

## The Question of Ethics in Contemporary Maltese Literature

For some time now the discourse of postmodernism has been insisting on a return to ethics and in particular to the classical concern with the virtues. The return to classical ethics has been motivated by a feeling of exhaustion with both the metaphysical and epistemological questions that have dominated the centre stage of traditional western philosophy. In terms of importance ethics has always been placed low on the scale of philosophical values, though in a slightly higher position than aesthetics. Some philosophers are suggesting that abandoning wholesale classical ethics was mistaken: in this respect, Aristotle is receiving renewed interest after the modern turning towards ethics with Kant. Macintyre's pivotal work *After Virtue* restores teleology to human affairs arguing that when Newton and Darwin dropped teleology as an explanatory principle of nature, the further step of dropping teleology from human affairs was mistaken. Human life can only be explained in terms of goals or purposes and this is why classical philosophy placed great emphasis on the acquisition of virtues. Macintyre reads the narratives of Jane Austen as examples of Christian-Aristotelian practical ethics identifying her as the last great voice of this tradition. It is not incidental that Macintyre uses examples from literature to demonstrate the virtues. Macintyre's hope is that the return of virtue theory will help resolve the crisis of values in the contemporary world.

However, the return to the primacy of classical ethics in the discourse of contemporary philosophy does not mean that modern philosophy ignored ethical questions. We must not forget that one of the great works of ethics in modern philosophy is Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*. What postmodern philosophers break away from is the Kantian search for foundations or universal principles in ethics. It is this wholesale rejection of universality that marks out one of the salient differences between modern and postmodern philosophy. Whereas Kantian ethics focused on the universalism of moral judgements, postmodern writers stress the cultural diversity of moral evaluations. Postmodern philosophers consider the modernist search for universal values as nothing other than a disguised Eurocentric ambition projected onto the rest of the world. The argument in favour of universal moral judgements runs as follows: reason is considered a universal quality of humanity so that those moral judgements that are rational are by default universal also. And this way of arguing has a certain rhetorical force obliging others to accept one's position: this view is described as legislative universalism.

Although Benhabib is critical of this notion for it elevates reason to a transcendental position she defends the poststructuralist view of reason as grounded in history; different historical configurations have produced different rationalities. Her concept of reason takes its cue from Habermas and Apel who argue for a dynamic and interactive type of universalism where reason is placed within a dialogical framework. It would be better to describe it as a historic-cultural universalism that is conscious of the contingencies that ground particular views. It is the re-configured type of universalism that Benhabib is committed to.

However there is another feature of the contemporary discourse on ethics that must be mentioned. This feature is the rejection of theoretical ethics on the grounds that it fails to grasp the particularity of ethical actions. It should be pointed out that this debate is part of another broader debate concerning the 'death' of philosophy in the sense that the traditional conception of philosophy as a universal discourse is no longer legitimate. Just as traditional philosophy can no longer claim to speak the same language for all, ethics likewise can no

longer prescribe rules for all. Martha Nussbaum (1990) argues that since the days of ethical theories are over, one can learn more about behaving ethically from the study of literature, since literature deals with singular individuals in concrete situations.

Postmodernism is not usually connected with the singular and one might be tempted to argue that the singular and unique individual is more at home in the world of existentialism. However, while postmodern writers do not seem to talk much about singularity, with the exception of Derrida who argues that his readings bring out the singular, they do talk a lot about the value of difference. The point is that difference and identity (or singularity) is intertwined: one term produces and is dependent on the other in an interplay without termination. Postmodern writers celebrate differences whether between man and woman, between western and eastern culture, between the secular and the divine, etc. Incidentally, Nietzsche argues that mistakes in thinking are the result of thinking in opposites rather than in terms of a continuum. Critics of this approach argue that if difference is celebrated as an end in itself, as the basis or source of value, then this would make everything value-less. To evaluate something as different requires a standard or background of similarity from which one can judge.

In Derrida's philosophy difference is a key element but he adds a twist to it, rewriting difference to include the deferral of meaning. He calls this notion 'differance' and it is introduced as an explanatory device that has a fundamental role without being foundational in the process or 'dissemination' of meaning. Differance is 'quasi-transcendental' because it is the necessary condition of the production of identity without being outside the process of signification. However, on the question of identity and ethics it is not Derrida that I shall be referring to, but Levinas. He is perhaps the philosopher from the continental tradition who has most insisted on the return to and the primacy of ethics. Although he is not considered postmodern, his thinking aligns itself with certain facets of postmodernism. Levinas' treatment of ethics avoids that type of ethical discourse that relies on rational justification arguing that this is too narrow and exclusive. Instead, Levinas opts for a multi-dimensional ethic that is immediate and singular (it is not ontological or cognitive): the experience of ethics is the experience of alterity or the Other who in the face to face encounter is beyond categorization, is more than our linguistic appellations. Crucial to Levinas's thesis is the notion of responsibility: the face to face encounter is an act of - or lack of - responsibility. The objectivity of the world is guaranteed because when the Other offers him/herself to me, by virtue of this offering, a process takes place where the subjectivity of perceptions is transformed into an objective reality.

In this paper I am investigating a number of recent Maltese literary texts to show the way these texts reflect the ethical encounter with the Other. The texts in question are 'Our Daily Wine' (DW), 'Under the Sun' (US) and 'The Strange Stories of Sara Sue Sammut' (SSS). 'Our Daily Wine' is a long short story centring on the narrator, written in the first person singular and expressing his vision of life and the world. The other two texts are both as a series of short stories with the fundamental difference between them being that the short stories of 'Under the Cover of the Sun' has a unifying thread that is constituted by the identity or subjectivity of the narrator, while 'The Strange Stories of Sara Sue Sammut' is composed of a number of independent stories disconnected from each other.

In 'Our Daily Wine', the narrator remains nameless throughout the text; he can be described as a cheerful pessimist who, despite problems with his health, problems at work and in his love-life, still manages to pick himself up and continue with his life. The significant Others in

his life are two women, Mandy, his childhood friend and Victoria, his lover; towards both he displays a lack of ethical responsibility, demonstrating a complete failure in understanding them in their moment of greatest need. With Mandy, the narrator is paralyzed when confronted with the sensitive situation she is in: when she asks for advice on what she should do - having found out that her boyfriend has impregnated her - he remains silent incapable of the slightest humanism. His silence or lack of communication is that of the dead and soon after he learns that Mandy committed suicide.

The second person who also has a considerable amount of significance in the narrator's life is Victoria. Despite being married to someone who provides her with all the material comforts that she could possibly desire, Victoria betrays her husband for the narrator's love. He is infatuated with her and when she ends their affair, he is constantly thinking about how to make up with her. Despite his adulation, when Victoria asks him directly about his feelings towards her, once again he remains silent. Silence, however, also says something and Victoria reads this as a lack of emotional interest. She leaves him but the narrator fails to realise that his sadness is connected to his lack of response, to his crippling inability to communicate with her. As things happen Victoria dies shortly after in a traffic accident.

It is understandable why the narrator is nameless for his lack of communication transforms him into a sort of living dead. This in turn explains his lack of recognition and responsibility for them: the significant Others in the narrator's life die in the attempt to establish their identity, to be recognised and valued for what they are. This desire becomes unattainable and intentionally or fortuitously their lives come to a tragic end, their voices pleading without anyone listening.

The protagonist in 'Under the Sun' is a journalist whose sole concern is 'living' the truth. This is clearly evident in his relationships to others where the inter-subjective dimension of truth plays a pivotal role in his life. In the story called 'The Passenger', the singularity of the individual and his relations to truth is highlighted. The journalist, Mark Micallef, works for the newspaper, 'The Sun' and he is investigating the escape of a prisoner, Henry, from jail. Having researched and published his criminal background on the paper Mark organises an interview with Henry's mother. As he drives to her in the rain, he offers a lift to a man sheltering from the rain: without knowing it, the journalist gives a lift to Henry although we later realize that this is Henry's 'spirit'. The face to face encounter in the car makes us realise that the singular truth of the individual is eradicated by the all too convenient use of labels. The media with its facile use of generalisations is indicted for its inhumanness by transforming individuals into spectacles. Despite his criminal past the dialogue reveals the abyss between the public sphere of expectations and obligations and the private realm of needs and wants. The public condemnation of Henry jars with his private life, where we learn of the intensity of his feelings for his girlfriend and their baby. The face to face encounter discloses more about Henry than any newspaper report ever could. The spoken word is the voice of truth and being while the written word – the newspaper – in its bid to attract an audience reduces the individual to non-being. The written word kills and as the dialogue takes place Henry – we find out later – has already died of a drug overdose.

In another story, 'The Tunnel' (UCS), the relationship between the singular truth of the individual and the negation of the individual by the media recurs. The journalist, Mark Micallef, is investigating a tunnel that was being built between Malta and Gozo but which never seems to have been finished. As the journalist investigates, he discovers that the tunnel has been diverted and passed all the way under the Maltese islands to Libya so as to

circumvent the international boycott towards it. When the narrator uncovers the secret of the tunnel he is kidnapped and taken to Libya where he meets Colonel Gheddafi who explains the situation to him. As things turn out, the international boycott is terminated and the need for the tunnel is over. As a result the journalist is released, but when he returns to his office and recounts his story, nobody, including the editor, believes him. Instead he is advised to take time off. It dawns on him that the powers that be have thrown a veil of doubt over his state of mind and in fact, a Maltese member of parliament with his network of power and influences and who was colluding with the Libyan government, could clearly make anything he said unbelievable. For the journalist it was a case of power conspiring to negate the singularity of his being. In contemporary Maltese Literature, the question of the recognition and non-recognition of the person is a fundamental ethical issue.

The ethical encounter with the Other in 'The Strange Stories of Sara Sue Sammut' is frequently transformative: transformations differ and not all of them are uplifting. In 'Congratulations for the Show', the transformation is unethical for it brings about a de-humanisation of the person. Christine, a television presenter is confronted with the dilemma of falling viewer ratings: her programs are truthful but have no effect on the public. In her next interview her guest is a Russian prostitute. As she sets about preparing for the interview she realises that the programme director is not interested in the experiences of the prostitute but in increasing the program's ratings. To do so he fabricates her life: her misery is exaggerated to as to amplify the emotional impact on the viewers. It is not merely a question of telling her story but of maximizing its dramatic effect. The formula is simple: more pain equals more viewers. Her unpleasant life experiences become a public spectacle by which she is measured and judged. It soon becomes clear that her life was not 'interesting' enough so the director decides to transform it. To do so, however, necessitates the fabrication of an illusionary life. One such illusion is the claim that her husband died tragically on the submarine Kursk, the result of which reduces her to prostitution. The strategy is successful and the program's ratings increase. The relationship between the director, Christine and the prostitute is unethical for the real life suffering of the prostitute is transformed and celebrated as a spectacle of suffering without any interest in doing anything to ameliorate her situation.

In 'The Jump'(UCS), the ethical encounter takes the form of an imperative. Paul is blind and yet life vibrates throughout his body. He challenges the journalist to go skydiving. The leap out of the airplane reminds us of Kierkegaard's leap of faith. It is a leap into darkness, but because 'darkness' accompanies the blind man wherever he goes, he feels no fear at jumping into the void. On the other hand, the journalist fears the jump as he fears for his life. Paul challenges him to jump but it is not the literal jump that he is referring to for the jump is a metaphor for living life to the full, a life that includes taking risks. The ethical imperative that Paul decrees toward the Other is, 'I command you to live'. The journalist understands the way of life that Paul, despite being blind, has led for his blindness helped him see more than others and he has shown it through his actions. A transformation of the journalist's life takes place: his hesitations and doubts are replaced by his resolute actions.

The transformation of one's life is also the theme of the story 'Ruby' (SSS). She is the narrator's youthful love who is unaware of the effect that she had on him then. The years go by and their roads follow different directions. After years of separation, Ruby reappears on the narrator's doorstep but she is a changed person: from her wild youthful days she now goes door to door delivering the word of the Lord. Just as she changed, the narrator has also changed his life: in fact, their roles are reversed as it is the narrator who lives a 'playboy'

lifestyle. The ironic reversal of their situation is best described by Levinas as ‘the event’: things happen without having to happen the way they do. It is the contingency of ‘the event’ that creates the conditions for the ethical responsibility of the Other. Accepting such responsibility is an existential commitment for which there are no ready made answers. This explains why the responsabilisation of a person in the face of the Other is such a hard task. In ‘Violins’ (SSS) the narrator notices that his life was grounded upon a series of mistakes: it was a mistake to persuade Seneda to leave her country and come to his, a mistake to marry her, a mistake to leave her and live with another woman, Marquita. This last relationship also fizzles out as both he and Marquita have other persons in their lives. The culmination of the narrator’s total lack of ethical responsibility occurs when he leaves Marquita and abandons his daughter. This tale is a series of ethical encounters gone wrong: the narrator’s lack of responsibility for the others in his life is perhaps indicative of the malaises of the contemporary world where perseverance in difficult situations is all too often replaced by indifference. When the narrator moves out without telling Marquita he fails in his responsibility towards her and his daughter.

In the discourse of contemporary western philosophy the question of what it is to be human has returned to centre stage. However, it has returned with a different emphasis: from Heidegger’s Dasein and Levinas’s Other the notion of a person as either an Aristotelian substance or as a Cartesian combination of body and soul is rejected. Instead, the way a human is, is connected to his/her relationship with Others and some aspects of contemporary Maltese Literature highlight this point. In this respect, I don’t think I am exaggerating when I say that the underlying concern of these texts can be summed up as follows: existence is co-existence.

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