

MAIN TRENDS IN THE HISTORY OF MALTESE LITERATURE

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The discovery in 1966 of Pietro Caxaro's *Cantilena*, a beautiful poem in Mediaeval Maltese presumably composed in the middle of the 15th century, only marks an isolated effort by an eminent man of letters to produce a literary piece in Maltese. The *Cantilena* stands out as the earliest known work in the language and does not imply in any way the existence of a contemporary literary tradition in the vernacular. When Maltese, an originally Semitic dialect gradually developed into a highly expressive language on its own through direct contacts with non-Arabic sources of influence (mainly Sicilian, Italian, French and English), 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.

Maltese writers developed an uninterrupted local «Italian» literary movement which went on up to about four decades ago, whereas Maltese as a literary idiom started to co-exist on a wide scale in the last decades of the 19th century. 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 the socio-cultural affairs, for the longest period. The native tongue had only to wait for the arrival of a new mentality which could integrate an unwritten, popular tradition with a written, academically respectable one.

Romanticism, both Latin and Germanic, 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, as Mikiel Anton Vassalli (1764-

1829) calls it, of the new emerging nation. One of the more important results of Vassalli's political and scholarly contributions is the embryonic development of a nationalistic way of thinking which centered around two basic aspects of the 19th century philosophy and aesthetics: (i) the affirmation of the singular and collective identity, 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 favor 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 rule. This started to give rise to an ever wider utilization 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. Theater as a definitely aesthetic experience in the modern sense is only a recent achievement.

In search of 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 own 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.

This formula was decidedly followed by Anton Manwel Caruana (1838-1907) whose *Inez Farrug* (1889), considered to be the first literary novel in Maltese, succeeds in fusing stylistic ambition with patriotic involvement, thus initiating a movement of language-cum-

literature revival which lasted up to the sixties of this century, 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 derive his central plot from known history and set it within a fictitious surrounding, or peripheral plot, 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 synthesis of the two narrative models was attempted by Guze' Muscat Azzopardi (1853-1927) whose *Toni Bajada* (1878:, *Viku Mason* (1881), *Susanna* (1883), *Cejlu Tonna* (1886), *Censu 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 Guze' Aquilina's *Taht Tliet Saltniet* (1938, *Under Three Reigns*) and Guze' Galea's *Zmien I-Ispanjoli* (1938, *The Times of the Spaniards*), *San Gwann* (1939, *Saint John*) and others. These novelists' constant preference for protagonists chosen from within the zone of well-known national patriots is another major step in the romantic direction.

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 centered around a sensational murder or an unhappy love affair which ended up dramatically. Spectres, ruthless villains, haunted houses, ruined castles, 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* (1899, *Carlo de Von Hove*, or the cruelty of the hangman Goldo), *Inez jew bint l-imghallaq, grajja ta' Malta, Kurjuza u tal-biza'* (Inez or the hanged man's daughter, a tale of

Malta, curious and macabre), A.E. Borg (*Lucija jew il-Vittma tat-tradiment* (1907, Lucia or the victim of betrayal), *Marija jew vendetta ta' baruni* (1908, Maria or the baron's vengeance), G. Cumbo (*Yatavru spjun* (1935, The spying corpse) 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 *tjattrin*, or popular theater, 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.

The reformist novelists, such as Guze' Ellul Mercer (1897-1961), Gwann Mamo (1886-1941), Guze' Bonnici (1907-1940), Guze' Chetcuti (b. 1914) assumed the role of critical observers of characters, 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—as found, for instance, in Ellul Mercer's *Leli ta' Maz-Zghir* (1938, Leli of Maz-Zghir), Mamo's *Ulied in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerka* (1930, The Children of Grandma Venut in America), and Chetcuti's *L-Isgag* (1962, The Alley), *It-Tnalja* (1964, The Plier), *Nirien ta' Mhabba* (1967, Fires of Love)—had to be conveyed through a faithful analysis of spoken linguistic schemes. This is also what realist playwrights, such as Guze' Diacono (b. 1912) and Chetcuti, sought to do in order to put on stage a totally faithful reproduction of what actually happened in daily life. The more important and elementary aspects of family 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.

The self and the outer region in conflict

The young revolutionary writers of the sixties, united under the banner of the 'Moviment Qawimien 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, and not as an already codified set of objective rules demanding full adherence and unquestionable reproduction.

Novelists like J.J. Camilleri (*Ahna Sinjuri*, 1965, *We are rich*; *Il-Ghar tax-Xitan*, 1973, *The Cave of the Devil*; *Is-Sejha ta' l-Art*, 1974, *The Call of the Earth*), Lino Spiteri (*Tad-Demm u l-Laham*, 1968, *Of Flesh and Blood*; *Hala taz-Zghozija*, 1970, *Wasted Youth*; *Rivoluzzjoni do Minore*, 1980, *Revolution in D Minor*), Frans Sammut (*Labirint u Stejjer Ohra*, 1968, *Labyrinth and Other Stories*; *Il-Gagga*, 1991, *The Cage*; *Samuraj*, 1975, *Samurai*; *Paceville*, 1991), Oliver Friggieri (*Il-Gidba*, 1977, *The Lie*; *L-Istramb*, 1980, *The Misfit*; *Fil-Parlament ma jikbrux Fjuri*, 1986, *In Parliament no Flowers Grow*; *Fil-gzira Taparsi jikbru l-fjuri*, 1991, *In the Island of Taparsi Flowers Grow*), Trevor Zahra (*Taht il-Weraq tal-Palm*, 1974, *Under the palm leaves*; *Hdejn in-Nixxiegha*, 1975, *Near the Fountain*) Paul P. Borg (*Dal-Lejl gie Alla*, 1988, *God came Tonight*) 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 real birth of a modern literary theater is part of the whole scenario. Since his first radioplay, *Cpar fix-Xemx* (1950, *Fog in the Sun*), Francis Ebejer (1925-1993) started to create a nervous awareness of what stage reality actually was. His major play *Menz* (1967), an intelligent sequel to his *Vaganzi tas-sajf* (1962, *Summer Holidays*), strongly affirms the rights of the individual to self-determination and recognition of his unique distinctiveness. Other playwrights,

like Oreste Calleja (b. 1946) whose *Erba' Drammi* (1972, Four Plays) is essentially a dramatic reconstruction of the need for a thorough examination of tradition, and Alfred Sant (b. 1948), also noteworthy for his novel *L-Ewwel Weraq tal-Bajtar* (1968, The First Palms of the Prickly Pears) provide various new approaches to theatrical technique and are adamant in their efforts to transform a play into a forum for debate.

The idea of nationhood

Gan Anton Vassallo (1317-1868) is the first important poetic personality. He introduced into Maltese the pathetic or sentimental attitude which represents man as an emotional creature in search of self-attainment through love. 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. His focal conception, however, is essentially nationalistic. 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 evolving process, thus suggesting that the idealized *patria* of the romantics is potentially on the verge of being actualized in definite political terms.

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), Guze' Muscat Azzopardi (1853-1927), Dwardu Cachia (1858-1907) were mainly motivated by the need to provide the common people with material they could easily understand and enjoy. They simplified knowledge of various sorts and sought to relate it to their own immediate environment. Such an attitude amply reduces their poetic merit but it equally proves that they succeeded in bridging the traditional gap between culture and the population. Social relevance, rather than aesthetic value, is their almost exclusive point of reference. In the process they equally managed to introduce literary forms and coin poetic diction which eventually survived for quite a long time in the history of Maltese poetry.

In the late twenties and throughout the thirties Dun Karm (1871-1961), the most important poet of the whole traditional period, reached the peak of his creative ability, principally owing to his transcending the particular and perceiving the universality which actually transforms routine into uniqueness and thought into intuition. *Il-Jien u Lilhinn Minnu* (1938, The I and Beyond it), a work of more than 500

hendecasyllabic lines, is his most valid contribution and the best evidence to his inner need of going beyond human experience in order to arrive at a spiritual justification of the mystery of being.

The latter part of Dun Karm's life is characterized by an ever-increasing serenity. Even the war poems, in which the besieged island has found a veritable documentation of contrasting sentiments ranging from epic fervor to heartfelt mourning, reveal the fact that the long literary pilgrimage was heading towards its end. The previous turmoil, amply illustrated in most of his works, finally seemed to be overcome and silence, the hugustinian virtue the poet strove to acquire in his major poem, gradually developed into a habitual state of the soul.

Poetry goes on to be the most favorite genre with Maltese writers throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Lyricism of various types gives shape to a whole spate of sentiments and conceptual reconstructions of reality. Most of the output is profoundly sad and betrays a profound sense of disillusionment. Ruzar Briffa (1906-1963) transforms his unfortunate private life into a set of short lyrics which all eventually contribute towards the formation of a highly evocative autobiography. Sublimation and universal significance immediately creep in at times, but Briffa is not very keen to depart from immediate reference to known data. Karmenu Vassallo (1913-1987) reconstructs his whole vision of life on sound philosophical principles and ultimately identifies life with suffering, questioning in the process the legitimacy of birth and the possibility of overcoming the limits imposed by nature on the individual. Anton Buttigieg (1912-1983) is Wordsworthian at his best, although the Mediterranean atmosphere sharply distinguishes him from his master. He has produced some of the finer vignettes ever to be read in Maltese. The whole of nature is personified and a highly intimate relationship with creation, rather than a sort of escapism, transforms itself into a new-found alternative to the monotony of being.

In the late sixties a radical change took place in Maltese literature, particularly and essentially in poetry. Political independence from Britain, attained in the midst of sharp partisan controversy in 1964, could not fail to create a profound stir in intellectual circles. Awareness of what was happening in the outer world gave its share as well. Everything was set for a thorough critique of tradition and for the real rediscovery of the truest sense of independence as applied to individual and collective life. The long tradition of romanticism, largely modeled on the Italian experience of the 19th century, had overextended itself. Obvious imitation and rigid formalism were two

of the most conspicuous features of the literature of the period. Young poets, such as Mario Azzopardi, Victor Fenech, Daniel Massa, Oliver Friggieri, Achille Mizzi, Philip Sciberras, Charles Coleiro, Doreen Micallef, soon started to show a new, deep awareness of the profound innovations undergone in this century in all fields of Europe's literary experience. Against an uninspiring, definite vision of world and literature alike, they gradually imposed their own fresh outlook and assumed the role of sensitive protagonists of a much different Maltese environment which, however modernized, had not yet found its artistic projection. The traditionally solid foundations of political and ecclesiastical monolithism were finally challenged and shaken.

Since the sixties, new trends have been developed and then substituted by others. Social commitment was a point of departure to all poets who wanted to prove that their literary works had a vital role to play in society. Political and religious life, customs, attitudes and taboos were radically reviewed in search of an authentic inspiration. By the mid-seventies, practically with the appearance of Mario Azzopardi's book *Demghat tas-Silg* (1876, Tears of Ice), this outward-looking view gradually lost ground to make room for a much more subtle approach towards the underlying preoccupation: being Maltese. Azzopardi himself had initially inaugurated a period during which the grotesque caricature of Maltese life was the major source of inspiration. The time had come again for introversion to creep in.

Instead of the previous symbols chosen from the more immediate regions of daily routine, an essentially emotive metaphorical nucleus became again the real core of the new output. Intimacy, the search for personal coherence necessarily at grips with society itself, and the exploration of vague, infinite spaces, such as the wide sea and distant foreign lands revealed once more the fact that the identity of the new Maltese poet had to remain that of an essentially solitary, fully conscious citizen of the planet. Within a period of about twenty years, namely since the acquisition of Independence, the Maltese poetic spirit went through two apparently opposite experiences: having sensed the different moods of an Anglo-American cerebral type of verse, it soon had to face again and to accept the fact that the real self of the country was still Mediterranean, that is necessarily passionate.

The whole of contemporary Maltese poetry is actually engaged in portraying man in his eternal, absolute dimension. The romantics had discovered the self in his national aspect; their basic intuition regarded man as a citizen, an inhabitant of an ancient, historically rich island. Alongside this revelation the earlier poets themselves

insisted on individuality as the prerogative of man the human being and non exclusively of man the member of a particular community. Identity, both collective and personal, was seen in itself as a poetic awareness. As this consciousness reached maturity and was fully developed on the creative level, it seemed that the time had come for a profounder revision of such an attainment. The exploration of different forms, including the renewal of traditional ones, is not a merely technical exercise; it emanates from a much deeper urge to use all given means in order to attain self-fulfillment.

The national and the universal levels at times overlap and are engaged in a continuous relationship. Self-knowledge has gradually become a sort of collective awareness uniting poets together in search of something unknown. Maltese poetry has now traveled much in diverse directions and is constantly leading towards a condition where man, the sea, the ancient land, the sun, the landscape and all the other obvious characteristics, traditionally identified with the real nature of the country, assume a cosmic, ambiguous significance.

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