

**POINTS OF CONTACT BETWEEN ITALIAN
ROMANTICISM AND MALTESE LITERATURE :
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 characterise 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. Two major languages assumed, contemporarily or subsequently, the role of primary media for the elaborate expression of a community's feelings, experiences and ambitions: 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.¹ 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

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¹One of the earliest indications of an English-Maltese interaction is provided by Richard Taylor's translation of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, *Il-~~F~~ajja u l-Vinturi ta' Robinson Crusoe to York*, published in 1846 and in 1852. However, all the other works of Taylor (1818-1868), both as a popular poet and a staunchly patriotic journalist, place him easily within the Italian tradition of the island.

the island goes back many centuries, and a Semitic one, characterised 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. After getting a clear perspective of the language question, which constituted one of the major political preoccupations between 1880 and 1939,² 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.

When one considers the life of both languages in Malta, the first conclusion to be drawn is that Maltese is prior to Italian as a spoken language,³ 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 seventeenth century and then on a much wider scale in the eighteenth and nineteenth 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.⁴ Maltese men of letters 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 nineteenth century.⁵ This considerable deposit of literary output throughout the

² H. Frendo, "Language and Nationality in an Island Colony: Malta," *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1975): 25. The language question, forming a central part of the island's romantic experience, owes its origins 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.

³ The Arabs conquered Malta in 870 AD and thus laid the foundations for the language we now call Maltese. With the Norman conquest in 1090 AD, the language of the island started to find itself open to extra-Arabic influences, a process which has widened the lexical stock and the syntactic patterns and which is still active nowadays. Ö. Aquilina, *Papers in Maltese Linguistics* (Malta, 1961), 42-62.

⁴ One of the earliest documents in Italian dates back to 1409 (Cathedral Archives, ms. A, ff. 171-176. also A. Mifsud, "Malta al Sovrano nel 1409," *La Diocesi* 2 (7/1/1918), 243-248 and "La cattedrale e l'università, ossia Il comune e la chiesa in Malta," *La Diocesi* 2 (7/7/1917), 39-40; U. Biscottini, "Il volgare a Malta ed una questione dantesca," *Il giornale di politica e di letteratura*, Nov.-Dec. 1934, 665-670.

⁵ O. Friggieri, *La cultura italiana a Malta — Storia e influenza letteraria e stilistica attraverso l'opera di Dun Karm* (Florence, 1978), 11-32.

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.⁶ 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 that 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 must include and give causative prominence to, the said Italian-oriented Maltese production, rendering it as the first, or preliminary, phase of the whole spectrum. This approach would seek to establish the extra-literary motives which debarred Maltese from all cultural manifestations, and ask why it was socially dishonourable to use it. Alongside this dichotomy — which resulted 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: the Renaissance, Baroque, Illuminism and then the first glimmerings of Romanticism.

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 a sense of personal and national individuality, coincides with the first serious efforts towards the rediscovery of Maltese as one

⁶Among the earliest 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, ms. II, fol. 498-519, and included in Ignazio Saverio Mifsud's collection of the *Stromati Melitensium*. 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 (1870-75) on the island (G. A. Vassallo, *Il-hGifen Tork* (The Turkish Galley), ed. O. Friggieri [Malta, 1975] 5-6). With regard to published books, since the appearance of the first one printed locally — *I natali delle religiose militiae de' cavalieri* (1642) 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 literary tradition in the vernacular.

of the most ancient patrimonies, as Mikiel Anton Vassalli (1764-1829) calls it,⁷ 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 centred around two basic aspects of nineteenth-century philosophy and aesthetics: (i) the affirmation of the singular and collective identity (an experience emanating from the Romantics' absolute devotion to sentiment and passion, as opposed to the old and undisputed right enjoyed by the "goddess Reason" [as evinced in almost all poetics since Aristotle] informing the artworks of a previous age, 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* as writers, journalists, and political rebels sought refuge on the island. Alongside their activity in favour of a united and independent homeland, the Italians engaged themselves in an analogous mission: that of inviting the Maltese themselves to fight for their own political and cultural rights against British colonial domination. This initiated an ever wider utilisation of the native language and the gradual growth of an indigenous literature fully aware of the political, social, and cultural rights of the community.

The two genres in which the fullest development of Maltese literature is expressed are poetry and narrative prose. Theatre as a definitely aesthetic experience in the modern sense is only a recent achievement. Consequently, in providing a panoramic picture, any basic assessment is bound to focus on 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 recast them according to one's

⁷ M.A. Vassalli, *Discorso preliminare, Vocabolario maltese* (Rome, 1796), vii. The antiquity of a popular language featured very significantly in the concept of nationalism which European Romanticism sought to form and preach.

political commitment, flourished most during the *Risorgimento*. In recalling the heroic achievements of past generations, the novelist sought to revitalise forgotten myths and give dignity to the contemporary national cause. The idealised 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 as 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 being repeated in the present. Structurally, his work tends to assume the form of an alternation between the depiction of creatively exalted 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 synthesises 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 nineteenth century and of the first half of the twentieth. 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), Ġuzè Muscat Azzopardi (1853-1927), Anton Manwel Caruana (1838-1907) and later Anastasju Cuschieri (1876-1962), Dun Karm (1871-1961), and Ninu Cremona (1880-1972) started their literary careers in Italian; and (ii) the island's political situation easily presented itself as analogous to—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 Settem-

brini, Francesco Crispi, Rosalino Pilo, Tommaso Zauli Sajani, Francesco de Sanctis, and many others.⁸

The Maltese historical novelists writing in Italian, such as Ġan Anton Vassallo (*Alessandro Inguaniez*, 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, made them realise 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 aesthetic 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 that this modern conception owes its dynamic presence in Malta, and particularly within the literary circles, to the island's complex participation in the *Risorgimento*, an involvement which 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

⁸ B. Fiorentini, *Malta rifugio di esuli e focolare ardente di cospirazione durante il Risorgimento Italiano* (Malta, 1966); L. Schiavone, *Esuli italiani a Malta durante il Risorgimento* (Malta, 1963). Regarding the journalistic and literary activity of the rebels in Malta, as well as the way in which they diffused the concept of a literature fully committed with the national cause, O. Friggieri, *Risorgimento italiano e movimento politico-letterario maltese 1800-1921* (Milan, 1979). On the other hand, numerous non-Italian writers visited Malta from time to time and recalled such experiences in their memoirs. The list includes prominently the names of George Sandys (1611), Patrick Brydon (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).

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 Caruans whose *Ineġ Farruō* (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 until 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, popularised 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), *Čejlu Tonna* (1886), *Čensu 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 *Taħt lliet saltniet* (Under Three Reigns, 1938), and Ġużè Galea's *Żmien I Ispanjoli* (The Time of the Spaniards, 1938), *San Ġwann* (Saint John, 1939), and others.⁹ These novelists' constant preference for protagonists chosen from amongst the 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 aes-

⁹Other 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. Frendo De Mannarino's *Il-Barunissa maltija* (The Maltese Baroness, 1893), and L. Vella's *Bernard Dupuó* (1898), *Isolda* (1902), *Bint il-Hakem* (The Hakem's Daughter, 1907), and *Nikol Gh abdul* (1907-8).

thetic 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 elegiac *leit motiv* 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 to be accounted for psychologically, rather than artistically, due to relatively advanced political emancipation achieved in the first decades of this century.

Together with the formative discovery of a hitherto neglected epos, this narrative tradition recognised 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, the oral and written traditions of the lower classes, and the more primitive, or less urbanised, cultural traditions of the people. The instinctive artist inspired by the spirit of his nation, 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, these writers' insistent elevation 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, appealing more directly to the less educated category of society, was contributing in an analogous manner to the fusion of narrative pattern, socio-political involvement and newly-born awareness of the intrinsically creative value of folk traditions. In addition to the extra-literary implications of the said Italian-Maltese dialectic, the distinction between the literary historical and the popular historical novels implies another class stratification within the restricted spectrum of readers of Maltese (as opposed to those of Italian). However, the basis for their difference is, apart from literary intentions, rather a question of varying emphasis on related aspects of social themes: the literary type stresses collective po-

litical 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 foregoes a central plot, focusing instead on an idealised content, the popular novel treats plot on a purely narrative level. Exclusively concerned with arousing pathos as a personal experience, the popular novelist does not attempt to conduce 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 category of historical novel, although not strictly literary, has an indirectly aesthetic dimension inasmuch as its thematic content is immediately derived from the romantic vision of life. Formally, however, it is openly geared to the less sophisticated tastes of the majority.

Poetry: A cultural dualism

The aesthetic myth of the people as the truest poet—which determined the real character of romantic art—is the primary motive of the revival of Maltese as a means of literary, and especially poetic, 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 *Kunst poesie* (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 implied not only a radical reaction against a worn-out aesthetic vision but also the hitherto unprecedented formation of a national awareness, which inevitably had to be both political and linguistic.

Ġan Anton Vassallo's triple contribution

Ġan Anton Vassallo (1817-1868) effected the earliest traces of development in that direction. 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 of his art.¹⁰

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 an 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 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, stylistically delicate and 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 turn stale folkloristic material into a spectacular panorama of what actually underlies the truest identity of a humble class-ridden society. Animal psychology, class conscience, personified animate and inanimate entities, dramatised 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.

¹⁰Of all the instances in which Ġan Anton Vassallo dwells on this democratic interpretation of culture, and of poetry in particular, the following are the most important: *A chi legge, F' rejjef u Ċajt bil-Malti* (Fables and Jokes in Maltese; Malta, 1895), 3-4, 7; "Lettera al Prof. Dott. Stefano Zerafa," *L'ordine* 28/6/1861, 3; *Mogħdija taz-żmien fil-Lsien Malti* (Pasttime in the Maltese Language; Malta, 1843), 3-4; *Prolusione al Corso di letteratura italiana nella R. Università degli Studi* (Malta, 1864), 3, 17, 20-22.

Vassallo was 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 nation-wide 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 idealised *patria* of the Romantics is potentially on the verge of being actualised in definite political terms. Through this elimination of any mental barrier between past and future, the poet — in a manner analogous to that of the all-seeing prophet — brings to life the new image of the nation.

This three-fold character of Vassallo's contribution to Maltese poetry marks the initial phase of a relatively long period of effort conducted along the same lines by subsequent 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 (1853-1907), Manwel Dimech (1860-1921) and others continued to develop further the democratic orientation of poetry and to widen the poet's 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 diffused in Malta through the island's participation in Italy's romantic experience, and particularly through the extensive local activity of the Italian exiled rebels (1804-ca. 1860)— and since Maltese was rapidly assuming a central role which was ultimately destined to sub-

stitute, at least partly, the traditional cultural role of Italian,¹¹ 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 caste.

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 only be adequately faced through 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 no longer reach its basic aim, 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 which reflected certain elements of 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.¹² Since

¹¹Maltese became an official language of Malta in 1934 ("Letters Patent Passed under the Great Seal of the Realm Amending Section 57 of the Malta Constitution Letters Patent," *The Malta Government Gazette* 7937 (21/8/1934), 642-644, 650-652).

¹²Although the language question emphasised the basic distinction between Italian (as the living evidence of a rich Latin patrimony) and Maltese (as a Semitic dialect, then deemed unworthy, 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 democratisation 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,

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,¹³ 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 democratisation of literature are only new bearings within the same linear development.

represented mainly by A.M. Caruana (1838-1907), who sought to eliminate as much as possible non-Semitic loan words from his novel *Inez Ferrug* (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 (1843-1915; “Sugli elementi costitutivi del linguaggio maltese,” *Archivum melitense* 1 [1910] 8-14); Ninu Cremona (1880-1972; *X'inhu l-Malti Safi* [What Is Pure Maltese; Malta, 1925]); Dun Karm (1871-1961; “Inhobba l-ilsien Malti” [Let’s Love the Maltese Language], *Il-Malti* vol. 7, no. 4 [1931] 101-103); and Ġ. Aquilina (b. 1911; *L-ilsien Malti* [The Maltese Language; Malta, 1945]) 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 synchronised version of the spoken language.

¹³In 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 — as it subsequently came to pass — that 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 the set of non-Semitic formal and thematic components that 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” *Lettera al Prof. Dott. Stefano Zerafa* (cit.), 3-4.

Dun Karm as a nationalist and a solitary

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 awaited a master of both languages, ideally gifted also with a sublime poetic character, since the poetic genre was actually the most popular and hence the most suitable to involve the majority in such a socio-cultural encounter. This 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 broader cultural 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, and who had already let European, and especially 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 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 dates 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 continued to assert the same dignity in regard to 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 of a healthy fusion of past and present is further evinced by another, equally significant fact: Dun Karm went on to write occasionally in Italian even after the year of his linguistic "conversion" (1912).

Dun Karm succeeds in exalting 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 as 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 as the fathers of the country (a direct participation in a central motive of Italian nineteenth-century inspiration, elaborated and diffused in particular 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 characterised by its religious charity 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 adjectivisations and other lexical choices easily define this poetic corpus as significantly risorigimental according to the Italian models, which are here revisited and experienced by a mature spirit, and reorganised according to the needs and suggestions of an immediate historical situation.¹⁴

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. This motive 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, at once 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 spiritualised according to one's own internal universe and reduced to an objectivised projection of a disturbed human psychology. Even if Christianised 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 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.¹⁵ Although substantially and stylistically very distinct

¹⁴For an examination of this central component of Maltese national poetry, O. Friggieri, *Storia della letteratura maltese* (Milazzo, 1986), 217-254.

¹⁵P. Van Tieghem, *La littérature comparée* (3rd edition, Paris, 1946), 136.

from one another, Ruġar Briffa (1906-1963), George Zammit (b. 1908), 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 extra-personal commitment, the focal character of their poetry is confessional, at times overtly diaristic.

Ruġar Briffa imposes upon his own sensibility a set of time-space limits which transcend their original sensory data insofar as they convey the imaginative exaltation of a suffering soul. George Zammit seeks the mysteriously religious significance of creatures and objects by which he is hauntingly surrounded, and sees in empirical data a mystic manifestation of infinity which is both external and spiritual. Anton Buttigieg challenges the ideal-real dichotomy by depicting reality (which is largely vegetative and sensitive) according to an ideally anthropomorphised conception. His seemingly descriptive poetry, richly suggestive and allusive, is only an elevated projection of his own internal universe. Karmenu Vassallo, whose first poetic phase (1932-1944) is essentially determined by Leopardi's poetics of socio-psychological exclusion on the one hand, and a poetics of negation, as evinced by his central lexical choices and syntactic patterns, on the other, has a contrasting identity: he is perhaps the only local poet to reveal an 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 traceable back to both philosophical and literary spirits of modern Europe.

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