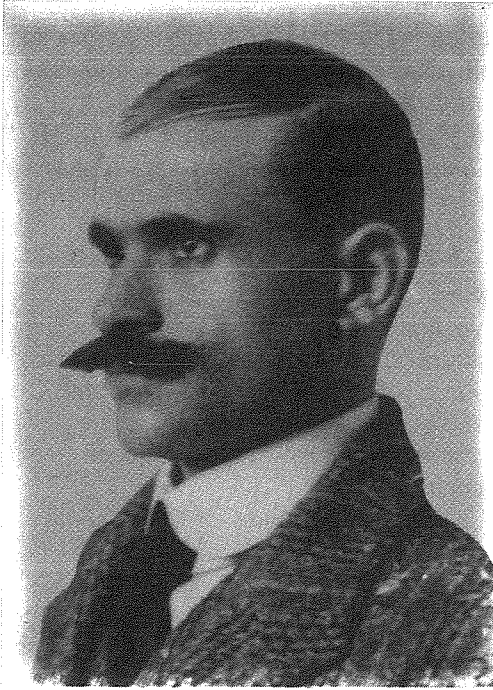
Dun Karm



Gan Anton Vassallo



Temi Zammit



Gwann Mamo



Rużar Briffa



Karmenu Vassallo



Francis Ebejer

diffused in Malta through the island's participation in Italy's romantic experience, and particularly through the vast local activity of the Italian exiled rebels (1804-c.1860) – and since Maltese was rapidly assuming a central role which was ultimately destined to substitute, at least partly, the traditional cultural role of Italian, this group of writers found themselves faced with a decisive dilemma. They had either to come to grips with the new situation (that is, through resorting to the handling of Maltese as their artistic medium and through reaching a compromise with the immediate aspirations and the real educational standards of the majority), or to isolate themselves considerably from the mainstream and to reduce themselves to a consciously isolated socio-literary cast.

Maltese became an official language in 1934. Although the language question emphasized the basic distinction between Italian (as a living evidence of a rich Latin patrimony) and Maltese (as a then so-called unworthy Semitic dialect which served as a mere vehicle of popular communication), for the literary historian it is still more important insofar as it motivated a further distinction within the Maltese language literary movement itself. Some writers sought to purify the written idiom from all non-Semitic derivatives (an attitude analogous in various ways to the Italian purist movement, led by Antonio Cesari and others, which during the Napoleonic era tried to restore the modern language according to the Italian of the “*aureo Trecento*”). Others, however, believed that an effective democratization of literature in Maltese could not be adequately carried out without using lexical and structural patterns which, although carefully and intelligently selected, were also totally faithful to the actual choices of the contemporary population. The purist movement – represented mainly by A.M. Caruana (1838-1907), who sought to eliminate as much as possible non-Semitic loan words from his novel *Inez Farruġ*,

1889, and from his *Vocabolario della Lingua Maltese*, 1903, and by Annibale Preca (1830-1901), who strove to give an all-embracing Semitic origin to common words of Romance derivation, particularly to place-names and surnames, in his *Malta Cananea*, 1904 – was later on succeeded by a group of liberal thinkers who faithfully reiterated the linguistic democratism of the Italian romantics. Napuljun Tagliaferro, Ninu Cremona, Dun Karm and Ġ. Aquilina were openly in favour of a natural fusion of Semitic and Romance words which ultimately reflected both the truest image of popular spirit and a synchronized version of the spoken language.

Consequently, many of the romantically oriented poets of the early twentieth century (like Ġ. Muscat Azzopardi, A. Cuschieri, N. Cremona, Dun Karm) soon found that the new challenge, being both political and aesthetic, could not be adequately faced if not through their translating (and partly modifying) their own ‘Italian’ romantic conscience into Maltese. Others, however, failed to accept the intrinsic value of the popular idiom and continued to write romantic poetry which, paradoxically enough, could not reach any more its basic aim, that is, popular communication. The implied aesthetic contradiction is indirectly present in certain Maltese poems which proclaim the myth of a national language.

The contemporaneity of the two schools, though linguistically much different and socially opposed, may appear, at first sight, to be analogous to the thematic and formal distinction between the old literature still written according to the Latin tradition and the new literature written according to some Semitic philosophy and technical apparatus. Maltese was looked at, up to a few decades ago, as a mere corrupt Arabic dialect, the ‘poverty’ of which was further proved by its lexical assimilations from Sicilian and Italian. Since the Maltese community had, and still has, a Catholic orientation, and

since the local writers who either abandoned Italian to start experimenting with Maltese or initiated their creative activity through Maltese were not in any way alien to the Italian tradition, they were repeatedly reminded of their being '*educati italianamente*'. One can only speak, therefore, of a harmonious fusion of the older and the new tradition, a historically organic continuation of one complete process. The modern usage of the native language instead of the more respectable one and the consequent democratization of literature are only new bearings within the same linear development.

In spite of the well known fact that Latin romanticism amply exploited various extra-European sources of inspiration, and notwithstanding the basic Semitic character of Maltese, Vassallo insisted that local writers were duty bound to interpret and sublimate the real identity of the country. In practical terms this meant that, as it subsequently proved to be, they were only expected to insert themselves within the wider current of the Latin tradition and to find the adequate channels through which they could adopt a linguistic medium of Semitic origin according to a set of non-Semitic formal and thematic components which were part and parcel of the island's cultural orientation. When one bears in mind that Vassallo was fully aware of the need of diffusing the popular language and of creating a poetic corpus which faithfully reflected the community's innermost experiences, one can only conclude that in this way he was advocating the organic fusion of a Semitic language and a Latin spirituality which henceforth was destined to prevail in all future literary works:

"Sacrificheremo pure vanità filologiche e interessi maggiori, a più alto fine; facciam ogni sforzo per ispingerci verso l'occidente nonostante l'orientalismo della nostra lingua. All'Oriente, bellissimo nelle pagine di Chateaubriand e Lamartine, diamo soltanto un saluto poetico; sien essi però i nostri sguardi, i nostri sospiri, per l'occidente".

Dun Karm: nationalism and solitude

Maltese only needed then to assume this

respectability and to be identified with culture, apart from folklore, popular comedy and religious ritual. This was the challenge which expected and needed a master of both languages, gifted also with a sublime poetic character, since the poetic genre was actually the most popular and ideally the most suitable to involve the majority in this socio-cultural encounter. Such a poet could not possibly be one who was outside the *only* group of dedicated Maltese authors, that is, those who cultivated the Italian tradition and sought to develop it locally. The situation is commonly labelled as linguistic but in reality was deeply rooted in social and ideological substrata. It only lacked the presence of a unifying spirit who also happened to be a resourceful author who had already let European, and especially the Italian risorgimental, romanticism exert far-reaching influences on his identity to make him take the irrevocable decision of giving both Italian and Maltese their respective due in terms of time-space conditions which are always changing. In fact Dun Karm (1871-1961) was endowed with a deep sense of historicism and could easily accept the challenge in its entirety, but only 'failed' to see any incompatibility between the two linguistic media on the creative level.

Since he wrote exclusively in Italian up to 1912 (his first poem goes back to 1889), when he started to write in Maltese he did not undergo a substantial or radical change, but retaining the formal and ideological features he had already developed in his first literary phase, he passed on to assert the same dignity in regard of the native language. The fact that this event of major importance in the literary evolution of Maltese did not take the form of a total re-examination but just of a healthy fusion of past and present is further evinced by the other equally significant fact that Dun Karm went on to write occasionally in Italian even after the year of his linguistic 'conversion' (1912).

Dun Karm succeeds in sublimating for

the first time the vision of a glorious nation and transforms its long history into a lyrical epic full of heroes and spectacular events. Through the dramatic reincarnation of such patriots like Dun Mikiel Xerri, Vassalli and La Valette, and through the depiction of a varied series of folkloristic vignettes, he unifies in one complete whole the always relevant glories of the past and the verifiable merits of contemporary life. A group of national figures, romantically conceived of as the fathers of the country (a direct participation in a central motive of Italian nineteenth century inspiration, particularly elaborated and diffused by Foscolo, with whom Dun Karm takes part in an ideal but intimately passionate dialogue, and whose *I Sepolcri* he translated into superb Maltese), and an anonymous multitude of faithful citizens form one ethnic entity distinctly characterized by its religious chorality in deeds and intentions. The Mazzinian emblem of 'God and the People' as well as the thinker's doctrine of one's right to have a homeland and consequently one's duty to construct it assume an essential importance in the poetry of Dun Karm (and then of his numerous followers). Metaphors, similes, rhetorical devices, poetic forms, emotional adjectivizations and other lexical choices easily define this poetic corpus as significantly risorgimental according to the Italian models which are here revisited and experienced by a mature spirit and reorganized according to the needs and suggestions of an immediate historical situation.

The subject-object dilemma of the romantic conscience is also actively present in Dun Karm. In complete contrast with the nationalistic, outward-looking component of his poetic personality, there is the equally important aspect of his solitude, a main motive which is insistently expressed in poems which evoke the fatally remote figure of his mother and which depict a loving nostalgia for the countryside where the poet's sensibility revives the past and seeks to indulge in an

ego-id relationship which is both physical and spiritual. The landscape, previously transformed into a figurative version of the island's differentiating factors which form and justify its national definition, is now spiritualized according to one's own internal universe and reduced to an objectivized projection of a disturbed human psychology. Even if christianized and ethically restrained, the *Sehnsucht* motive, the urge for the nostalgically exotic, is typical of Dun Karm's real individuality.

Poetry as a lyric

The thematic field of subsequent romantic poets was destined to evolve within analogous limits. This was partly due to Dun Karm's literary influence on his contemporaries as well as to a sort of a collective participation in one general experience, aesthetically romantic and historically Maltese, which was bound to make itself evident in terms of a common trend, a *courant commun*, to use Van Tieghem's comparative language. Although substantially and stylistically very distinct from one another, Rużar Briffa (1906-1963), Ġoġ Zammit (1908-1990), Anton Buttigieg (1912-1983) and Karmenu Vassallo (1913-1987) gradually eliminate the remnants of patriotic inspiration and adopt a thoroughly subjective, inward-looking attitude. Instead of socio-political preoccupations, their lyricism at its best presents a second stage of the main romantic evolution, an intensified investigation of man as a passionate victim of his sensations as well as of the supreme forces of nature with which (or better, with whom, since the world of empirical data is always personified and frequently transformed into an ethereal, omnipresent feminine figure) they can develop a psychological relationship. Since this is their particular way of passing from monologue to dialogue, from isolation to extrapersonal commitment, the focal character of their poetry is self-

confessional, at times overtly diaristic.

Rużar Briffa imposes upon his own sensibility a set of time-space limits which transcend their original sensory data insofar as they convey the imaginative sublimation of a suffering soul. Ġorġ Zammit seeks the mysteriously religious significance of creatures and objects with which he is hauntingly surrounded and sees in empirical data a mystic manifestation of infinity which is both external and spiritual. Anton Buttigieg omits the ideal-real dichotomy by depicting reality (which is largely vegetative and sensitive) according to an ideally antropomorphized conception. His seemingly descriptive poetry, richly suggestive and allusive, is only a sublimated projection of his own internal universe.

Karmenu Vassallo, whose first poetic phase (1932-1944) is basically determined by Leopardi's poetics of socio-psychological exclusion on the one hand, and poetry of negation, as evinced by his central lexical choices and syntactic patterns, on the other, has a contrasting identity: he is perhaps the only Maltese poet ever to reveal a subtle affinity with the *Sturm und Drang* state of soul (a directly Italian, and indirectly German, assimilation), but he also ends up by denying humanity in general, and poets in particular, the possibility of ever creating illusions. This anti-Kantian negation is evidently traceable back to both philosophical and literary spirits of modern Europe.

The modern movement: controversy, reconstruction and detachment

The uninterrupted repetition of these and other romantic motives, as well as the imitative reproduction of a definite set of related formal components, by a group of minor poets whose literary activity coincides chronologically with that of the said major ones (a span of time ranging approximately from the thirties up to the sixties of this century) is the immediate cause which necessitated the recent anti-

romantic controversy conducted by a new crop of young poets, like Charles Coleiro (b. 1935), Victor Fenech (b. 1935), Achille Mizzi (b. 1936), Daniel Massa (b. 1937), Mario Azzopardi (b. 1944), Philip Sciberras (b. 1945), Oliver Friggieri (b. 1947), Albert Marshall (b. 1947) and others. Alongside the mainstream of the young generation, however, Anton Buttigieg contributed and is still contributing to a sort of formal compromise between the older and the modern type.

The modern period is characterized by the radical contestation of the thematic content (predominantly patriotic, traditionally religious and ecclesiastical, nocturnal, introvert and emotional) of the previous literary school which, as happens to all movements which prolong their existence too much, started to bear evidence of decadence and extinction in the uninspiring work of numerous minor poets. The new version of the cerebralists, regarding both literature (and particularly the verse form) and Maltese society (which had long started to modify its identity and to experience different modes of thinking and behaving), goes back to the sixties of this century when the new national awareness naturally ought to have given rise to more complex attitudes in the creative field.

In 1949 Ġużé Aquilina had already pointed out the need of a thorough regeneration of Maltese poetry. He suggested that poets had to give due importance to technical, especially metrical, experimentation and to the exploration of a new self, much more creatively subjective according to the trends of modern knowledge and experience. He also implied that such a renewal was necessarily destined to introduce new syntactic structures in the language which the traditionalists had only handled in an almost anonymously uniform manner and in accordance with the old norms of grammatical equilibrium and academic decorum. However, it was only an article

published by the present writer in 1966 which finally put forward the quest for a radical modernization of literature, and particularly of poetry. Discussion soon started to gain momentum, mainly owing to the participation of other budding poets and prose writers, like Mario Azzopardi, Albert Marshall, Raymond Mahoney, Philip Sciberras, Achille Mizzi, Joe A. Grima, Charles Casha, Alfred Degabriele. The other points of reference were various major modern writers, such as Thomas Mann, Ernest Hemingway, Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene about whom Peter Serracino Inglott, himself a poet and a critic as well as philosopher, wrote a series of articles on *Il-Haddiem* during the period 1966-1967. Modern foreign poets, like Vladimir Mayakovsky, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Salvatore Quasimodo, Petr Bezruc, Dylan Thomas and Pedro Salinas started to be translated into Maltese by the local poets themselves.

The critical appraisals of the members of this reformist group repeatedly referred to what the major international exponents of modern poetry – like Pound, Eliot, Apollinaire, Mallarmé, E.E. Cummings, Ungaretti, Claudel, Valery, Alain Robbe-Grillet – had already declared and adhere to.

In 1946 Aquilina's second edition of his anthology *Il-Muża Maltija* (The Maltese Muse) featured Wallace Gulia (b. 1926), Marjanu Vella (1927-1988) and Charles Coleiro, all of whom gave evidence of being preoccupied with a set of modern themes and of being fully conscious of the need of experimenting with new poetic forms and syntactic structures, as well as of giving a cerebral flavour to their metaphors.

During the period 1966-1972 a number of shared anthologies of modern verse were widely covered and discussed in the leading newspapers and gradually motivated a public debate which ultimately assumed a social, political and religious character, beside its basic literary one. *Kwartett* (Quartet), 1965, by J.J. Camilleri, V.

Fenech, D. Massa, C. Vella; *Dhahen fl-Imħuħ* (Smoke in the Minds), 1967, by Ġ. Borg, O. Friggieri, A. Marshall; *L-Għar ta' l-Enimmi* (The Cave of Enigmas), 1967, by A. Mizzi; *Prizmi* (Prisms), 1968, by L. Cachia and Ph. Sciberras; *Antenni* (Antennae), 1968, by M. Azzopardi, J.J. Camilleri, V. Fenech, R. Mahoney; *Analizi '70* (Analysis '70), 1970, by M. Azzopardi, V. Fenech, O. Friggieri, D. Massa; *Mas-Sejha tat-Tnabar* (The Call of the Drums), 1971, by M. Azzopardi, O. Friggieri, A. Mizzi; and *Dwal fil-Persjani* (Light in the Blinds), 1972, by M. Azzopardi, J. Friggieri, O. Friggieri, R. Mahoney, Ph. Sciberras are the main documents of a radically new approach both to literary values and to human behaviour alike.

The idea of publishing shared anthologies is to the credit of Victor Fenech, who edited *Kwartett* (Quartet) in 1965. Three Maltese poets, Joseph Abela, Manwel Cassar and John Sciberras, had already produced *Tlitt Iqlub* (Three Hearts) in 1953, but it remained an isolated case. Fenech got the idea in 1965 on seeing some Northern House poetry pamphlets, published in sets of four authors, and he thought the scheme could be adopted locally with some modifications. In 1962 Penguin Books had already launched their "Penguin Modern Poets" series, featuring some thirty poems by each of three modern poets in a single volume. The idea gathered momentum in the literary life of the island and a whole spate of shared anthologies soon appeared in the market. Running parallel to these were the more traditionally Maltese 'collective anthologies', involving single works by a large number of writers. In recent years the trend has slowed down considerably.

The titles of these shared anthologies are in themselves a clear indication of a substantially untraditional way of creating metaphors. Whilst former book titles had an exclusively sentimental touch (e.g. *Weraq mar-Riħ*, Leaves in the wind, 1932, by N. Cremona; *Dell ta' l-Imghoddi*, Shadow of the past, 1936, by T. Vassallo;

Fanali bil-Lejl, Nocturnal Lamps, 1949, by A. Buttigieg; *Il-Waltz tad-Dellijiet*, The Waltz of the Shadows, 1949, by Ġ. Pisani; *Fuq Ġwienah il-Ġhana*, On the Wings of Song, 1964, by Ġ. Zammit), the modern ones prefer to select their imagery from the immediate world of urban, industrialized experience (e.g. *Antenni*, Antennae), or to reveal the detached frustration of a distressed psyche (e.g. *Dħaħen fl-Imħuħ*, Smoke in the Minds; *L-Ġhar ta' l-Enimmi*, The Cave of Enigmas). Such a deliberate substitution of emotional metaphors by a set of others which are rather cerebral, mathematically precise, logically coherent but apparently too densely inter-related to be easily comprehensible, is one of the most consistent features of the new poems themselves. This proves further that the modern poetic experience is necessarily transferred from the warm abode of the heart, as the so-called seat of passions, to the labyrinth of the mind, now considered as a paradoxically delicate, fragile machine which cannot actually insert itself adequately within the predetermined confines of an objective, impersonal complex.

The romantics had repeatedly sought to sublimate the conception of poetry as the intimate revelation of the heart and had equated their own work with an aesthetic reconstruction of autobiographical data. The following book titles are just a few typical examples of this fundamental orientation: *Kwiekeb ta' Qalbi* (Stars of my Heart), 1944, by K. Vassallo; *Mohħba tal-Qalb* (The Heart's Secret Path), 1945, by F. Camilleri; *Mill-Milja ta' Qalbi* (From the abundance of my Heart), 1956, by V. Ungaro; *Tlitt Iqlub* (Three Hearts), 1953, by J. Abela, M. Cassar and J. Sciberras; *Meta toħlom il-Qalb* (When the Heart dreams), 1962, by G. Delia. On the other hand, although Charles Coleiro is one of the first protagonists of the modern movement, the title of his book, *Mirja ta' Qalbi* (Mirrors of my Heart), 1964, indicates his reluctance to part irrevocably with tradition.

Notwithstanding the impression of optimism which these poets suggest, an

intelligent examination of their innermost self shows a deep dissatisfaction with themselves and with the outer region which surrounds them. At times the subject-object rapport betrays the presence of an existentialist attitude (Sartre, Camus, Ionesco and Brecht as well feature in their manifestos) and consequently the inherent frustration ends up with transforming the apparently indomitable protagonist into a sceptically hostile victim of superior forces. The best instances of this psychic dialectic are provided by Victor Fenech, Philip Sciberras, Mario Azzopardi, Carmel Attard and Doreen Micallef. From the point of view of poetic technique, this incapability of coming to terms with the world of sensory experience results in metaphorical density. Symbols seem to breed and over-populate the poem without leaving any marginal space for literal or rhetorical intervals. Pure poetry proved to be difficult for the average reader and for some of the traditionalists as well.

As social animals these poets only develop a love-hate relationship with their environment. This dualism is also characteristic of some modern Maltese novels and short story collections such as Alfred Sant's *L-Ewwel Weraq tal-Bajtar* (The first Palms of the Prickly Pears), 1968, Frans Sammut's *Il-Ġagħa* (The Cage), 1971, and *Samuraj* (Samurai), 1975, and Oliver Friggieri's *Il-Ġidba* (The Lie), 1977, *Fil-Parlament ma jikbrux Fjuri* (In Parliament no Flowers grow), 1986, and *Fil-ġżira Taparsi jikbru l-fjuri* (In the island Taparsi flowers grow), 1991.

Protest, the elimination of traditional taboos and the negation of rigid socio-religious rituals, the search for a different identification of a true individual and national self, and other unfamiliar motives were conveyed through a range of poetic forms which amply reflected the extraliterary involvement of the group and the fresh cultural orientation of the younger generation. Polyphonic prose, projective verse, the *recit*, cut-out and concrete poetry and other unconventional techniques,

generally of an English or an American modern origin, aimed at provoking a critical confrontation between the authors and the widest possible range of readers and at providing poetry with an authentic justification for its existence and then for its diffusion among people from all walks of life.

Thematically, this attitude implied that all human experiences are inherently adequate to be considered as prime matter for poetic transformation and sublimation, whilst from a purely formalistic point of view it evidently proclaimed the belief that all aprioristic literary codes had to be done away with. Consequently, the definition of a poem in terms of its genre became only an *a posteriori* conclusion. Practically this amounted to the conscious elimination of generic distinctions and of the traditionally supreme recognition granted to the adherence to a prescribed set of stylistic precepts.

The *Moviment Qawmien Letterarju*, informally set up in November 1966 and officially founded in January 1967, was meant to organize this whole process of literary revival and to fuse all innovations in one concerted effort. Writing was intended to be translated into experience which had to go far beyond the restricted boundaries of normal literary routine. The title of the movement's magazine itself, *Il-Polz* (The Pulse), launched in July 1967, immediately indicated that these poets and writers were detecting an intimate relationship among rhythm, pulse, beat and jazz music. (It is impossible to isolate this mentality from that of the Beat Generation poets of the fifties and the sixties, such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso). As a matter of fact, their radio literary programme was called *Beat and Literature*, whilst they soon embarked on a series of public recitals of poetry and pop music. Night clubs, hotels, streets and squares were the new venue for experiencing literature conceived of as a happening rather than as just a written work. The poet was not to be any more, to

quote Dylan Thomas, "a person of words" but "a person of words in action," and the poem was gradually becoming "an event, a happening, an action perhaps, not a still-life or an experience put down, placed, regulated." Such activities were obviously intended to substitute the previous ghetto-like gatherings of traditional literary societies.

Whereas the sixties form a short, turbulent period of experimentation, public debate and controversy, the seventies and the eighties are actually the period when literary equilibrium was finally reached. The best examples of modern Maltese verse illustrate the general conclusion that the modern trends, modified and adapted to the conditions of the Maltese temperament, had to be channeled through a path where the inquisitive self and the environment of an ancient, solitary island form one unique whole. A brief account of the contributions of the more important contemporary poets may suffice to justify these assertions.

Mario Azzopardi, perhaps the angriest among the poets who made their presence felt in the late sixties, is himself a prominent exponent of the new current. His fine lyrical vein is an indication, albeit paradoxical, of inner tranquillity, since the real world is now the one within the self. The rebel has adopted the behaviour of a mystic constantly in search of ultimate truths. The objective world is now interiorized and symbols, equally original and disturbing, form the suggestive language of an inward-looking pilgrim talking only to himself. On the other hand, Achille Mizzi is highly sensuous and evocative, densely allusive and at times really obscure. He only knows the mood of a grave thinker perceiving the essence of existence through subtle images. His metaphors are frequently passionate but are intelligently formed as an effort to reconcile what is empirical with what is psychological. His poems at times suggest a sort of relationship between human life and scientific technique. Eternity and history constitute a world of sharp

confrontation. The self is at times lost but individuality is a sense animating all his works.

Doreen Micallef's main concern is the transformation of verse into a monologue conducted along different levels of awareness. This psychological condition is largely reflected in the syntactic patterns and the lexical choices she adopts in all her poems. Daniel Massa has contributed considerably to the renewal of Maltese verse especially in the field of symbolization, the choice of vocabulary, the formation of new rhythms, and the widening of the thematic content. His poetry is highly allusive and gives significance even to the minutest detail. Carmel Attard is essentially a lyric poet revisiting the past with the specific intention of renewing schemes and metaphors and of eliminating the rather abrupt distinction between tradition and modernism. Nostalgia and subtle irony are fully made use of in order to create an environment that is equally intimate and indifferent.

Philip Sciberras is deceptively descriptive and constantly philosophical. His deep sense of futility, at times utterly pessimistic, is combined with a profound faith in the innermost intuitions experienced by man when subjected to a thorough psychospiritual divestment. Social relevance is only of secondary importance to him, although some of his better works are effective owing to their dependence on known events. Oliver Friggieri transforms his own experience into a paradigm of universal suffering and insists on the relationship between love and death, God and history. Man's inability to communicate and to come to terms with existential and social dilemmas is eventually explained as the real essence of the human condition. Emotional content and philosophical principles constitute the major sources of his inspiration.

Other poets like Albert Marshall, Joe Friggieri and Gorg Borg still maintain a highly lyrical note, choose their vocabulary

from the registers of sentiment and intimacy, and dwell on the potentiality of poetry as a means towards self-identification. Their world is universal, rarely national, even if social relevance creeps in at intervals.

From an exclusively literary point of view, the reaction of the young poets was systematically directed against the typical components of some of the previous models: stereotyped phraseology, the purely emotional metaphorical nucleus, strict metrical formality, syntactic patterns which appeared to be obstinately distinct from traditionally unknown syntagmatic, paradigmatic, graphological, grammatical and lexical deviations. Consequently, openly declaring the absolute need of a radical renewal of forms and contents, these poets started to give great attention to English and American poetry. Among other things, the traditional sharp distinction between prose and poetry began to be considered as simply mental and phenomenological, and in no way substantial. Following Olson's dictum that the artist should escape towards, and not from, reality, and anxious to formulate a different poetic register, much more flexible and immediate, Victor Fenech and some others gradually eliminated the dichotomy. They did this mainly through the adoption of an utterly unpredictable anti-poetic diction, in which Wallace Stevens had already recognized "that truth, that reality to which all of us are forever fleeing," but, needless to say, the process is much more complex and aims at a fusion of both genres.

This attitude, which is both literary (since it concerns a taste and a choice regarding the written medium) and psychological (since it involves a new conception of what is humanly poetic or immediately translatable into poetry) has recently resulted in a harmonious fusion in Fenech's prose poems. In virtue of his latest creations Fenech has not only found the ultimate equilibrium towards which his poetry has been constantly heading since

the earliest published experiments in the sixties, but has also inserted Maltese poetry within the mainstream of international prose poetry production. Since the publication of Oscar Wilde's *Poems in prose* in the *Forthnightly Review* of July 1894, experimentation in this direction led to a highly creative synthesis of the narrative structure and the distinctive features of metaphorical composition. The works of Solzhenitsyn, who almost identified this genre with a recreated version of the traditional allegorical fables, and those of an impressive number of French poets, such as René de Obaldia, Pierre Bettencourt, Henri Pichette, Marcel Béalu, André Hardellet and Julien Gracq, have provided the Maltese writer with a reliable point of reference which admits a wide range of minor variations within the spectrum of its own basic definition. As a matter of fact Ġoġ Borg's *Stejjer minn tarf ir-Raħal* (Tales from the Village outskirts), 1977, claim to be poems in prose and are intimately related to Wilde's poetic fables in terms of narration and allegory, but are also different owing to the inclusion or exclusion of other aspects. (On the other hand, the prose of the major romantic poets, such as Dun Karm, Anton Buttigieg, Ġoġ Zammit and Karmenu Vassallo has always maintained a poetic spirit throughout, even if these writers were not aware of any literary fusion of the two genres which up to a few years ago were considered as mutually exclusive).

Being almost nervously conscious of their foreign contemporary colleagues – the most important ones being T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, G.M. Hopkins, the Liverpool poets, the English social poets of the thirties and others – the protagonists of this group could at last claim that they were moving apace with the most recent revivals. The initial historical disadvantage of Maltese literary evolution was finally surpassed.

The problem of identity

Contemporary Maltese writers are almost

unanimously engaged in portraying man in his eternal, absolute dimension. The romantics had succeeded in discovering the national self, and their basic intuition regarded man as a citizen, an inhabitant of a historically rich island. Alongside this conception the earlier writers themselves insisted on individuality as the prerogative of man as a human being and not simply of man as a mere member of a tiny community. Identity, both collective and personal, human and national, was seen in itself as the real essence of existence; national pride and personal distinctiveness are basically the complex offshoots of the same historical achievement. As this consciousness reached maturity and was fully developed on the creative level, it seemed that the time was ripe for a profounder revision of such an attainment. The exploration of the most diverse literary forms emanates from a deep urge to use all given means to attain self-fulfillment.

On the political plane Malta moved consistently ahead and made considerable strides in its efforts to be inserted in the contemporary outside world. Social and economic advancements brought about a different view of life and a set of new demands. The intercourse with foreign countries increased and international criteria had to be kept in mind as a constant point of reference. In trying to come to grips with this intriguing challenge writers know they have to face it both as keen observers of their immediate milieu and as intellectual interpreters of existence itself. The national and the universal levels at times overlap and are definitely engaged in a continuous relationship. The principle of individuation, sought after, discovered and sublimated by the previous writers, has since the seventies assumed subtle shades of meaning. Self-knowledge has gradually become a sort of collective conscience uniting writers together in search of something unknown. Although it initially had a decidedly Maltese point of reference, Maltese literature has since travelled much in diverse directions and is constantly heading towards a condition

where man, the sea, the ancient land, the sun, the landscape and all the obvious characteristics of an island, traditionally identified with the real nature of a country, assume a cosmic, ambiguous significance.

The basic problem to be faced by the Maltese writer will long be how to strike a middle course between the two extremes of being faithful to the place of origin and belonging to the outer world. Citizenship will go on assuming the double role of national identification and universal significance. The archetypal pattern of man the traveller is still the one most insistently adopted to portray the image of the self in search of justification in terms of history and relevance in terms of new demands and conditions.

Insularity has always been transformed into paradigm, a state of being which is both local and cosmic in implication. The island which the romantics have discovered and idealised to assert their own identity has eventually been transformed into a symbol of the human condition itself. Man himself is now an islander reaching out for the wide world where an alternative way of being can be explored. French

Existentialism has exerted great influence on most modern writers and it has paradoxically provided them with the necessary intellectual content whereby to justify their own predicament of members of a small island community.

As writers make great efforts to attain a higher degree of social relevance, their spiritual condition seems to be more identifiable with that of the inward looking mystic. Traditional religiosity has been largely substituted by a deeper sense of the mystery encompassing existence itself. They have more questions to put than answers to provide. The island itself is perhaps going through such a process of self-reappraisal. Traditions and myths which poets and novelists since the sixties have been divesting of any merit and dignity are now being similarly treated by the younger generation itself. Perhaps the impact these writers had on the population has been much greater than they themselves ever imagined. It all leads to the conclusion that even in such a tiny state writers can really play a decisive role in the process of modernisation.

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