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# MALTESE LITERATURE IN THE SIXTIES \*

**Peter Serracino Inglott**

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**What in your opinion led to the flourishing of contemporary Maltese literature (poetry and drama) in the 1960's?**

In my opinion it was connected with the sense of the achievement of a national identity which was in turn related to the achievement of political independence. A colony is a country which has no control over its foreign relations. Identity is achieved precisely by being able to enter into relationships with larger realities than oneself. Hence an identity is established if one can participate in a process of give and take, of being sometimes the recipient and sometimes the donor in relation to these other realities. It is this which political independence makes possible and therefore it is a precondition for the existence of a national identity. As long as these opportunities for exchange with larger realities outside did not exist, it was hardly possible to achieve the expression of a national identity.

When such contacts are non-existent the result is romanticism in its extreme form and this is what Maltese literature was like before the 60s and independence. The romantic poet is the one who feels that the values of his community have collapsed; that he is thrown back upon himself, that he is forced to create his own values because he is alienated from his fellow humans and from the larger reality which lies outside him but

with which he cannot connect and which therefore comes to be devoid of interest, stripped of meaning and even possibly hated. The romantic escapes from the objective world outside, from the real present, into worlds of false nostalgia and by closing in upon himself produces a very limited kind of provincial poetry, the poetry of a ghetto. This is what Maltese poetry was like before the 60s. With the possibility of being able to interrelate with other national communities and expressions outside Malta, with the sense of now being able to participate in the dialogue of nations, it became possible to give and take, to assume or to reject those revolutions in language which had occurred in the world outside, in relation to the changes which had occurred in history, and at the same time to realize in what individual ways these forms of expression which had become common in the contemporary would could be adapted, modified, individualized as a result of the local inheritance of a particular language and of a particular history.

**Do you think the younger generation of poets compares well with the poets of the 60s?**

I think there can be no doubt that the poets who emerged in the 70s are minor in relation to those who emerged in the 60s. I think that an estimate of their value can be reduced to a general estimate of the value or function of minor poetry. What the

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\* This is the text of an interview by an Italian student who was writing a thesis on a related subject.

minor poets seem to do is to act as intermediaries between the major poets and the public. The public finds it hard to assimilate the innovations of the major poets. The minor poets assimilate these innovations and they present them embodied in their own poetry in a more diffused form, in a more thinly spread out form; they therefore help the passage of the linguistic changes and innovations effected by the major poets into the common language. They help the major poets to produce an impact on the masses which may be otherwise at too great a distance from the points reached by the leading major poets. I think this is essentially what the poets of the 70s have done. They have helped to make the language of the major poets more accessible to the masses by habituating them to a mode of expression which is less dense, less original, less powerful than that of the major poets but which helps the general reader to acclimatize himself to certain forms of expression, to accept them in a certain sense as normal. The minor poets open the way of access to the major poets.

**Of the poets represented in 'Malta, the New Poetry', who do you think is the most significant?**

Daniel Massa. He is about the only poet to have treated to whole gamut of possible human feelings from religion to love to politics, from foreign travel to the relationship with the landscapes and the environment of home, something which no other poets have done. In fact, when compiling an anthology of recent Maltese poetry, I found that he was about the only poet to have produced religious poetry of very good value, about the only poet to have written pure

love poems, about the only poet to have written political poetry which is not propaganda, a mere protest, but which is a deep exploration of political realities. Apart from this wide range which he has, I think Massa is about the only poet to have the depth of content and thought combined with the sense of form which together make up real greatness in art. On the other hand, somebody like Mario Azzopardi has a set of reactions to reality which he is capable of embodying in powerful images and which he also embodies in forms which have a rough relationship to what he is trying to say; but an apparent reluctance to correct, to polish, to revise, to secure the perfect coincidence of form and matter, to go over the less successful bits, to purify, lead to his poems not having that sense of achievement, of embodiment of a perception in something concrete, which Massa's poems have.

I think that after Massa, the most interesting poet is Achille Mizzi. In his case, he is very strongly preoccupied with the dilemma which could be stated in the words *evolution* and *entropy*: the force of progress which leads life to grow and develop on the one hand, for which he is enthusiastic, and, on the other hand, the perception of death forces at work. However, I think that the greatest interest of Mizzi is that he expresses himself in a very distinctive literary form which is very often like that of a litany and which recalls the way in which St. John the Evangelist writes his Gospel. Mizzi has been influenced especially by the apocalyptic writing of St. John. He takes up a theme and expresses it in a sentence, in a phrase which seems to be closed. Then he picks up from it a particle of thought, encapsules it in an image which is

then again closed, only for another particle to be taken up again, a third, a fourth, a fifth time; with each new statement producing a variant, producing a kind of development of the theme which is not a logical or a dialectical one, but one in which the same entity is contemplated for a variety of points of view in succession.

I think this particular style which no doubt owes its origin to Semitic, especially Hebrew, forms is one for which the Maltese language is particularly apt. Because of this reason I would regard Achille Mizzi as a very significant poet, especially from the point of view of the utilization of forms of writing which are particularly suited to the Maltese language as well as because he is preoccupied with the central themes of our time.

Victor Fenech is also a good poet, an unequal poet, somebody who experiences deeply certain problems and which he expresses in a manner which I think relates or reflects the attitude of a man who, aware of dilemmas, manages to solve them through moderation, that is through finding the golden mean. I think his kind of poetry is interesting because it presents one way of resolving the dilemma between indifference and fanaticism which so preoccupies Ebejer. But it's a way which excludes many human possibilities and I think implies a certain limitation of vision affecting the nature of art itself.

A more conscious adoption of this point of view is that found in Oliver Friggieri's later poems. He is a man who, much more deliberately than Fenech, has adopted the idea of the golden mean, has adopted Horace as his teacher, has sought to express a kind of belief in the achievement of a peace of soul through a certain

coolness which does not exclude care for humanity, which appears to try to cool down the passions which lead to fanaticism without falling into the indifference of passivity and death and inanimation. His later poetry is striking because it contrasts with his previous attitudes which were completely on the side of wholehearted commitment and which led to his producing a kind of volcanic explosion of images which is typical of modern poetry, but which he seems to have abandoned because of the fear, which fanaticism seemed to give rise to, of leading to violence of a sort which may have seemed to be appearing dangerously on the Maltese scene. It may also have been his way of resolving his own personal conflicts.

In the case of Fenech I think a roughly similar position is taken up, less explicitly however, and hence giving a sense that the dilemma is not so perfectly resolved. This may explain why he seems able to keep up a greater animation in his verse than appears in the very smooth, very apparently rounded poetry which Oliver Friggieri has lately produced.

A case on his own is Joe Friggieri. The main interest of his poems is that they express both in their imagery and in their modulation the attitude of somebody who hesitates, who has a vision which he is almost afraid to communicate because he suspects that it will be profaned. This attitude of the man who seems to suffer a failure of nerve when he is on the brink of taking a leap is perfectly captured in his poetry which therefore has an extremely individual note; although he also can be seen as the spokesman of a nation, which has achieved a very acute consciousness of the problems which any kind of

decision is likely to give rise to, and hence hesitates before taking any irreversible plunge, before any burning of the boats, preferring to keep all possibilities as open as possible.

**Do you think that Francis Ebejer will remain a monolith on the Maltese literary scene?**

I think that Francis Ebejer is likely to remain the isolated figure which he has so far been. I think his success in the theatre is related very closely to the misfortunes of his private life and to the fact that his own personal experience happened to provide him with an inner strength and power to animate a number of literary forms which happened to be extremely apt for the expression of national crises, and that enabled him to reach the peaks of dramatic art. He did that I think in an unqualified way in two plays: *Boulevard* and *Il-Hadd fuq il-Bejt*. I think it is extremely significant that Ebejer's work is very unequal, for while in these two plays he achieves an extremely high level, he has also produced plays which are good, but in no way, in my view, comparable to these two. He has also produced work, such as novels, which is of a much lesser quality. But because he has gone through a terrible crucible of personal experience the expression of which could function as a metaphor for larger social experiences, it can hardly be expected that others can produce anything to parallel his best work.

Clearly, the personal experience which could act as this metaphor for national experience concerns man-woman relationships. His picturing of such relationships could function as a metaphor because, from a national point of view, as has often been noted and exploited by even such

writers as Pynchon, Malta has been something of a matriarchal island, of an island dominated by a woman-figure, and the significance of this woman-figure is connected with an aspiration for protection, for security, for an escape from risk, and hence to the preoccupation with the old Tristan and Iseult theme, the basic theme which has been called by Pynchon "the single melody banal and exasperating of all romanticism since the Middle Ages"; it states that the act of love and the act of death are one. It is this connection between love and death which are combined in the figure of the Mother-goddess which became an overshadowing symbol in Maltese culture. Now, this kind of picture of woman came to be associated with a political form. In a sense the father-figure represents the monarch, the absolute authoritarianism of a colonial ruler, while the mother-figure seems to be associated with the softness, with the kind of chance, or quasi-chance, procedures, which appear to rule, to condition decision-making in a democracy; especially in a democracy which, at times, may seem to be close to anarchy.

The dangers of this kind of figure are no less than those of the other kind of figure. The dominance of this kind of "woman" is no less dangerous than the dominance of the kind of "man" who is the tyrant. While it seems that something in between, a dialogue between the two, a synthesis between the two, some kind of communion between these two figures, is what human beings really basically need.

I think thus that it is when Ebejer succeeded to give embodiments, in terms of metaphors derived from his personal experience, of a national and

political dilemma, that he has been most successful. In many of his other plays, he presents either a purely political problem or a purely personal problem with the result that the strength of a vision which depends on the two dimensions being taken together, in order to produce a metaphor, is lost.

I think Ebejer's achievement is so connected with having a strong personal experience of a man-woman problem, which can function as a metaphor for a political problem of a more general character, that somebody who has not had this personal experience in his own life, can only with difficulty, or hardly at all, manage to produce anything similar. For this reason I think that Ebejer is likely not to be paralleled by anyone else.

**Could you say something about the reaction of the Maltese audience to Ebejer's works?**

The Maltese public welcomed Ebejer's plays because they obviously struck a chord in its own heart. I think however that this appreciation was due to a subconscious realization of what Ebejer was saying which very few were capable of bringing to the surface of consciousness.

For this reason I think that the attitude is one of admiration mixed with puzzlement, provoked by the fact that Ebejer achieves a paradoxical expression corresponding to the dilemma which they themselves unconsciously feel. His work is an intellectual quest which raises problems and lays one open to risks, while its objective is achieving peace and simplicity. Most Maltese feel in themselves an inner tension due to two opposite poles of attraction: on the one hand, indifference, indifference as

almost a sacrament of death, and on the other hand fanaticism, the fanaticism which is associated with deep love.

At times, when Ebejer seems to present the idea of art as a means of resolving these tensions, of achieving the reconciliation of the two extreme attitudes, as in *Boulevard*, I think he provides a sketch of a solution through poetic creation, which itself is an image of creativity in general — in other words, he suggests that the tension is resolved through creative activity, which is seen essentially as the production of metaphor, that is, of a means of connecting two apparently disparate experiences. By connecting them, by interrelating them, by creating a pattern and hence a feeling of sense, which removes the feeling of absurdity which dominates as long as the polarity, the contradiction, the contrast between the two poles remains unresolved. Many, I think, in Malta appreciated and responded to one side of the metaphor, the side which presents a personal drama like that of *Il-Hadd fuq il-Bejt* and they took this kind of play as a purely human story, leaving out the dimension of political and national meaning which it has, if read metaphorically. But if one does that, since on the plane of personal experience it is rather unique, it is not an experience which anyone can feel to be his own, it becomes a play which can be contemplated objectively without its presenting a personal challenge. Most people can see it then without having their sense of security troubled. But, if they were to bring to the surface of consciousness the other dimension, the socio-political one, then they would be disturbed, because they would find that there are themselves

involved in the problems which he is presenting. Then the play would be a challenge to them, requiring that they change their habits, their attitudes, that they confront their own deep dilemmas and the public as a whole is always afraid to face this kind of disturbing problem.

So I think that in a certain sense

the Maltese public while responding to certain aspects of Ebejer's plays has refused to confront the deep challenges which they present to the nation as such.

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