

My English Poetry

Joseph AQUILINA

Abstract: *Some of Professor Joseph Aquilina's poems in English have been published sporadically in various numbers of The Journal of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Malta and in the press, both during his lifetime and after. The present paper includes the text of an unpublished lecture the author gave in the 1970s in which he spoke about his poetic works in English, how they were conceived, and about their place in Maltese literature and Commonwealth literature. Some of these poems are being reproduced for the first time.*

Keywords: *Joseph Aquilina, Commonwealth Literature, poems from Malta.*

PART I

My early years as an English poet

The English Language is described as a world language, more precisely as one of the world's great languages because it is not only the language of the people who live in the United Kingdom, but it is also the language of the many peoples in a far-flung area who form part of the British Commonwealth and a sort of *lingua franca* for many countries outside the Commonwealth. In the UK its status is that of Italian in Italy, of French in France, and, no less, of Maltese in Malta. It enjoys the status of the people's first language which they use for all purposes of communication and self-expression at all levels. There is nothing unusual about this. A people's language is inevitably the country's language.

What makes the diffusion of the English language historically interesting is that it is also the first language of some of the Commonwealth countries, Canada for instance where it flourishes side by side with French; Australia; New Zealand; and America. The dialectal differences which distinguish one type of regional English speech from another, for instance, UK English from Australian English, are no more distinctly remarkable than the variety of dialectal types which exist in the spoken languages of different areas in the UK. It is when you come to countries like India and Malta, to mention one very large country and a small one, that one has to regard English as a second language because the first language in both countries, though it belongs to a different family group, has co-existed with the people's native language.

In India, the use of English as a *lingua franca* solves, partly if not wholly, the difficulty of inter-regional linguistic communication created by a number of mutually unintelligible dialects. This serious difficulty is encountered also in the Organization of African States.

In Malta there has always been one native language and that is Maltese, so called naturally because it is neither Arabic, nor Italian, nor English, though it has borrowed many words and loan formations from several of them. In the history of Malta we notice the predominance first of Italian as the only language of culture and later of both English and Italian with Maltese left out of the picture, inconspicuous and out of sight like a maid washing her mistress's dishes in a kitchen.

In 1934 Maltese became the official language of Malta together with English. In 1937 I was appointed the first professor of Maltese and Oriental Languages in this University. Though the Maltese language is the subject in which I have specialized in my linguistic studies, I have made an extensive use of the English language for my language studies and communications read at international congresses and contributions to learned reviews. Other Maltese authors have used English for a general and specifically literary purpose. The volume of Anglo-Maltese literature is considerable enough to form part of what is known as Commonwealth literature. I gave a talk on 'Malta's Current Contribution to Commonwealth Literature' at a conference held in the University of Queensland, Australia, from 9 to 15 August 1968, under the sponsorship of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language studies which concerns itself with literature written in English throughout the Commonwealth, literature written in the various other languages used in the Commonwealth, translations in both directions between English and other Commonwealth languages, the varieties of the English language used throughout the Commonwealth and the problems of keeping them mutually intelligible, and the promotion and teaching of Commonwealth literature. This paper was published with others in *National Identity* (Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. London-Melbourne, 1970, pp. 104-14). Commonwealth literature is a significant contemporary literary reality which deserves the importance that is being given to it by the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language, and also by the Department of English in our University.

Some of you may be familiar with my Maltese Literary output but only a few may be also familiar with my literary output in English. Sometimes I ask myself (a disturbing question!): 'Should I have not employed my time more profitably then to express my poetic moods as these affected me from time to time, in the people's language?' Unlike Dun Karm, who started his literary apprenticeship in Italian but later abandoned this language for Maltese, I never succeeded in making the transition though, in extenuation of my sin of omission or commission, I must say that I have written a few poems in Maltese and a number of psalms poetically rhythmical (a

form of rhythmic poetry) which will be collected shortly in a special number of *Lehen il-Malti*. By my school education and personal inclination, though not by family upbringing, I was mentally conditioned by English language and literature from the very beginning after my primary school education in Gozo, first at the bishop's seminary and later on in our University from 1930 onwards.

I think this is enough by way of introduction to my topic: a talk on my own verse. I feel that the introduction is a bit too long, partly because I do not enjoy talking about my poetry and partly because you cannot build without foundations or know the foreground without knowing the background. I enjoy writing verse and then forget all about it. It is to me like letting off steam and calming down soon after.

I have been writing English poetry for so many years that the number of my poems from 1929 to 1971 amounts to 518. I have had them typed ready for publication when and if time and money (both 'when' and 'if' are problematic!) will make this possible. The first question that I want to answer before I start talking to you about my own poetry is 'Can I do so objectively? Can Aquilina, who is talking to you today on his poetry at the invitation of Professor R.J. Beck, dissociate himself from himself and speak to you today about his poetry objectively and dispassionately? I do not think this is impossible, though it is very difficult. Many of us can look at our faded photos of so many years ago when we were younger (vanished youth reviewed in retrospect!) and pass unfavourable judgements also on oneself as one looks say thirty years back – self-dissection in retrospect is possible, but not easy. Perhaps it is no more easy than kicking one's shadow out of the way in full daylight. It just follows us wherever we go, whether we like it or not! Therefore what I am going to do is try and be factual, tell you what kind of verse I wrote, why and how I write it, and then let you judge for yourself. After all, my English output is neither a contribution to Maltese literature nor to English literature. It is in fact a historical document of British cultural influence in Malta; a study in cultural orientation. As an undergraduate I edited the *Journal of the Malta University Literary Society*; for some years, lately, I have been editing the *Journal of the Faculty of Arts*. The only advantage I derived from this literary activity was publication facilities. I intend to divide this material between two talks based on the nature and chronological distribution of the verse, specimens of which have been tape recorded as a sequel each of these two talks.

The typescript of my collected poems covers the years 1929–1971, that is 42 years, quite a big slice of my life! The index of my collected works includes poems which fall under the following headings: 1. Juvenalia (30 poems); 2. Sonnets (129); 3. Sonnet Sequences (12); 4. Rhythms (24 poems); 5. Epitaphs and Epigrams (169 poems); 6. Angry Moments (4 poems); 7. Shorter Poems (55 poems) and 8. Other Poems (95 poems). In my earlier poems there are noticeable formative influences – (Palgrave echoes). But from the very beginning, one notes

that my main preoccupation, even if you call it an obsession, is with the following imponderables:— 1. Death; 2. The transitoriness of life (Youth and Beauty); 3. Man's relation to God; and the unabating struggle between Man and God and the world that stands between the two even as the devil stood between Christ and the Kingdom of Pomp and Power in the Desert. Psychologically therefore, my poetry is essentially metaphysical – a spiritual diary. The war in Vietnam, wars everywhere, and all other wrongs which disfigured the human image in the past, present and future, are the extension and projection of the perpetual war between good and evil, between Man and God. Though the theological picture is by no means Manichaeic, it is nonetheless overshadowed by the impact of the sense of evil (Satanism) which keeps a man internally divided, spiritually tortured, and doubtful. I wish it was not so even selfishly for my own sake, but a man is as he is made or as he is conditioned by his complexes which are as much part of us as lung and liver.

What part did my boyhood spent in Gozo where life is dominated by the parish church, has in the formation of my spiritual and religious reactions? I find it rather difficult to talk about myself at greater length. One naturally feels shy – self-revelation is easy in poetry because it is unconscious. Once it becomes conscious, one becomes immediately hesitant and reluctant. We all look in the mirror and see a blurred image of ourselves, because, as I have just said, we are all conditioned by deep-seated complexes and nobody can be his own objective critic, and frankly, I wonder how objective any critic can be, considering that he is also mentally conditioned by his own complexes, his likes and dislikes, and the society in which he lives.

Finally I would like you to hear a few selections from the first three sections of my poetic efforts, namely Juvenalia, Sonnets, and Sonnet Sequences. You may hear many echoes as in a conch but I do hope you hear my voice too. This is the end of the first part of my first talk. You will now listen to some of my earlier poems. Please forgive the exuberant enthusiasm and the rhetoric. They are a first selection from my earlier efforts, as psychologically remote and different from my present way of feeling about life and man as the 30- or 40-year old photos of my younger self preserved in my family album for occasional reflections on the changes we go through as we grow older and exercises in visual flash-backs of our transient mortality. As we grow older, we suffer changes not only in our body but also in our minds and hearts; such changes are reflected in the way we speak, in the way we think and in the way we get enthusiastic or despondent about life as a whole.

PART II

My mature years as an English poet

In the first part of this paper I gave a general idea of the extensive use I have been making of the English language for the expression of my poetic moods. You may

think 'mood' is not the right word; but I think mood is roughly a suitable word to express a frame of mind influenced or conditioned by heightened emotion. My poems are the product of heightened emotions mercifully spread over the years to ease the strain. Whether the net product translated such emotions adequately is not for me to say. In the process of transition from feeling to expression (self-projection in verbalized expression) much is lost because words are too fragile to bear the whole burden of the accumulated emotion. The best of poetry like the best of music, reaches higher levels in their attempt to overcome the limitations of sounds and words.

When I read some of my poems I inevitably recall an emotional situation which at that time stirred my feelings deeply and excited my imagination but I have always been deeply conscious of my inadequacy. Now such inadequacy may be due to inadequate command of the medium or to inadequate emotional correspondence between feeling and its verbalization in the spoken or written form. The latter obstacle to full self-expression (as I have already pointed out) is inherent in the nature of human language which being made up of a combination of sounds, a sequence of phonetic events and verbal situations, is by its very nature unable to achieve perfect transference at the same level of feeling and imagining in their unverballed form. In the case of a writer using somebody else's language for his literary purpose, there is some for study of language interference as well as the relation of words to mental attitudes. An English author and a non-English author writing in English use the same medium, but the personal temperament carries with it the colour of the native language and of the poet's native speech. The famous Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore, was a bi-lingual poet who wrote not only in Bengali but also in English. There is no doubt that he is a master of the English language, but there is also no doubt – one can feel this as one reads his poetry – that he transfuses oriental imagery into his English medium. So one can say that Commonwealth English provides scope for a comparative study in different mental attitudes and temperamental orientations of the medium which can provide the raw material of a comparative socio-linguistic survey.

What may be bad or indifferent poetry and prose can be invaluable material for such study at the social level – a study of two different cultures in contact. I would like to see some of our students at university writing MA theses on this neglected subject. A great deal of literature in English and Italian has been written in Malta, but very little investigation has been carried out so far on the lines I am suggesting. There is still an unexplored field, rich in uncollected spoils that none has yet taken the trouble to garner. The harvest is plenteous, but the workers have been looking away from it. It is time they started having a good look at it, assessing and weighing it for what it is worth. Many a possible exploratory theses along these lines could be compared to a sheaf of corn which together could build up quite a pile.

In my first talk, I gave up an enumerated account of the number of poems that I have written during 42 years grouped under different headings. You also listened to some of my earlier longer poems which reflect the imagination of a much younger and excitable man read to you by Mr Richard Rayson and Mrs Vivien Galea Debono. Now you will hear selections from my later poems. One of the later sections is entitled 'Epigrams and epitaphs' of which I have written a considerable number. What is an epigram and why did I write so many of them? Do they give the impression of a man always in a temper? The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines an epigram as a 'short poem ending in witty turn of thought; pointed saying or mode of expression'. I have described some of the poems as epitaphs, which are words supposed to be inscribed on a tomb. Epigrams may not qualify as good poetry or even as poetry of a kind. The exuberant lyrical note is alien to them, and as an epigram fails or succeeds by the bluntness (failure) or sharpness (success) of its tailpiece wherein lies the soul of its wit, sometimes like a snake hiding in the grass, its epigrammatic efficacy is assessed by its impact on us. As an argument is really cogent when it gets home, an epigram is similarly cogent when it drives a lesson home. Not that epigrams are supposed to be didactic, they would be worthless efforts if they were directly so, but they do communicate a feeling of reaction which may be violent or good-humoured against some of the more annoying foibles of human nature. The milder form of epigram is an exercise in good-humoured wit.

Martial is the Latin master; Anton Buttigieg is the Maltese epigrammist *par excellence*. All I can say about myself is that, like Martial and Buttigieg, I very often felt I could not help reacting against some of our human foibles, especially injustice, pretentiousness, and self-conceit. I have called some of the epigrams epitaphs precisely because it is by the yardstick of our mortality that we judge the haughty, the arrogant, and the pompous to be no more than foolish clowns in their short parts on the stage of human life.

Here are a few titles from my epigrams:

1. Predestination;
2. Demagogue;
3. Justice;
4. Epitaph on Epulon;
5. Epitaph on a poetaster;
6. Politicians;
7. Cuckold; and
8. *Cuisine Anglaise*, an exercise in good humoured wit.

I must read you this myself:

Cuisine Anglaise

Our friends, the English, learnt the art of Empire;
 In changing times they gave it a new look:
 They learned the worldly wisdom of expediency,
 But, damn it all! They never learned to cook!

Have patience. I am now going to read you two more epigrams on critics:

Epitaph on a Critic

Here lies buried a most conscientious critic,
 A very famous one,
 Who, having spent his life picking holes
 In other people's work.
 Left his own masterpiece undone.

Double Epitaph

Let us mourn the death of Mr Jones, a very brilliant critic.
 Alas, death comes unbidden:
 And let us mourn no less the loss
 Of all the books he left unwritten.

In a smaller number of poems which I have grouped under the title 'Angry Moments' (if one is honest with oneself, one can and *must* be angry at any age) I have castigated what I considered as questionable traits of human character. The difference between the epigrams and these four poems is in the corresponding length of the sting. The longer the poem the longer the many-pointed sting, for the more you prick, the more punctures you make – punctures in the worn-out tyres of the ramshackle cars of a decadent and bankrupt society. These four angry poems are: 'The Hollow Men'; 'Mr Bootlicker'; 'The "Great Civil Servant"'; and 'The Effete'; the first three of which you will hear on tape shortly. The other section 'Shorter Poems' includes a fairly large number of poems about which all I have got to say is that they deal with a number of topics written at different intervals, provoked by the poetic mood of the moment.

This is the age of experiment. It is also the break-away age which defiantly rejects old forms, often rejecting form itself as well as the nexus of a logically built-up sentence, the suitable context, and the rational collocation of words. Running amok has become quite fashionable. Prosodic discipline has also been rejected. Many have thrown it off as one does a straitjacket. *Vers libre* (some of it too *libre* to be either verse or prose) has produced some good and bad stuff. One important contribution of the new prosodic experiment is the development of what one might describe as the counterpoint. Prosodic and formal experiments and innovations must not be underrated. Where there is no experiment, there is the danger of stagnation. Therefore if I say that my verses are not prosodically experimental or adventurous,

and that I have been largely metrically traditional, I have no intention of either under-rating the new technique or overrating the old and the traditional technique. All I can say about traditional technique is that it has a solid foundation in time and counts masterpieces of poetic genius. One may reject traditional technique in favour of a revolutionary one, if one thinks that in this way one can get more substance out of words. Personally, I am a believer not in stereotyped metrical traditional technique but in what I would describe as evolutionary traditional technique.

One of the sections of my as yet unpublished collected verse, (all poems have been individually published) contains poems which I have described as 'Rhythms'. Though there is a feeling of recurrent rhythm in these poems, yet the general structure is free and the melodic effect is obtained by the free flow of stresses. The nearest comparison I can think of is the style of the psalms, but I must warn you that the general feeling and treatment are often most unbiblical. The main reason is that the context is contemporary as in 'The Nordic Superman', to single out one poem, which I wrote in Gozo soon after an air-raid when our homeland was being ruthlessly bombarded by the *Stukas* of the Third Reich. Here is an excerpt:

The Nordic Superman

Why are our cities destroyed? Why are we left without home,
 Knowing not where we are going,
 Always sinking down,
 Unthinking, unknowing,
 Our lads not sowing,
 Ungrowing, unmoving,
 And the soil still brown?
 We sink into Rock
 Retreating like shadows from Anger accursed,
 Bursting demonically split-up thunderous flame,
 Warily lifting up our eyes to the skies staring above us,
 Wondering starless and grey like ageing foreheads or rust on steel,
 The age of the rock, Neanderthal men in Ghar Dalam Cave,
 Till, unclenching tight fists in sudden conversion.
 Till, unclenching tight fists in sudden conversion,
 (For what is hatred even of enemy but animal perversion?)
 Relaxing pained legs that swell out in protest,
 Maundering sheep for the slaughter houses,
 Tight-packed knee to knee with aching backs against the wall,
 The shrunken shadows out-flattened above our heads,
 Half-lighted by candles spluttering rock fears,
 (Crumps of shell in the distance and crashing of bombs)
 Thus pray to Superman reaching us like thunder from the North:

O Superman, made strong by sheer power of Robber Will,
 Destined to conquer the world, to be always wearing jack-boots,
 And toying with bayonets and guns and spilling the blood of your youth,
 Eternal pirate, whether rowing on canoe or primitive galley of wood,
 Or raiding the oceans on armoured ships of invulnerable steel,
 A savage tattooed and shaggy, yelling the war-cry,
 Or wearing bowler hats to match a cleanly shaven face,
 Biting the end of your pencil in comfortable offices adding up figures,
 We that are not of your Chosen Breed.
 But fleeing from you into the Rock that shuts out the sky,
 Thus dare address you: – O Strange Master Robber by Act of Inherited Will,
 Sharp-toothed Wolf howling on the mangled lamb,
 (What rights boast impudent lamb to Super-Wolf!)
 Spare us the disturbing privilege of your Nordic anger,
 Keeping your four-engined bombers, tanks and machine guns,
 Hand-grenades, mines and poison-gas,
 Far from our peaceful shores.
 We in return leave you uncontested world,
 Knowing you are so hungry and a hungry wolf
 Will bite into the marrow of the victim's bones.
 Even into solid granite though he breaks his teeth.

I now read to you another of the shorter poems in this section before you hear a selection of poems from other sections, recorded on tape for you by Mr Rayson and Mrs Galea Debono, whom I thank for cooperation, as I thank once more Professor R.J. Beck for inviting me to give these two talks.

Our Parents

After the Fall . . .
 Adam and Eve had a long story to tell,
 Much to recall:
 A story of witchcraft, murder and hate –
 How when they repented they found, alas,
 That even repentance could come a little late;
 And they spoke quietly as
 If they had received the seal of their Fate,
 Remembering how after the Cheat, the lashing curse of God
 Maddened, disturbed them with Satanic lust
 So that when they strove to fly to the stars
 A vulgar, wicked force drove them back to the Dust:
 A Force, an evil Force that sickens Woman's womb
 A Force, an evil Force that fouls her husband's seed:
 And they wept when they knew that to the end of time
 Their children's children had to hunger and bleed,
 March forward to win
 As if all was well with the world, as if nothing had happened,

In spite of all,
 In spite of sin,
 This is what Adam and Eve had to recall;
 And they were not proud;
 They were very sad
 Feeling guilty and bad.

(1951)

I am sorry if I have been unkind to Adam and Eve. I must say in their defence that many of their children would not have proved the mettle of their heroism if their heritage was the Arcadia the ideal rustic paradise age of Roman mythology.

Other poems

Girls of Other Days

Sweet, dark-eyed, maids with raven hair,
 With rounded, sun-burnt arms,
 Like roses guarding their sweet charms,
 That, tender-petaled, fair,
 For one brief season edge the rills,
 Ye bring to me the dead:
 Young other girls that on the hills
 Like fleetest shadows sped.

Your eyes are dark as theirs were dark;
 Their silken hair was bright:
 They ran away to fly the night
 Upon a time-swept barque;
 And hasting on, perhaps they saw
 New oceans and new vales;
 The triumph of a holy law
 In far-off, sheltered dales.

For years and years, familiar trees
 That once beheld them wooing
 Like mating snow-white doves a-cooing,
 Or questing garden bees,
 Have longed in vain for their return
 With laughter in their eyes,
 Gay, buoyant loving hearts that burn
 With unrepressed sighs.

But now they will not come again
 For they sing happy there,
 In perfect joy, unsoured by care:
 They come not back to pain.

Like withered leaves their youthful dream
Has followed Autumn's storms.
Not all is fair that so doth seem,
What'er the pleasant forms.

Yet life was sweet for them when they
Were wooed by village swains,
Met them by moonlight in the lanes
Alone, out of the way.
Perhaps the boughs of hazel trees
Once heard their loving words
While hummed the swarms of tiny bees
Or sang the fluting birds.

Just like a ship with wind-torn sails,
The life of man departs:
The wind has sung of broken hearts,
Of death a thousand wails.
I hear a plaining in the air,
It is a dirge of sorrow
For the many lasses fair
Whom we shall miss tomorrow.

The rose-cheeked maids with flowing hair,
Love bubbling in dark eyes,
The joy of life expressed in sighs,
As if they never were,
Must pass away, return to Earth
To seek a fuller life;
And death is life through Nature's birth
That harmonises strife.

The peaceful sunsets, orange-red,
Gold pouring down the hills,
Or scattered on the pebbly rills,
Transform the risen dead.
Thin, distant shadows, chiming bells,
The clarion of the chase,
Revive past life in silent dells:
Young girls of other days.

(1932)

A Marriage Song

Throw wheat for fullness on the head
Of his young bride;
Throw apronfuls of roses red,
In joy and pride.
Sacristan, ring the parish bell,
Bless her new home,

And keep from her the fiends of hell
That round her roam.

The basil and carnations bloom
Upon the sill.
Young bride, be your mother's loom,
The farm, the mill –
Ay, take this dower to your love,
With smiling health,
But he shall love your soul above
Your mother's wealth.

Sacristan, ring the bells again,
And tell your beads.
Behold the sunshine after rain
Splashing the weeds.
Pray for their joy, and ring the bells
That love may be
As deep to them as new-filled wells,
Or as the sea.

Light candles in the votive shrine
That God may make
Her womb as fruitful as the vine,
Love for Life's sake!
And burn an olive branch that she
May live and die
As chaste as snow, as full of glee
As God's blue sky.

(1933)

Fear of Youth

I am a troubador. How steep and long
The perilous path that plunges through the Night,
Across weird cliffs beneath the realm of Song,
Which shines a mocking glory from the height:

I have seen some fall near me on the way,
Some who had dreams and courage in their soul,
Some who had hailed with drums the dawn of day,
Some who had drunk Youth's wine to reach the Goal.

These I beheld once dare the heights of fame,
Through blizzards and through darkness as through light,
That they upon them might engrave a name
Like splendour of the gods – eternal, bright –

Till once they fell half-way and their hearts bled,
And from their soul the light of vision fled.

(1933)

If Only Dreams

If only dreams and nothing more were true,
The dreams like golden threads of coloured lights,
The lasting memory of starry nights,
And dawn-clouds swimming in the heavens blue;

If maids could always smile and never rue
Their plighted love; if spring with her delights
Of flowers and fruits, rich meadows and such sights
Made Life pleased with herself and lovers woo;

If laughing Youth poured out its soul in songs
A quiver with the struggling of deep love,
With faith beyond the narrow bounds of time,
Sad poets then would not complain of wrongs,

Appeal for peace from man to God above:
Perpetual joy would be their pleasing Rhyme.

Lost Words

She sat beside me like a fairy Queen
From Youth's white kingdom on a throne of light;
With gentle eyes intent she saw me write
An essay on lost words until between

The fumbling of research she lay, unseen,
Her glowing hands on mine and with delight
'Rest but a while,' she warned 'twill soon be night.
Bring down your Book of Love – this – gilt-edged – green'.

And soon I put away the scratching pen,
The essay on lost words, the heavy lore,
And plunged into my Past when I was young;
Till by sweet magic, lo! within thy ken

Sailed back the Ship of Youth; Time stepped ashore
Laden with all the love-songs I had sung.

(1/11/51)

The Age We Live In

What more could poets wish to fire their Muse,
To catch the mighty resonance of rhyme,
Than jet-planes' roaring beating out the time
Fraught with the pressure of large headline news:

Men laying down their lives to stop abuse
Of greed and power at home or Asian clime,
Defying sten-guns, filt, mosquito, grime,
Ready to die for Country in their shoes?

Ah, lucky we whom Fate reserved to live
In such breath-taking Age of destiny,
This Atom Age that mastered land and sea!
Not the Arcadians' timed age could give

Such tension for great verse, such villainy
That bears the phoney name of Liberty.

(1952)