

What's in a Footprint? A Question of Island Magic

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Abstract:

This paper first looks at small islands from a literary point of view, using episodes of shipwreck from works such as Homer's *The Odyssey*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and Tennyson's *Lotos-Eaters*, as a starting-point. The footprint in the sand that Crusoe is perplexed by becomes the point of reference for the main argument, whereby the paper looks how this footprint, which cannot be either explained nor negotiated, symbolically stands for those few geniuses that the island of Gozo has produced. An overview on the work of men of letters such as Ninu Cremona, Guzé Aquilina, poets such as Ġorġ Pisani and Mary Meilak, and musicians Mgr Gużepi Farrugia u Joseph Vella is then presented, concluding on how these magical footprints in the sand are what makes the island of Gozo such a wonderful place with a rich legacy.

Keywords:

Islands, Footprint, Homer, Shakespeare, Defoe, Tennyson, Genius.

Author's Bio-Note:

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What's in a Footprint?

A Question of Island Magic

*'Islands work exceeding miracles on earth.'*ⁱ
*'Could any good thing come out of Nazareth?'*ⁱⁱ

Tracing the histories of island geniuses who seemingly emerge from nowhere, given the insularity and at times even isolation in which they are born and bred, compels the writer to think with tender emotion and a dose of wit, to think of crossings taken and passages lost, of failed ideals and bewildering achievements, of reckless optimism in the face of insurmountable barriers. In short, the voyage embraces that most Mediterranean of experiences: the islander's life.

Islands tend to be self-referential, self-centred, even mean or small minded. This is a point made, among others, by both Andrea Levy and Bill Bryson, in their titles for books on Britain, *Small Island* and *Notes from a Small Island*, respectively. An island is also much more than a geographical entity: 'no man is an island', John Donne tells us. One possible meaning for this wonderful line is that an island can be a state of mind, or one can suddenly be marooned by an

unexpected turn of events. So, islands can lurk in many shapes and situations, even in the heart of a city. One can unaccountably feel isolated in a crowd, like a small island with the tide washing in.

Perhaps no stories speak more to islanders like myself than the trials and tribulations of Odysseus, of Prospero or Robinson Crusoe, or of Tennyson's lotos-eaters, all victims of shipwrecks. Speeches in *The Iliad* are hurled to and fro like weapons, but in the *Odyssey* they are the ingredients of strangely placid, laid-back conversations that surprise the reader only occasionally and then, for the most part, through the accidents and limitations of the oral technique. They are random, disconnected and arbitrary. That's what shipwreck does to you; it precludes logic and order, throwing everything out of countenance and giving free rein to the imagination. It lands Odysseus in the arms of the siren, who captivates him with the beauty of her song.

On the other hand, Prospero is a renegade to duty, and he is punished for this abdication to his role as the rightful Duke of Milan by being tossed on the rough seas and shipwrecked on a desert island. There, Prospero's world turns upside down, and regeneration occurs only when

This rough magic
I here abjure, and, when I have required
Some heavenly music, which even now I do,
To work mine end upon their senses that
This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
And deeper than did ever plummet sound
I'll drown my book.ⁱⁱⁱ

Like the lotos-eaters, Prospero recognises the negations of

common truths and the affirmations of uncommon doubts. The possibilities are endless, so is their music.

Crusoe, on the other hand, is a capricious adventurer who, disobeying the wishes of his parents to pursue law studies, sets out on a voyage which results in shipwreck. A second voyage ends up with him being captured by pirates, and managing to escape in a small boat accompanied by a boy, Xury, he is rescued by a captain of a Portuguese ship off the west coast of Africa. And on the story goes, with the attendant despairs and hopes, both of which set off a creative trigger in Crusoe which enables him to transform potential catastrophe into moments of possibility.

While these island texts have inevitably elicited many postcolonial readings, it is the unfurling magic that attracts me, the island poetry and the island music, the white beaches and 'strange noises', that bewildering footprint in the sand. In short, it is the inexplicable and the mysterious, the unfathomable and the arcane, the mythical and the iconic, the singular particularities and multiple possibilities that are the hallmarks of small islands. These texts produce protagonists that seek to free art from the limitations of the possible.

What is there about islands that privileges the freshness of instinct, the trained leaps of imagination, where the unspoken and the unspeakable coalesce in the utopia of sacrament? With only the appearance of a paradox, the constricted space of an island gives the creative dweller a feeling of expansion, of a kind of psychedelic multiplicity not unlike the sudden illumination in Rimbaud (putting to the side the notion of the hellish that comes with his poetry). In short, what is it about islands that brings forth genius? As they say, the devil is in the detail, and the detail here is the footprint.

Crusoe's world is filled with dreams, prophecies and remarkable portents in the form of earthquakes, storms, and the seemingly remarkable single footprint that sends him scurrying to his cave out of 'Snare of the Fear of Man'.^{iv} Also, at the same time that the footprint makes Crusoe believe, at first, that the Devil may have landed on his island, he approaches its appearance as a scientist might, measuring it, comparing it to his own foot, and looking about for evidence of the presence that might have produced it. Also, he wonders where the other footprint is, perhaps that's his biggest worry, a footprint present through being absent. His responses resemble a cross between a scientist attempting to ascertain the truth through experiment, and a poet more entranced by what's absent than what's present.

Island literature specialises in powerful scenes that cannot be readily explained either rationally or scientifically, only imaginatively. It is the footprint, not only the literal one imprinted on the sand which causes Crusoe so much existential angst as to its provenance, but also the absent, metaphorical one that becomes the measure of all things great or small. The footprint is the island's natural rhythm that cannot be captured by the industrial, cosmopolitan city, a rhythm that makes the inspired dweller a singer of songs and a maker of poems.

In this, Caliban reminds us that his island is a world of un-profaned magic, a living nature, in which reality has not yet quite been separated from dream, nor waking from sleeping, a bit like Keats's nightingale there:

Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments

Will hum about my ears, and sometimes voices,
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again. And then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked,
I cried to dream again.^v

This liminal space between sleeping and waking is also evocative of Tennyson's *Lotus-eaters*, in yet another shipwreck, lying on a beach in 'a land in which it seemed always afternoon', where even 'the poppy hangs in sleep':

There is sweet music here that softer falls
Than petals from blown roses on the grass,
...
Music that gentlier on the spirit lies,
Than tir'd eyelids upon tir'd eyes;^{vi}

Again, it is music that shipwreck brings; it is always about the music. It is there, on that threshold between dream and reality that magic strikes, that the inspiration trembles with impossibility and the nightingale sings. It is there that the genius awakes.

Of Linguists, Poets, and Musicians

Poetry, Painting and Music, the three powers in Man conversing with Paradise, which the flood did not sweep away.^{vii}

For me, the 'land where it seems always afternoon' is also Gozo and while fiction of shipwrecks is full of creative protagonists, the history of our island is also enriched with the occasional appearance of

genius. Gozo has had its Odysseuses, its Prosperos and its Crusoes; it has had its dreamers.

My language? Heavens!
I am the best of them that speak this speech
Were I but where 'tis spoken.^{viii}

Ferdinand's lines in *The Tempest* are a useful text for this paper and not merely because, in this age of global travel and debates about a *lingua franca*, his surprised joy at hearing his own language spoken on a desert island strikes a familiar chord. Transposed into the third person singular and the past tense, these lines could very well serve to record the received opinion of another kind of traveller: one who has explored the realms of Shakespeare's language, which is, of course, also the language of Ferdinand. Shakespeare as an artist in language, like Dante before him, is a natural genius nurtured by the state of his native speech, when and where it was spoken.

Native speech. That is the clue. 'Ay, is it not a language I speak'?^{ix} Ninu Cremona (1880 – 1972)^x was one of the foremost promulgators of the Maltese language at a time when, ironically, the political tension was pulling in two different directions, namely, those who advocated for the primacy of the English Language and those in favour of the Italian Language, with the native Maltese language nowhere to be seen or, rather, heard in the course of the argument. So, while the debate over the language question was raging in Malta, a Gozitan scholar came up with the solution. Rather than exacerbating the quibble over whether English or Italian should be the official language of the Maltese islands, Cremona hit bull's eye by flying the banner for the native Maltese language.

Born in Victoria to an upper middle-class family did not preclude

Cremona from mixing with the ordinary life of the ordinary citizen. A man of quiet disposition, Is-Sur Nin, as he was fondly known, championed the sovereignty of the Maltese language and he was the first linguist on the Maltese islands to propose a series of orthographic rules that eventually became standardised as the norm. Aided by Gianni Vassallo, he set a system of paradigms and rules for the writing of Maltese which were then published in the seminal *Tagħrif fuq il-Kitba Maltija* in 1924.

Cremona's interest in the Maltese language was not, however, restricted to questions of grammar and orthography, but also extended to creative writing. In fact, it is safe to say that he gave the country its first instance of dramatic writing with the famed *Il-Fidwa tal-Bdiewa* (written in 1913, first published in 1936). This poetic drama is the first of its kind in the Maltese language, based on the classical Greek drama of Aeschylus and Euripides, focusing on the inevitable dialectic between good and evil. Cremona continued consolidating the primacy of the Maltese language by contributing scholarly articles to local literary journals. His visionary acumen also anticipated linguistic cross-fertilisation, as it were, as the way forward. One could not stem progress, and in the interwar period Malta was becoming more important to the war cause, both geographically and politically. For Cremona, language is made by the people for the people and not some exclusive domain to which only the privileged few have access. He believed that Maltese, as any other language, starts from the spoken word, in social, familial, and cultural contexts, and that is the starting point from the which the journey towards further development starts. He was an uncommon man working for the common good, taking the pulse of everyday, ordinary life and seeing where that was heading. Not for him the ivory tower; Cremona ventured on the open sea of thought.

The aim of this paper is not to argue that Ninu Cremona was the best of them that spoke that speech, but to voyage, however briefly, over turbulent seas that will show how he and another fellow Gozitan linguist, Guzè Aquilina, thought of the arts of language, how they used them, such as they found them, and how they developed those arts within the cultural and political contexts of their time. However, because this is much-travelled ground, mapped variously, and especially in recent years, by language historians and theorists and by literary critics of many schools, Ferdinand's lines above have to be pressed into service yet once more: to yield a reminder of how easily, in the process of analysis, 'his language' will revert to 'my language'. Structures of critical belief are bound to form what we hear or read, and the critic of the Maltese language is apt, like Ferdinand, to find his own identity and affirm his status in the language he uses.

Guzè Aquilina (1911 – 1997), hailing from the tiny, then idyllic hamlet of Munxar in Gozo, was a linguist, lexicographer, and writer. Apart from gaining a degree in languages, Aquilina also graduated as a lawyer from the then Royal University of Malta and furthered doctoral studies in London. His formidable intellect saw him lecturing in legal terminology as well as becoming the first Professor of Maltese and Oriental Studies at the R.U.M. During his tenure, he worked tirelessly to promote the Maltese language not only through his inestimable teaching but also through scholarly writing and research. Current professors at the University of Malta recall Aquilina as a wonderfully inspiring lecturer and mentor, down-to-earth, generous with his time and wisdom, and uncompromising on principles. A renowned author of countless works on language and comparative linguistics, he always centred his research on historicity and historical development, tracing the genealogies of language and identifying patterns that would eventually lead to the establishing of grammatical/lexicographical rules. His contribution to the discipline of diachronic linguistics set the benchmark for further study in the discipline and established him an unparalleled pioneer in the field.

For Aquilina, whose verbal imagination was nothing short of prolific, it matters, too, that this imagination could exercise itself in a climate of a preoccupation with language, as it was with Cremona. It was a particularly fruitful climate in that it could sustain, as was the case on so many other questions at the turn of the twentieth century, apparently contradictory beliefs. On the origins, nature, or value of language Aquilina would have been, as Keats would have said, 'capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts'.^{xi} One cannot forget the political side to the language question, with the war waging between the language of the colonialists and the language of the elite. It is out of such fruitful ambivalence that Aquilina's use of language springs, and conforming Cremona's position on the matter, established Maltese as the *lingua franca* not only by force of argument but by the power of the spoken and written word. Rhetoric, at which he was an undoubted expert, especially given his legal training, teaches not only the control of structures but also of an audience. What is perhaps more unique than most in Aquilina's studies of the Maltese language is the progressive marriage of verbal and structural rhetoric. He never forgot that language is based on the spoken word, 'and every tongue brings in a several tale',^{xii} the tale of the man in the street and the woman at the kitchen table. This is the language that Aquilina wanted to standardise.

To be understood is as important as being able to speak, which is not the same thing. Language is not speech unless it communicates and so, finding directions by indirections, Aquilina saw that Maltese functions as the language which makes life lively and creative, as the instrument both of feeling and of knowledge. It is essential to life, and yet it has to be learnt as an art. In a sense, Mowbray, in *Richard II* speaks clearly for the ordinary man and woman in Malta at the turn of the 20th century when he says that man is in exile when he is not allowed to speak his language. He

describes the loss of his tongue as 'an unstrung viol or a harp':

Or like a cunning instrument cas'd up
Or, being open, put into his hands
That knows no touch to tune the harmony –

and then the image changes to one of imprisonment:

And dull, unfeeling, barren ignorance
Is made my gaoler to attend on me.^{xiii}

What Cremona and Aquilina did is untie the fetters that chained the Maltese language to the whims of the few. They recognised the language of the common man, the one spoken in the fields and the village piazza, in the homes, the taverns, and the markets, the tongue that produced the poetry of the ordinary men, 'each in his narrow cell for ever laid, | the rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep'.^{xiv}

Poetry: 'the very word is like a bell'^{xv} reminding me of where it all started for civilisations. The tendency is to look for that flicker of light at the end of the tunnel. Poetry does the opposite; it is the tunnel at the end of the light. It reveals by obscuring and the miracle of light is renewed eternally in the imaginative soul. This renewal is largely a question of grace.

Shakespeare's dramatic and historical vocabulary for poetry, and his presentation of characters as poet-figures are 'such stuff as dreams are made on', as Prospero puts it at the end of *The Tempest*. The Bard's conversation about poetry and the poet-figure does not occur in a historical vacuum but responds to a larger conversation about poetry, literacy and orality coming out of classical Greece and Rome, migrating to the Middle Ages and entering Renaissance England. One such conversation occurs when the court clown Touchstone in *As You Like It*, also visiting the Forest of Arden, tries

to woo the country girl Audrey:

Touchstone: Truly, I would the gods had made thee poetical.

Audrey: I do not know what 'poetical' is. Is it honest in deed and
in word? Is it a true thing?

Touchstone: No, truly; for the truest poetry is the most feigning.

Touchstone the court jester is the touchstone of my argument. If the tone of this conversation is playful and flirtatious, the terms are aesthetically serious, confirming that Shakespeare imagines poetry as both a language ('word') and an action ('deed'), and showing the author to enter a historical debate about the nature of poetry and the new medium it serves, namely, theatre, as the climactic word 'feigning' perhaps hints.

So, besides 'feigning' or perhaps because of it, 'poetry is nearer to vital truth than history'.^{xvi} It ripples on the surface of Shakespeare's islands filling the air with music that speaks to the soul.

The greatest poet figures there, Theseus and Prospero, speak the kind of music that is only possible through the magic of the island they inhabit. So does Gozo's own Ġorġ Pisani (1909 – 1999), whose poetry of lyric affirmation sings like the nightingale's voice.

Born in Victoria, Gozo, Pisani's education in the classics must have triggered that 'spontaneous overflow'^{xvii} of unbounded feeling in the young man. With experience on the editorial staff of *The Times of Malta*, Pisani cultivated the rigour and discipline that so marks his own writing, a feeling for precision that, however, does not curb his inspiration. He was also the first ever teacher of the Maltese language at the Lyceum in Gozo, a post that he also held later in Malta. A major theme that runs like a leitmotif through Pisani's poetic output is his deep love of Gozo, both its prehistoric temples

of Ġgantija (which is the subject of one of his most beautiful poems) as well as its historic places. His collection *Il-Waltz tad-Dellijiet* can be categorised as one of the earliest, if not the first, sonnet cycle in Maltese, touching on memory and reminiscence among other topics. Of all poets that the Maltese islands have produced, Pisani is rightly accredited with being the 'poet of youth' not only because of his concern with young age especially in his early poetry, but because even his mature poetry throbs with the freshness of youth that never seems to wane or wither. Like Shakespeare's Prospero, Pisani is not only a poet but a poet-figure.

When someone's subject is literature, more specifically poetry, clarity beyond a certain point becomes falsification. When a genre such as poetry is, of its own nature, in its very essence, vague, clarity should consist in recognising the vagueness and in checking (that is, stopping) analysis and division at the prudent point. In dealing with poetry, one looks at resemblances which are neither purely natural and unconscious, nor purely conscious and deliberate. Poetry works by indirections, as intimated earlier in the paper. What it wants to say is more often than not left unsaid: one needs to engage with the gaps and the absences. This is the fascination with Pisani's work: his syntax and choice of words affirm his superiority in the genre. A man educated in the classics, one can trace the source for the delight in ideas, the dialectical subtlety, the intensity with which themes are dealt with, the lyricism of expression.

This is something that Pisani is known for. The quickness of his imagination is seen in the invention, the fertility of his reason in his fancy, and the accuracy of his understanding in his expression. He has freedom and originality of rhythm, precision and dignity of language. He is a master of the simple everyday word in the right place, and he charges it with concentrated meaning. His is the common style

which he elevates to uncommon heights. Reading *Ġgantija*, one can see that the images with their direct meaning, in a very remarkable way, cancel each other out so that at the end an exact suggestion is obtained which is not even partially present in any of the images taken alone. Such is his power of metonymy. Here, one gets an extension, and no vague one, beyond the bound of thought. There is a refinement and subdivision of a simple emotion by infusing it into a turn of thought of some difficulty. Sensibility is never replaced by sentiment, and Pisani's poetry never degenerates into a diversity of noises. It remains unified, complex, forever regenerating itself.

If Pisani's is the voice of the nightingale, that of Mary Meilak (1905 – 1975) belongs to the lark. Also born in Victoria, Gozo, at a time when culturally or politically woman had virtually no voice, hers was heard echoing across the islands' coast far and wide. Displaying inordinate talents at writing from a very young age, and with a natural humour that made hers a unique tone, her first poem in Maltese was 'Faxx Nemel' which was published under a pseudonym in *Pronostku Malti*. To date credited with being the only Gozitan female poet of note, Meilak published profusely – poetry just oozed out of her imagination and her rhyming abilities were second to none. She became one of the very first women to sit on the committee of the *Akkademja tal-Malti* in 1937. Hers was a natural talent that knew no bounds and her humorous take on life's seriousness coloured her verses with piquant imagery and wonderful conceits. She had the unique ability to transform poetry as music, song as lyric poetry – such is the singable quality of her lines.

The reference to music brings me, last but not least, to two Gozitan musicians who not only established themselves foremost in their discipline but were visionaries who were well ahead of their time. I am referring to Mgr Giuseppe Farrugia, known as Tal-Vers (1852 – 1925)

and Joseph Vella (1942 – 2018), both born and bred in Victoria, Gozo. Both were men of culture of the highest order: men whose musical and artistic output have turned out to be of inestimable value to our Maltese culture. Rather than dwell for any length on biographical details (as with the previous personalities discussed in this paper, that can be got from other sources), the aim is to draw attention once again to their contribution towards the island culture into which they were born, and how this resonated with the wider cultural milieu of Europe. Entirely different personalities, these two geniuses shared a common aim: to enrich the Basilica of St George, the foster parent of these extremely talented musicians, with their wonderful music.

Mgr Farrugia's education at the Gozo Seminary is summed up in one telling phrase: 'Ottimo in tutto e sempre il primo' ('Excellent in everything and always first in class'). Getting the best tuition from Jesuit scholars in languages, design, and music, three disciplines at which he became a master, formed the foundations on which the young Farrugia's expertise was built. Mgr Farrugia never ventured beyond the shores of Gozo but the best tutors came to him in the form of the Jesuit scholars. By profession, he was a teacher of subjects as diverse as Philosophy, Latin, English Literature and Moral Theology. We know him as a composer, pianist, designer, architect, a man of letters with interests in physics and astrology. Our very eminent poet Ġorġ Pisani says 'Ftit kien hawn Prelati Ġhawdxin wara de Soldanis li għamlu għeġ lil Ġhawdex bil-għerf u l-pinna tagħhom daqs 'Tal-Vers'" ('Few were the Gozitan priests who, after de Soldanis, honoured Gozo with their wisdom and their writings as "Tal-Vers".) Equally at home as an artist as well as a scientist, his exacting nature, meticulous attention to detail, his obsession with precision were legendary, together with his intolerance of mediocrity.

Foremost in anything he gave his mind to, perhaps what has endured beyond even his own expectations is the rich catalogue

of musical compositions that he wrote to be performed during the Feast of St George in Victoria. The Vespers (1897) and Tantum Ergo (1901), are decades ahead of what was being produced in his time. The avantgarde harmonic progressions, the rigorous adherence to structure, the cultivated melodies: one could easily date these works sixty or more years later than they were actually composed.

We know that all artists exhibit something of both an original and a derivative (that is, inherited) nature. What varies is the balance between the two. For the genuine artist, derivation is the servant of originality while for the lesser artist, derivation is the master. The main difference between the music of 'Tal-Vers' and that of his contemporaries is the way in which he shows the greatest capacity for changing an idea and yet remaining itself. In his music, the diversions, the descents have a significance of feeling which sophisticates and complicates, without destroying the original impulse. It is a music which speaks to the intellect. For Mgr Farrugia, as exemplified in these works, the purpose of art is beauty and beauty is style. Style must have been a supremely difficult achievement which could only have been won by knowledge, calculation and scrupulous toil against the resistances of language. This was emulated much later by a younger composer, Joseph Vella.

Vella, who was a catalyst in reviving Mgr Farrugia's compositions and through whose efforts these works are still being performed during the yearly feast of St George in Victoria, was an inspired and inspiring polymath and, alongside the other personages discussed in this paper, one of Gozo's most illustrious citizens. A multi-faceted career saw him as Inspector of Music within the Education Department; the founder-member of the team that set up the Johann Strauss School of Music in Malta; the first academic who introduced music at tertiary level at St Michael's College; his pioneering work and

research of old Maltese music, earning him the title of 'Father of the Maltese Revival Movement'; Malta's leading composer and the one most performed internationally; a conductor who premiered large scale works in Malta. He was also the first Maltese composer to appreciate the immense riches of the Maltese language, setting Ġorġ Pisani's 'Il-Barri' to music in a secular cantata in 1961, followed by countless songs, as well as setting 4 of his 7 song cycles to Maltese texts. You name it, he was.

Joseph Vella never followed trends, he always set them. There is an honesty about his work that endows it with a permanent validity. His musical language, far from constructing enclosed aesthetic worlds, is invested with all the power of temporal process and historical engagement: one remembers *Lament op. 103* (written in 3 hours on the tragic news of the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001), and *Charlie on my Mind op. 144* (inspired by yet another terrorist attack, this time on the Charlie Hebdo headquarters in Paris on 7 January 2015). The approach to language taken by Vella in his music inscribes the struggle to define and to locate the values that endow man's life with meaning, and to translate these values into temporal and historical reality.

With his bigger works, namely, his five symphonies, thirteen concertos and five oratorios, Joseph Vella strives to achieve what words alone cannot accomplish. He generally creates with contemplation in mind and lends the work a syntactic density and homogeneity that demands singular attention to its sonorous content. At the end of the day, what matters for Joseph Vella is the quality of the sound, the beauty that emerges from that. Basically, what he extracts from music is poetry's musical power of evocation.

Joseph Vella has 155 classified opus to his credit, apart from double that amount in unclassified works. For him, chamber music is the heart and soul of the musical experience. In that genre, he has written for every conceivable instrument, in every conceivable formation. Yet, his excellence as a composer is also manifested in his large-scale works, not least the *Concerto Grosso op. 143* for harp, harpsichord and pianoforte soli and orchestra. It doesn't get much more imaginative. Written for the *Malta Philharmonic Orchestra*, this work was however premiered at the *University of Delaware* when he was invited as a lecturer there in 2016. At this point, I should say that he was particularly proud, in his understated way, of his *Symphony no. 3 op. 105 'The Apocalypse Verses*, a magnificent work commissioned by then Archbishop of St George's Basilica, Mgr Joseph Farrugia, and the Basilica Chapter, to celebrate the 1,700th year from the martyrdom of Saint George, Patron Saint of Gozo. When Vella conceived of the structure for his *Symphony* (he was not partial to composing an Oratorio, which is generally the common practice for such occasions) he felt that the leitmotif running through the work could be that of the eventual triumph of good over evil, so well-illustrated and expressed in the story of the life and deeds of the Christian martyrs, particularly of Saint George; but not only that. For him, this idea also extended to modern-day heroes fighting injustice, abuse, suffering. With this in mind, he highlights and crystallises his intended notion of universality.

Pausing for a momentary reflection, Vella, as well as Mgr Farrugia, possess a capacity for assimilation with the consequent extent of range. The function of the music here is both to fix and make more conscious and precise emotions in which most people participate in their own experience, and to draw within the orbit of feeling and sense what had existed only in thought. It creates a unity of feeling out of various parts. Here, one does not have unity of action which is epic

or dramatic, but a unity of sound and sense, which is pure lyric. Vella and Farrugia do not only manifest immense technical skill which is necessary to make such musical discourse fly; they also demonstrate that great emotional intensity necessary to make it soar.

The range of Mro's vision reached its Olympian height in the stupendous donation of his life work to *Il-Ħaġar Museum* in that same fateful weekend when he joined the panoply of greats in Elysium. He was inordinately proud of what turned out to be a unique moment in time, a moment that defeated time in the validity of its purpose. Always generous to a fault, this was literally and metaphorically a culmination. He never rested on his laurels, however: no sooner were the events surrounding the inauguration of the Joseph Vella Music Archive over than he said that he couldn't wait to return 'in earnest' to finish working on a big project, his opera. He left the piano score of the first two Acts without finishing the third. He passed away a mere five hours after uttering these words. He died looking forward.

Nearing the close of my ruminations, one realises that it is the artist who presses a relentless kind of quest for intimacy of relationship with the various particular realities of experience, not with what Wordsworth calls 'light that never was on sea or land',^{xviii} but with the concrete actualities of the world; with the unique historical event, with the unrepeatable personal encounters, and with all the rich singularity that belongs to things in their intractable specificity.

Within this context, the legacy left to us by Cremona, Aquilina, Pisani, Meilak, Farrugia and Vella is as profound as it is substantial. Their iconic presence in our cultural environment represents our 'termine fisso', to quote Dante. For us, they reassert artistic, historical, and conscious form, adding value to art, time, and consciousness,

placing these things into a pattern deduced from historical culture. Commemorating the past, it impregnates the present with meaning and celebrates the future. For many they are what Shakespeare calls a 'Muse of fire, that would ascend | The brightest heaven of invention',^{xix} in short, they are a gift that keeps on giving.

In our time, when there are more social circles than we come by in Dante's inferno, when there are more philosophies – complete, incomplete, inchoate – then there were builders at Babel, when physical communication between nations is almost perfect and ideological communication sometimes all but extinct, when men seem more than ever prone to confuse wisdom with knowledge and knowledge with information, it is certainly more difficult to find a common denominator, but one can be found for, as mediocrity tends to uniformity, genius tends to unity.

'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.'^{xx} One can extend this prophecy uttered by Shelley to include all artists. Driven by inspiration, the six Gozitans referred to here were geniuses, they were

The Mind, that Ocean where each kind
Does straight its own resemblance find;
Yet it creates, transcending these,
Far other Worlds, and other Seas;
Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade.^{xxi}

The true test of civilisation is not the size of its cities, of its economies or of its wealth. If that were the case, Malta, and even more so Gozo, would not be traceable even with a sophisticated radar. A nation is truly tried and tested in its civilisation in the kind of person the country turns out. In this, and much more, Gozo can be proud. In

diverse disciplines, from politics to law, language to poetry to music, Gozo has produced individuals that led the way for countless years and set paradigms that bigger countries can only hope to follow.

I do not think that Gozo has produced people of more outstanding calibre in the humanities than the six mentioned here. Cremona, Aquilina, Pisani, Meilak, Farrugia and Vella had one thing in common: they abhorred provinciality, by which they meant applying standards acquired within a limited area to the whole of human experience. This confounds the contingent with the essential, the ephemeral with the permanent. This attitude can also be attributed to Sir Arturo Mercieca and Prof. J.J. Cremona, two leading men of law whose imprint left an indelible mark on the legal system in Malta. There is also Anton Buttigieg, who gave us perhaps the most consoling line in Maltese poetry: 'U ma' Majsi Alla ħares ma kienetx il-poeżija' ('And with Majsi, thank God we also had poetry').

One of the disadvantages of being islanders is to plunge into the abyss of provincialism, something which the six geniuses discussed here, our Odysseuses, Prosperos, Crusoes, dreamers, would have hated, a provincialism of time, one for which history is merely the chronicle of human devices which have served their term and been scrapped, one for which the world is the property solely of the living, a property in which the 'rude forefathers' hold no shares. Gozo would be much richer to remain inspired by her remarkable citizens: 'the communication | Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living'.^{xxii} Let's continue listening to their poetry and their music. Theirs was work of inestimable value to our culture, one that gave Gozo an enviable identity.

Islands work like a miracle, of the beauty we can know. This is true not only of Ithaca, of desert islands and the lotos land, but

also of Gozo. Our island gently floats in the Mediterranean, itself a word that means the 'centre of the world'. Taken both literally and metaphorically, this centre is the pivot around which all else turns, that against which tired minds lean when all else fails: this is the contribution the island dwellers referred to in this paper have given our history. They have consolidated this centre, showing that greatness can come from small spaces. They had countless rivals but no equals, and being metaphorically shipwrecked on tiny Gozo did not present any obstacle to their fertile imaginations. What they did for Gozo will live in the memory as a symbol of random but steady, upward progress, with its glittering light, its shadowy water, a language with its packed abstract syntax uncoiling like the gently lapping Mediterranean waves, for the mind to drown in it and rise again like the dancing movement of the rising lotos. Our island geniuses left us footprints on the sands of timeless history. Responsible citizens would be proud to serve as Man/Girl Friday.

'A magna maxima.'^{xiii} Something good does come out of Nazareth.

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