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**The Correspondence of a Senglea
Merchant during the Plague of 1813**
Paul Cassar

1921: Electoral Issues
Dominic Micallef

Il Mito Calvino
Adrian Stivala

Wilfred Owen: An Introduction
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Studies in Melitensia and papers related to the current 'Advanced Level' curricula should be directed to the Editor, Hyphen, The Arts Lyceum, Valletta, Malta.

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CONTENTS

	Page
The Correspondence of a Senglea Merchant during the Plague of 1813 Paul Cassar 147	147
<i>This is the text of a lecture delivered to members of the Historical Society on 22nd November 1979.</i>	
1921: Electoral Issues Dominic Micallef 158	158
Il Mito Calvino Adrian Stivala 169	169
Wilfred Owen: An Introduction Marianne Vella 176	176
On Polar Co-Ordinates Charles Vassallo 183	183
Methods of Library Research John Sare 189	189

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THE CORRESPONDENCE OF A SENGBEA MERCHANT DURING THE PLAGUE OF 1813

Paul Cassar

The publications that are available about the plague of 1813 contain very little material on the impact which that catastrophe had on particular individuals very likely because there are no private archival sources that can be exploited on this aspect. The accidental discovery of a Letter Book containing copies of many business letters sent from Sengbea during the plague is, therefore, a fortunate occurrence. These letters were written by an import-export merchant by the name of M.A. Cumbo in the pursuit of his business activities. The correspondence is in Italian except for a very few letters that are in Spanish.

The Letter Book or register measures 33.5 cm by 24.5 cm. Its cardboard cover bears the label 'Copia Lettere, B.Dal 1 Gennaro 1812 sino li 28 Dicembre 1813'. During this span of time Cumbo registered two hundred and twenty-two letters, one hundred of which were written during the plague period 5th March to 28th December 1813. The letter "B" suggests that this register was the second one in a series of letter books, the fate of which is unknown. It is provided with an index (Repertorio) containing the names to whom the letters were sent and the folio number where the copies are registered.

The original cover is torn in places. The upper edges of the folios are frayed and discoloured, the spine is missing and the top areas of the folios are dampstained and browned with fading of the ink so that the script is no longer readable in places. This damage was caused by the dampness of the rubbish heap where this register had been dumped and partially buried until it was rescued from further destruction, together with a few other unrelated manuscripts, by the present writer.

In Cumbo's entries the general subject of shipping receives frequent attention. This was inevitable as sea-communications were a matter with which trade and the conveyance of letters were very closely linked. In the first decade of the 19th century Malta was a busy centre through which much of the sea-trade of the Mediterranean was forced to pass especially during the war between Britain and France. Hence, apart from accounts of his trade operations, Cumbo sets down in his Letter Book the names and types of ships that carried his cargoes abroad or brought his merchandise from overseas and the ports which they visited. These ships varied in de-

sign and tonnage and included the bombards, polacres, xebecs, brigantines and schooners. He was the sole proprietor of the 'San Francesco' and the joint owner of a polacre which was armed with 6 to 8 pieces of cannon. As this vessel was "a fast ship" it was employed on the route to Constantinople.

The other ships plied with his merchandise to and from Mahone, Gibraltar, Cadiz, Messina, Palermo, Cagliari and the Adriatic. Others called at Prevesa, Samos, Scutari and Alexandria. In one of his letters Cumbo lays down the itinerary followed by one of these crafts that carried both letters and cargo. It first sailed to Albania, then to Lissa, Fiume and Trieste and back. This ship was manned by a crew of seven men besides the master. The expenses involved in running it included, apart from the wages of the sailors and master, the cost of the food for the crew, the maritime insurance premium and the port and quarantine dues.

These ships carried the most varied assortment of foodstuffs — grain, oil, wines from Samos, beans, peas, sugar, coffee and cocoa; apart from these items Cumbo dealt also in soap, tobacco, candles, cotton, hides, timber, lead and writing pens.

The masters mentioned in his letters bear surnames that were still familiar to Cottonera residents of fifty years ago — such as Arcangelo and Benedetto Gaffiero or Caffiero; Matteo Cassar; Vincenzo Grima; Salvatore and Giuseppe Camilleri; Biagio Drago, Emmanuele Grech and Salvatore Chetcuti.

Cumbo's entries describe not only routine business operations but also record his anxieties due to losses incurred during the voyage through some untoward event. The risks which he had to face were capture of vessels and cargo by Barbary pirates, seizure by the French during the war between England and France and losses from storms when merchandise had to be cast overboard or, worse still, when the ship itself foundered. Although merchants appreciated the protection afforded them by the presence of His Britannic Majesty's warships that kept sea-rover at bay, it was inevitable that occasionally merchandise and ships were lost to the enemy or to pirates. One such occurrence is mentioned in a letter of March 1813 when a Captain Marques, who was carrying Cumbo's cargo, was seized and taken prisoner by the French. When news of this incident reached Cumbo he wrote to the captain's wife in Cagliari informing her of the fate and place of imprisonment of her husband and assuring her that he was doing his utmost to have her husband exchanged with another captain in British custody.

There were compensations for these misadventures; in fact we read in another letter of the capture, by Cumbo's ships, of two prizes loaded with oil and grain in the Adriatic Gulf.

The subjects of maritime insurance, costs of freight, changes in exchange rates and the forcing down of prices by competition loom up very large in his correspondence. It appears from these references that he had

financial interests in a maritime assurance firm known as the *Compagnia Senglea*.

Conveyance of letters

Letters were sent to the addressee by various means and carriers depending upon their place of destination. Thus letters to Gibraltar and London were sent by the "packet" sometimes after pre-payment of postage; to Mahone and Sicily with sea-captains or friends who happened to be sailing to those islands; at other times letters were dispatched with the "royal transport" or else with merchant vessels escorted in convoy to dodge enemy warships. Sometimes letters took a very round about way to reach their destination. Thus in July 1812 Cumbo's letters to Majorca were, in the first instance, sent to his business partner at Mahone who in turn forwarded them to Majorca. On one occasion a letter to Mahone was sent by a British warship that happened to be sailing to that port (1813).

To ensure extra security during the sea voyage, correspondence was dispatched with "an armed boat" (July 1812). When the addressee did not have a fixed abode but was travelling on business from place to place, letters to him were sent to the care of the British Consul of one of the ports known to be on the route of the travelling recipient who called at the Consular Office for any mail awaiting his arrival.

As the departures of ships were far from being regular or according to a fixed schedule and as the progression of letters was slow, Cumbo sometimes wrote his correspondence in haste to catch a vessel that happened to be leaving the island at the moment. As, besides being erratic, the transmission of letters could not be relied on to reach the addressee with certainty copies of the same letter were sent by different routes and persons to ensure that at least one of the copies would arrive at its destination. Sometimes, however, in spite of this precaution both originals and copies failed to reach Cumbo's customers.

Following the outbreak of plague in April 1813, Cumbo's correspondence was mainly held with people residing in Malta because of the decline in overseas trade on account of the quarantine measures imposed by government and because the only communication that was possible among persons in Malta itself was very often by letter writing as there were times when people were barred from meeting one another. In fact very strict restrictions were enforced on the movement of the population between the four cities and the countryside and also between each of the four cities themselves. The aim was to avoid unnecessary contacts and thus diminish the chances of transmitting the "contagion" — as then understood by the medical world.

During the plague Cumbo wrote to his agents and partners in Valletta, Zejtun, Bormla and Birgu. The distribution of the post between the countryside and Valletta continued to function during the whole period of the

plague though not without the occasional loss of documents during transit¹. Cumbo, however, did not suffer such losses in his inland correspondence. In fact, apart from delays of some three days in the receipt of local mail, the flow in the conveyance of letters to him was never interrupted. Thus writing to his partner Mr. M. Camilleri, in Birgu on 12 December 1813, Cumbo advises him thus:— "If you do not find ready means by which to send me your letters take them to the *Barriera* (at Valletta) by means of the boat of the Superintendent of the Port, Mr. Trevisan. The boat (from Valletta) calls at Senglea twice a day so that your letters should reach me quite soon". This method seems to have worked well for the following day Cumbo received two letters from Camilleri, the correspondence being delivered to Cumbo by the Health Guardian or *profumatore* who was in charge of the "smoking" of letters to disinfect them.

Plague letters

When plague broke out it darkened Cumbo's life, hampered commercial activities and intruded into his correspondence. The first hints of impending calamity occur in two letters of 5 and 12 March 1813 addressed respectively to officials of the Health Office by which Cumbo undertakes to assume responsibility for the expenses entailed by the stay in quarantine at the Lazaretto of the crew of the polacre *Madonna della Pietà*. The sanitary authorities of Malta had actually been alerted to the presence of plague in Alexandria as early as January 1813 but infected ships from that port began to arrive in Malta on 28 March when the sick were landed and confined at the Lazaretto².

From a letter of 2 April we learn that a consignment of tobacco for Cumbo had to be unloaded at the Lazaretto where no one was allowed to go "as ships coming from suspected places were berthed there. It was feared that they may harbour the fomites of disease but the sanitary authorities are doing their utmost to protect the public health". However, in spite of these sanitary measures, the first case of plague among the inhabitants of Malta came under medical observation on 19 April at Valletta³. By the beginning of May commercial transactions were restricted, ships in our harbours were placed in quarantine and the sale of "susceptible" articles prohibited⁴.

In a letter of 7 June, Cumbo informs his correspondent in Lisbon that "the situation of the country was critical" while on the 16 he openly writes that "the island is infected with the infamous disease of plague which thanks to the precautions taken by the government has not made alarming inroads

1. *Malta Government Gazette*, 12 January 1814, p.46.

2. Depiro, G.M. *Ragguaglio storico della pestilenza che afflisse le isole di Malta e Gozo negli anni 1813 e 1814*, Livorno, 1833, p.3.

3. Cassar, P. *Medical History of Malta*, London, 1965, p.176.

4. Depiro, G.M., *op.cit.*, pp. 17-18, 30-35.

though it has not ceased to infiltrate fresh places". The sanitary safeguards alluded to by Cumbo included the avoidance of personal contacts, the evacuation of healthy persons from infected household, the prohibition to enter Birgu, Bormla and Senglea and to communicate with ships. Government also announced the infliction of the death penalty for transgressors of the quarantine laws ⁵.

On 17 June Cumbo expressed the hope to his agent in Mahone that "thanks to Divine Providence and the stepping up of the sanitary campaign the disease would not continue to spread; meanwhile", he continued, "all business transactions are suspended but we are all in good health." In another letter of the same date addressed to a firm in Gibraltar he regretted that owing to the pestilence he was unable to avail himself of the favourable prices prevailing at Gibraltar and nearby markets. "I trust in the Almighty", he states, "that within a short time we will again enjoy the previous joy of living in this island... Captain Grima has arrived here but is detained in quarantine."

On 18 June he told his agent in Palermo that "the sinister circumstances caused by the contagious malady that afflicts this island prevents us from carrying out any commercial transactions". In fact two ships from Samos laden with wine had reached Malta but Cumbo was unable to dispose of the cargo because "we are isolated in strict quarantine as the illness has been advancing almost everywhere. The mortality, however, is not great in proportion to the population; in fact it has not surpassed the fifty to fifty-five cases daily between dead and attacked in the whole island of Malta. We hope that God in his mercy will calm his wrath and that through the precautions being taken the disease will not make further progress." His hopes proved to be unfounded for in his letter of 15 July addressed to his Maltese agent in Majorca, he states:— "I believe that you are aware of the unfortunate fate with which Our Lord has justly deigned to punish us. We are being afflicted with the scourge of plague without there being any sign of abatement. Only Divine Omnipotence can save us. All commercial affairs are suspended and it is only with great exertion that we can conclude the transactions that we were already engaged upon. All our friends are confined (to their homes) and we cannot communicate with one another. This is the reason why I am unable to answer your letters as I am myself in strict quarantine as also are my papers as a precautionary measure. I ask you to pray God for the safety of this disconsolate island." By 20 July he had begun to ask his customers to honour their bills of exchange and to effect payments due to him and settle their debts "since the present critical circumstances so require." And quite right he was for July proved to be the worst month with regard to the extent of mortality when by the end of the month 1602 persons had perished ⁶. His

5. Burrell, W. H., *Appendice V al secondo rapporto sulla quarantena, Londra, 1855*; p. 81.

6. Burrell, W. H., *op.cit.*, p. 26.

anxiety was intensified a few days later when communication with Valletta became extremely difficult. This, however, proved to be only a temporary setback for by the 2nd August he managed to send letters to Valletta and receive replies to them though with a delay of three days.

By the beginning of August some of Cumbo's foreign partners left the island with total disregard for their business affairs because of the fear of catching the disease. Others did so because they dreaded the possibility of being confined in quarantine, a fear that was quite for on 14 August Cumbo wrote that no one was allowed to embark on ships before performing a double quarantine. There was some relaxation in this prohibition about a week later when shipowners from Senglea were allowed to board their vessels on the production of a medical certificate and a permit from the *luogotenente* (deputy). Cumbo grasped this chance to slip to Gozo and there sell his tobacco and wine.

A very frequent recipient of Cumbo's letters was Giuseppe Pulis who during the plague was living at Zejtun and who carried out many trade operations on Cumbo's behalf. On 26 August Cumbo wrote to him to arrange a *rendezvous* at the *barriera* at the Marsa but we do not know whether they actually met.

A ray of hope illumines Cumbo's letter to Mahone on the 27 August:—"The terrible scourge seems to show signs of abating since a few days, thanks to the many (sanitary) measures taken by government so that the mortality in the whole island has now gone down to thirty a day... In Senglea, thanks to Divine assistance, we enjoy perfect health... With regard to prices, soap is fetching high prices but olive oil tends to go down." During the first week of September he was trying to obtain a cargo of vegetables from Gozo in exchange for a consignment of *vermicelli* and *macheroni*: and one hopes that he managed to do so because on 14 September he was complaining that there were no vegetables and no fruits to be had in Senglea owing to the lack of communication with the countryside. Because he was so cut off, he wrote to Pulis at Zejtun telling him that he was unable to meet him at the Marsa, as he had envisaged to do, but hoped that he would be able to do so on 16 "very early in the morning." The venue this time was to be the "slaughter house or near San Francesco alias tal Balliu" at Kordin. It appears from subsequent correspondence that they did succeed in effecting their *rendezvous* this time. In fact another meeting was fixed at the same place for 21 September but Pulis sent a letter saying that he was unable to keep the appointment. Cumbo also endeavoured to meet one of his partners at Valletta to whom he wrote on 19 September suggesting as venue the *barriera* at Valletta. Cumbo required the signature of his partner to a contract of marine insurance but he leaves us in the dark as to whether the encounter took place.

He sounds quite buoyant on 27 October when he wrote to Spain that restrictions in communications were being relaxed allowing for the resump-

tion of commercial operations "with due precautions". Indeed he knew on'y of three to four cases a day occurring in the whole island. Actually the incidence was more than the figures given by Cumbo but he was quite correct in saying that the epidemic was on the wane so much so that the mortality had declined to 196 during the whole month of October 7.

On 13 November he informed his correspondent in Mahone that since twenty days no new cases had appeared in the four cities and that it was only in the villages that cases still occurred. He was very hopeful that within a short time all the island would be completely free from such a "horrible scourge". The epidemic was by now showing signs of declining so that writing to Mahone on 6 December, Cumbo stated that government ordered a general depuration of Valletta and Floriana though cases still occurred in two casals that had been cordoned off by troops from the rest of the island. These were the villages of Zebbug and Qormi to which Birkirkara was later added⁸. Communication he added, was still restricted but he had been able to go to the *barriera* at the Marsa. The fresh appearance of a case at Naxxar induced the sanitary authorities to again tighten up controls and restrict communication within the towns so that Cumbo again found himself "locked" in Senglea though by 15 December he was trusting that within ten days permits would again be issued for those who needed to go to the *barriera* of the four cities and the wharf of Valletta. In the meantime he availed himself of this new period of quarantine to bring up his accounts up to date.

The last letter recorded by Cumbo is dated 28 December 1813 and is addressed to Giuseppe Pulis at Zejtun:—"I see your brother everyday. He is in good health... The polacre *Giovanna*, which is now in quarantine with sealed hatches in Marsamxett Harbour, departs with the first convoy which is expected to leave on 10 January. I enclose the booklet of signals, which you wish to copy, together with a small brush. I wish you and your family a prosperous and happy new year. I send my greetings and kiss your hand". Signed M.A. Cumbo, Maresciallo. And with that letter — the only one that bears his signature — Cumbo takes his leave of us.

Comment

I think it worthwhile to return to some of Cumbo's entries referring to particular persons and topics to place them in proper perspective in the contemporary scene.

The *profumatore* alluded to in the same letter was an employee of the Mr. John Andrew Trevisan who thirteen years previously had taken part in the military operations against the French during their occupation of Malta in 1798-1800. He then joined a Maltese regiment until on 13 May 1813 he was appointed Captain of the Port of Valletta and Commissioner of

7. Burrell, W.H., *op.cit.*, p. 26.

8. Burrell, W.H., *op.cit.*, p. 33 .

Health — a post which he filled, until 7 February 1815, with “activity, zeal and fidelity”⁹.

The *profumatore* alluded to in the same letter was an employee of the Health Department who was in charge of the disinfection of mail at the Lazaretto by means of the so called *profumo*, i.e. slitting the letters and then soaking them in vinegar or else exposing them to the fumes of a mixture of aromatic herbs, sulphur, camphor and other substances burnt in a special cupboard¹⁰. Cumbo's letters must have been disinfected in this manner at least for a short spell, for even a despatch and another official document sent to Malta by the Secretary of State on 5 and 6 August 1813 were subjected to slitting and fumigation¹¹.

It is likely that Mr Giuseppe Pulis, so often written to by Cumbo, was the American Consul in Malta to which office he was appointed in 1801. His activities as consul were suspended in 1812 when relations between Great Britain and the USA became strained during the Napoleonic Wars owing to British interference with American shipping and trade in the Mediterranean until Congress declared war on Britain on January 1812¹². Pulis resumed his role as consul on 26 April 1815 and it is likely that he engaged in trade in the interval in partnership with Cumbo.

In a letter to Majorca dated 15 July 1813, Cumbo states: “I am in strict quarantine as also are my papers as a precautionary measure”. The reason why his papers were “in quarantine” arises from the fact that paper was believed to be a carrier of the “contagion” of plague so much so that the health authorities discouraged the use of paper and drew attention to the health hazards from handling this material. The registers of the *Monte di Pietà*, for instance, were all unbound, depurated and rebound in January 1814, to ensure that they carried no “contagion”. The concept of “contagion” from paper dominated official medical thought for many years afterwards so much so that during the cholera epidemic of Gibraltar of August 1834, letters reaching Malta from the Rock were “steeped in vinegar” before they were delivered to their recipients in Malta¹³.

Apart from these measures some people during the plague of 1813 avoided all contact with paper and resorted to writing on small wooden tablets

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9. Sammut, E. “A Military Career... and its Aftermath, Giovanni Andrea Trevisan 1781-1838,” *The Malta Land Force Journal*, 1972, No. 11, p.75 et seq.
 10. Cassar, P. “Slitting of Letters for Disinfection in the Eighteenth Century in Malta,” *British Medical Journal*, 1967, 1, 105.
 11. The Palace Archives, Valletta, Despatches from Secretary of State, No. 5, July 1813 to December 1814, fols., 153 & 161-5.
 12. Cassar, P. “Joseph Pulis, American Consul in Malta (1801-28)”, *Heritage*, 1978, 1, 327;
 - Cassar, P. *Early Relations between Malta and the USA*, Malta, 1976, pp. 25-29.
 13. *Malta Government Gazette*, 6 August 1834, p.256.

as it was believed that the disease did not attach itself to wood and therefore could not be carried from one person to another by the handling of wood¹⁴. Cumbo says nothing on this point and we are left guessing as to whether he ever wrote any letters on wooden tablets.

The *barriere*, referred to in various letters from Cumbo's pen, were set up on 19 June in order to ensure the provisioning of Valletta and the four cities with foodstuffs from the countryside. These exchanges took place under the supervision of sanitary guards. The *barriere* consisted in a number of railings so arranged as to allow people to approach within talking distance of one another but with an intervening gap between them wide enough to prevent them from touching one another. Besides the *barriere* mentioned by Cumbo, there were others located at Portes des Bombes for Valletta; and at Polverista Gate in the outer defences of the Cottonera lines, facing Zejtun, for the Cottonera area; and at Bormla Gate just outside Senglea which gave access to the wharf in French Creek¹⁵.

Cumbo's belief that the plague was a form of divine punishment was not a mere personal idea but was in accord with the collective credo of his contemporaries with its roots running as far back as biblical days. His reliance for deliverance on the "hope that God in His Mercy will calm his wrath" is, therefore, understandable especially when one remembers that in his time nobody knew about the microbial origin of bubonic plague and about the part played by infected rats and their fleas in its transmission to man. Lest one should think that this emphasis on faith in God was the peculiar preoccupation of Maltese Catholicism, it is instructive to point out that such religious ideas were shared by Protestants elsewhere in connection with the onslaught of epidemic diseases of which the cause was unknown. Thus as late as August 1834, on the occasion of the cholera epidemic that struck Gibraltar in that year, the Lieutenant Governor of that fortress ordered the holding of thanksgiving services "to Almighty God, in all churches, for this manifestation of his mercy" ¹⁶.

Cumbo's personality

Far from providing us with clues as to his identity Cumbo poses us several questions and we can only speculate as to their answers. Whence the *Maresciallo* for instance? Is it a second surname or a nickname or a rank of some kind? Did he survive the plague? We are on sure ground with regard to this last question for we can say with certainty that he outlived

14. Cassar, P. "A Further Document on Wood Relating to the Plague of 1813-14," *Scientia*, 1961, 27, 165

Cassar, P & Ganado, A. "Two More Documents Written on Wood During the Plague of Malta of 1813," *Melita Historica*, Vol. 7, 1979.

15. Depiro, G.M., *op.cit.*, pp. 36 & 46.

16. *Malta Government Gazette*, 20 August 1834, p.273.

the plague because we know from the official lists of mortality that the only person from Senglea that succumbed to plague was a Maria Cassar who died at the Lazaretto on 14 June 1813¹⁷. We can, therefore, be sure that he was not among the 4572 victims mowed down by the epidemic in Malta¹⁸. Did he resume his former trading operations after the declaration of free pratique for Malta on 29 January 1814? The absence of further letters from him leaves us in the dark on this score but there is no doubt that sales of food stuffs were being effected in March and in May of that year from the warehouse "del Maresciallo" at Kalkara¹⁹. By mid-November commercial activities had revived to a great extent, the arrivals of ships becoming increasingly frequent as the days passed by and the amounts of exported goods increasing "considerably"²⁰ so that Cumbo should not have encountered any great difficulties in resuming his trading operations.

If we are unable to piece together a biographical sketch of Cumbo because of the lack of data, we can at least draw a profile of his personality from the perusal of his extant correspondence. In fact the contents of his letters reveal him not only as a type — the merchant intent on the day-to-day routine of his business affairs — but also as an individual with his peculiar traits of character. He appears to have been a wealthy man with a long experience of commercial affairs and a person of great initiative who, though warning his agents to conduct his affairs with prudence and caution, was not averse to take calculated risks in his business dealings and to embark on substantial commercial ventures. He kept an eye on the fluctuations in the exchange rates and in prices in various markets while seeking new opportunities for trade.

He was a hard-working man who endeavoured to get the best service out of his agents whom he spurred to study the state of demand and supply and to ensure the good quality of the items to be purchased and whom he instructed how to pay for these goods and how to collect the profits. The regularity with which he kept up his correspondence, the way he wrote it in a neat and clearly legible script, and its indexing show him to have been a meticulous man who did not do things in a hurry. In fact he recorded his trade operations in great detail taking care to note with whom he sent his letters, by what means, whether by convoy or by packet or whether through a consul "for greater security".

He took his losses with equanimity trusting in Divine Providence whenever he was faced with circumstances beyond his control. He expressed himself in becoming terms and in gracious greetings to his correspondents

17. Burrell, W.H., *op.cit.*, p. 43.

18. Cassar, P. *Medical History of Malta*, p.186.

19. *Malta Government Gazette*, 2 March 1814, p.77.

Malta Government Gazette, 4 May 1814, p.114.

20. *Malta Government Gazette*, 16 November 1814, p.222.

with some of whom he was bound by ties of friendship as well as business so that in his letters to them commercial topics are mingled with warm expressions of his pleasant anticipations of meeting them personally, with felicitations at the news of their safe arrival abroad and with congratulations on the birth of a baby!

He confessed that English was not one of the languages that he knew; but then, in those early years of British rule, very few Maltese were familiar with the English language. In fact Lord Bathurst, the Secretary of State, remarked in 1813 that the "upper classes" in Malta still spoke Italian²¹ as Cumbo did. Hence the reason why his letters are written in this language except for every few of them that are in Spanish. He obtained newspapers from Messina and in 1812 acquired a book entitled *Io per tutti ossia calendario o notizie per l'anno bisestile 1812*. In the following year he acquired from abroad *L'Officio della Beata Vergine* and *L'Officio del Santissimo Natale* which reveal him as a religious man devoted to the Blessed Virgin Mary — to whom the Parish Church of Senglea was dedicated — and intent on seeking solace in perusing the Office of the Birth of Christ during the Christmas season.

Epilogue

Cumbo's name has no place in the written records of our national history like that of the great mass of his undistinguished and unsung contemporaries who, never the less, through their humble activities provide the raw material on which the edifice of history is built.

I am not aware of the existence of any other correspondence by persons who lived through the harrowing experience of the plague of 1813 except for the small number of letters and other scanty documents written on wood already mentioned. In this respect, therefore, the *Copia lettere* under study is a unique manuscript especially in the absence of any diaries dealing with that period. Though the letters contain nothing spectacular or dramatic, they impart atmosphere to the bare official bulletins and literature concerning that calamity. In fact one feels that they provide us with a personal encounter with Cumbo himself and give us a deeper understanding of the overall picture of the repercussions of epidemic disease on the daily working life of an individual who struggled to carry on with "business as usual" when his own death by devastating disease was a constant threat. Apart from these considerations 1813 is a year that makes a great stir in Maltese history and any material that throws it into a sharper focus is worthy of committing to memory and recording in print.

21. Palace Archives, Valletta. Despatches from Secretary of States, No. 5, July 1813 to December 1814, fol., 136.

1921: ELECTORAL ISSUES

Dominic Micallef

The granting of self-government to Malta in 1921 ushered in a new era for the island. Although Malta was still largely controlled by Britain, the Maltese representatives could now voice their claims with a hope of actually achieving something; henceforth, they themselves were responsible for local affairs.¹

As a natural sequel to the granting of self-government, political activity in Malta started mounting slowly until it reached a climax during the general elections which were held in October 1921. In this constitutional frame-work, properly organized political parties were bound to develop. Five political parties were formed in view of the imminent elections. These were the *Unione Politica Maltese* (U.P.M.) under the leadership of Mgr. Ignazio Panzavecchia, the *Anglo-Maltese Party* (A.M.P.) under Sir Gerald Strickland, the *Maltese Constitutional Party* (M.C.P.) under Dr. Augustus Bartolo, the *Partito Democratico Nazionale* (P.D.N.) under Dr. Enrico Mizzi, and the *Labour Party* (L.P.) under Col. William Savona. The U.P.M. and the P.D.N. had practically the same ideology; they were both pro-Italian and therefore representing the nationalist forces. Their division rested mainly on personal and tactical differences between the party leaders. On the other hand the same could be said of the A.M.P. and the M.C.P. They were two pro-British factions within the Imperialist camp. Personal animosity between their leaders was overruled in time, and just before the elections, they united their forces to form the *Constitutional Party* (C.P.). The only completely original and independent party was the *Labour Party* (L.P.) which had to protect, above all, the interests of the working class.

The elections were approaching, by May the electoral machine started operating and Malta was drowned in propaganda. Yet the electoral campaign was characterized by ambiguity. No specific line of policy could be attributed to any of the parties. Generally speaking, the political arena was ideologically divided into three groups — the pro-British, the pro-Italian and the Labour parties. Parties which had the same inspiration criticized and attacked one another. People with practically the same ideology were sworn enemies.

Each party strived to establish its ideology and differentiate itself from

1. The 1921 Letters Patent adopted a 'dyarchical' system of government, with a bicameral system for local affairs and a Nominated Council to look after imperial interests.

the rest, but on various instances these ideologies overlapped. The U.P.M. called the P.D.N. 'extremist', 'disloyal' and even 'irredentist', but both parties had pro-Italian leanings which they had inherited from the 'old' Nationalist Party. The M.C.P. was ideologically very similar to the A.M.P., they were both imperialist parties yet before they amalgamated they criticised each other severely. In their great anxiety to secure votes, the newly constituted parties all promised every kind of measure to ameliorate the position of workers. In this case the U.P.M., the P.D.N., the M.C.P., and the A.M.P. had to give the impression that their ideology was very similar, if not identical to that of the Labour Party and in fact they all tried to co-operate with it. On the other hand, the *Labour Party* sought to retain its independence claiming that it was the only true workers' party and that the others had ulterior motives when appealing to workers. Rather than on pressing issues such as unemployment, the electoral campaign was mainly fought on these relatively ambiguous ideological principles and on personal animosity and recriminations between politicians. These were the controversies which literally filled up the pages of the press. As regards the issues, there was very little difference between parties. The parties were ready to show moderation and compromise on everything including the language question.

To add to the ambiguity which already characterized the political arena, electoral programmes were published rather late. As the new government was going to be run by Maltese representatives, the public was facing a new situation. The people were expecting something radically different from previous electoral programmes which had been mainly directed to fight for a good Constitution. Constructive programmes attempting to give an answer to the most pressing and controversial issues was what was needed at the moment. When the electoral programmes were published the parties went to the other extreme. Instead of being realistic and explaining the great liabilities and difficulties which were bound to be encountered in the working out of the new constitution, the public was promised several things which were impossible to achieve. First and foremost parties sought to establish their identity and remove any possible doubts, which the man in the street might have had, with regard to their basic principles.²

Religion

A principle which was accepted by everybody and which no party ever dreamt to challenge was the guarantee given to the rights of the Catholic Church in Malta. All parties thought fit to declare their support to the Catholic Religion mainly because of the controversy resulting from the interpretation of the Religion Clause in the Constitution. The Draft Letters

2. Dominic Micallef, "1921, A Landmark in Maltese Political History", unpublished B.A (Hons.) Thesis 1978, University of Malta.

Patent establishing self-government in Malta dealt with the religious question only to the extent of laying down the principle of religious freedom for all. Following the disillusioned reaction of the Archbishop, the National Assembly³ in its final comments and suggestions on the draft constitution had proposed the insertion of a clause declaring the Catholic Religion to be the established religion of the island. This proposal was not accepted by the British authorities and some even wanted to reject the Constitution on this issue. The Constitution was accepted on the understanding that during the first sitting of the legislature the House would declare the Roman Catholic Religion as the official religion of Malta. All the political parties, but especially the A.M.P. gave a guarantee to the rights of the Catholic Church in Malta. Having been charged with harbouring designs incompatible with the Church's ownership of landed property, Sir Gerald Strickland wanted to dispel any such suspicion.

Loyalty

Loyalty to the British Crown was another principle which was found in all political programmes published in 1921. The A.M.P. and the M.C.P. were not just loyalist but imperialist parties. While they regarded as unchallengeable the Maltese national individuality and the people's right to be masters in their own home, they expected the Maltese to give something much more than 'lip-loyalty' to the British Crown. The two parties emphasized that imperialism was not an attempt at denationalisation. They claimed that the power of incorporating alien races, without trying to disintegrate them, or to rob them of their individuality was characteristic of the British Imperial system. Considering British policy in Malta in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this claim could easily have been questioned. The cultural feeling at the time had its roots in Italian and so any attempt to dislodge Italian was artificial and forced. The upholding of the Maltese language was only an excuse to promote English and undermine Italian.⁴

The Maltese Imperialists equated the English Language with loyalty, anybody who supported the Italian language openly was called 'disloyal', if not 'irredentist'. Using this strategy, Strickland managed to keep the pro-Italian nationalist forces divided. The U.P.M. stressed its strict loyalty to the British crown and its intention to protect the cultural and national

3. L'Assemblea Nazionale di Malta, 25 Febbraio 1919 — 27 Maggio 1921. Processi verbali e altri documenti dell'Assemblea Nazionale delle relative Commissioni, raccolti e stampate nel presente volume per ordine del Parlamento Maltese. Resolution approved by the National Assembly on the 27th May 1921, p. 80 (Malta: Stamperia del Governo, 1923).
4. Henry Frendo, 'Language of a Colony' unpublished M.A. Thesis, 1973 University of Malta.

traditions of the Maltese. In its electoral programme the U.P.M. categorically refuted any charges of disloyalty from whichever quarter they came. The party took great pains to differentiate itself from allegedly 'disloyal' P.D.N. All men suspected of harbouring extreme political views were held at arm's length by the party. The party made it clear that although its members considered themselves British citizens, they were first and foremost Maltese, ready to recognize Italian as their language of culture while acknowledging fully the importance of learning English. Calling itself the 'moderate' party, the U.P.M. tried to steer clear of the so called 'extremists' and especially of the 'irredentists' with the result that it was attacked from both sides.

The Labour Party was never accused of having any excessive pro-English or pro-Italian feelings. It was an independent party which did not think it necessary to declare its categoric loyalty to the British crown. Many workers were directly employed with the Admiralty and War Department and so it was in the Labour Party's interest to maintain the best possible relations with the local British authorities. The party was not interested in the diffusion of either English or Italian to the exclusion of the other. While encouraging the teaching of Maltese, the Labour Party realized the importance of knowing both foreign languages. The party was criticized on several issues but nobody ever questioned its loyalty. It was for propaganda reasons that the Labour Party gave a helping hand to the other parties in accusing the P.D.N. of 'disloyalty' and 'irredentism'.

Enrico Mizzi's P.D.N. was the target for those who, during the electoral campaign, championed strict loyalty to the British throne. The fact that even the U.P.M. called Mizzi 'irredentist' made his urge to prove his loyalty much more difficult. The P.D.N. issued a formal declaration of loyalty in the press, to remove any possible doubts, but this was to no avail.⁵ The 'irredentist' scare was practically the only weapon used by the adversaries of the P.D.N., during the electoral campaign. Mizzi was ready not to make use of the drastic expressions he had used in his youth but he was certainly prepared to defend the Italian language even at the cost of being called 'irredentist'.

Language

The 1921 Constitution sought to settle the language question by taking "equally into consideration the historic and cultural traditions of the island, its position as a member of the British Commonwealth and the everyday needs of the Maltese".⁶ This aim was not achieved, particularly because the Constitution itself was ambiguous on this issue. It allowed controversies to arise on the language clause. The constitution provided for both English and Italian to be considered as the official and cultural languages of Malta.

5. 'Una Categorica Smentita del P.D.N.' *Malta Herald*, May 21, 1921.

6. The Malta Constitution 1921.

However, what proved to be obscure and caused political wrangling was the decree that:- "where both languages cannot conveniently be taken simultaneously regard shall be had in settling the order of priority in which the languages shall be taught to the wishes of the parents in the case of schools and of students in the case of the University and to the ability of the teaching staff for the purpose of the pupils' future occupation"⁷

The crux of the problem was whether both languages were to be considered compulsory and so taught simultaneously or whether this clause simply meant that equal facilities should be given for the learning of both languages. Before the granting of the constitution, the 'pari-passu' system had prevailed in the schools. According to this system there was no option for a student to give priority either to English or Italian, he was required to take and study them with equal proficiency. In a report on the organization of Education in Malta published in 1921, the Hon. W.N. Bruce said that "the attempt to introduce three languages in the elementary schools is extremely contrary to all the best opinion as to the way to train the faculties of very young children."⁸ This opinion must have certainly influenced the decision-makers in London and although they upheld 'pari-passu', they made it theoretically possible for anybody to learn English only if he wanted.

The Language Question had always been the key issue in every election held before 1921. The nationalists had used the Italian language as a bulwark against any attempt at denationalisation or anglicization by the British authorities. In 1921, the language question continued to be treated as a political question. The interpretation of the ambiguous language clause in the constitution proved to be one of the main issues during the electoral campaign. Was there to be the continuation of 'pari-passu' or was "free-choice" to be re-established? The emerging political parties had to define their policy with regard to the language question much more than any other issue. This was a point which could indicate substantial difference of opinion, if not the only divergent opinion between parties. They knew that in the prevailing circumstances, a moderate policy was the best one to follow, and so none of the parties advocated the abolition of any language. No party contested the position of Italian in the Law Courts as this was clearly safeguarded in the Constitution. What caused friction was the system that had to be adopted for the teaching of languages.

The U.P.M., in accordance with the moderate impression it tried to give the public, advocated 'pari-passu' claiming that both languages were necessary and important and that it was possible to study both languages simultaneously as from the first classes of the primary schools. Bi-lingual

7. His Majesty's Letters Patent. April 14, 1921 — Establishing Self-Government in Malta, Clause 57 (2).

8. N.W. Burce, *Report on the Organization of Education in Malta*, Malta Government Gazette, Supplement No. XIII, April 15, 1921.

education was introduced in Malta during the war and so in 1921 it had not yet given the desired results. If started, from the first classes of Elementary Schools, the learning of two languages could yield good results, but one of the languages had to be the vernacular. Italian and English were two foreign languages to the Maltese. Notwithstanding the introduction of the "pari-passu" system relatively few people had a command of the two foreign languages.

"No compulsion" was the cry of the A.M.P. The party pledged to encourage the teaching of both languages as students desired, in other words, the party was in favour of the "free choice" system. Strickland pointed out that it was important to specialize in order to excel. He appealed to the workers, saying that those who specialize in English could earn their living much more certainly than those who could speak both languages with glaring imperfections. Sir Gerald Strickland did not preach outwardly in favour of abolishing Italian because this would have been suicidal. He upheld Maltese not because he was sincerely interested in the fostering of the Maltese language, but because he wanted to secure the worker's vote. If Maltese was promoted to the level of an official language, Italian would have to compete with two languages and not just English. Sir Gerald believed that it was only in this way that Italian could be abolished from Malta.⁹

The M.C.P. did not pronounce itself clearly on the language question. The party promised to abide by the provisions of the Constitution on this issue. If the Constitution was ambiguous, the M.C.P. was just as vague on this point. Commenting on the A.M.P.'s programme in the press, members of the M.C.P. supported the "pari-passu" system, however they were in favour of 'free-choice' when adopted in the elementary schools. This 'im-pari-passu' as it was called by Strickland, had one great drawback. By learning only one language in the elementary schools, the students would have found it impossible to pass an examination in both languages when trying to enter the Lyceum. When the M.C.P. joined forces with the A.M.P. to form the Constitutional Party, it was the M.C.P.'s provision which was adopted in the joint electoral programme. As the elections were on the threshold, Strickland decided to veil his ideas on the language question with ambiguity. He had far from changed — his intention was and still remained that of promoting the English language at all costs.

In comparison with the other parties the Labour Party was very clear on the Language Question. It opted for the teaching of Maltese in the first two years of the elementary schools, English was to be taught in the elementary schools up to and including the fourth standard, while 'pari-passu' would only be introduced as from the fifth standard. Knowing that workers would benefit much more from the English language than from Italian.

9. "Programme of the United A.M.P. and M.C.P. To be known henceforth as the Constitutional Party" — Clause 3. *Daily Malta Chronicle*, Sept. 2, 1921.

the Labour Party favoured the teaching of English. If the simultaneous teaching of English and Italian was dropped in the primary schools, many students who left school after the elementary level of education would at least have been able to communicate well in one foreign language. Employment in the dockyard or with the military services was likely, and so they would surely have benefited from their years at school. The prospect of emigration to other parts of the British Empire was another reason why the Labour Party favoured the teaching of English in the primary schools. As could be expected the Labour Party upheld the Maltese Language both in education and as a language which could be used in parliament. However, its support was limited considering the importance which the Imperial Government Workers Union representatives had attached to the Maltese Language in the National Assembly.¹⁰ The teaching of the vernacular in the first two years of the elementary schools was certainly not enough, even though it was much more than the other parties were ready to concede.

In its political programme, the P.D.N., strangely enough, made little reference to the language question. The party promised to reform the Constitution on this issue. It was clear, however, that Dr. E. Mizzi was in favour of a strict and uncompromising application of "pari-passu". While the party acknowledged the importance of English for certain sections of the population it upheld Italian as a safeguard against any attempt at denationalisation and against the take-over of the best jobs on the island by Englishmen. Italian was considered by the P.D.N. as 'la lingua nostra,' while Maltese was regarded as a patois having no grammar or literature. Maltese was attacked on all fronts by Dr. Mizzi's party. The promotion of the vernacular was seen as the most dangerous tool used by the Imperialists to oust Italian. This was the reason why the party objected to the inclusion of Maltese in schools.

Education

Although the attention of the political parties and of the population was focused on the language question, the introduction, or otherwise, of compulsory education in Malta was another important point at issue.

The British Government had seriously thought of introducing compulsory education in Malta. Governor Methuen had declared, during the war that he wished to be known to posterity as the man who established compulsory education in Malta. But due to Malta's bad financial position and the hostile attitude taken by the Church nothing had been done. Children coming from poor families were either not sent to school at all or else they left school to 'help' their parents in their work before they reached the school leaving age. On the other hand, applications made by parents to enrol their children were very often turned down because there was no room

10. L'Assemblea Nazionale di Malta, p. 199.

for them in government schools.

All parties contesting the 1921 elections promised to improve the educational system. What they did not agree upon was how and to what extent education had to be imparted. The Labour Party advocated compulsory education under the control and guidance of the Catholic Church. The party had a duty, namely that of eradicating illiteracy from among the working class. Knowing what opposition the church had put up to the idea of compulsory education, when it was first suggested, the party had to be cautious when proposing the introduction of compulsory education. The Church would have protested to any complete take-over by the State in education. The Labour Party emphasized that all children should at least be given the opportunity to go to school and for this to happen education had to be compulsory and free.

In its electoral programme the U.P.M. declared that it was in favour of compulsory education only if strictly controlled by the Church. Many members of the U.P.M., including Mgr. I. Panzavecchia had opposed compulsory education when it was first suggested by Governor Methuen, their abrupt change of opinion can only be attributed to the publication of the Labour Party programme. The U.P.M. did not want to become involved in any uncalled for controversies. It sought the workers' votes and so it was ready to compromise on this issue. The Panzavecchiani claimed that it was the parents' right to send their children to school and that the State had no legal obligation to provide education.¹¹ They were, however, ready to compromise and concede to compulsory education if the Church authorities chose the teachers and the materials to be studied. Moreover, the Church had also to be co-responsible with the State for the administration of education.

Dr. E. Mizzi's party promised to put education within reach of all social classes and to fight illiteracy by spreading Catholic education, but it made no mention of compulsory education. The M.C.P. decided not to deal with the question of compulsory education without a special mandate from the electorate, claiming that it was not fair for any party, which might secure a majority on a general programme to take advantage of its temporary power for the purpose of solving this important question of far-reaching consequences. The party claimed that any project to introduce immediate compulsory education was not realistic, when applications for voluntary admission were being refused due to the lack of school accommodation. In the joint electoral programme published by the A.M.P. and the M.C.P., the idea of holding a referendum on this issue was dropped. The L.P. was in favour of granting subsidies to the various educational institutions run by the clergy until the Government could provide additional school accommodation. This proposal was criticized by the U.P.M.

11. Mgr. I. Panzavecchia, "Lingua ed Istruzione", *Malta*, Sept. 17, 1921.

and the P.D.N. on the pre-supposition that if the Government would give subsidies to private educational organisations it would in turn claim the right to interfere in the schools' administration. Considering the circumstances at the time this was certainly the most realistic proposal.

Industry

At the turn of the century industry in Malta was practically non-existent. The manufacturing industry was very limited, being made up of a few minor industries such as tomato-canning, tobacco manufacture and cigarette production, which employed small groups of workers. The only industry which employed a large number of workers was the Dockyard. During the war the Dockyard had employed 12,000 men but it was obvious that the number could not be maintained and that discharges had to take place. Local industry could not absorb any of the discharged men and so many had to emigrate. Constant discharges from the Dockyard created great distress among the workers, which had obvious consequences. In 1921 there were 6,973 persons working in the yard. Malta's main industry could have been used better to employ a larger number of workers. Naval warships were the only vessels repaired at the dockyard; the transformation of the industry to serve commercial purposes would have certainly required the services of other workers. In 1917 Admiral Ballard expressed the hope that after the war Malta would become a centre for shipbuilding.¹² This project had not yet been carried out in 1921 and so both the L.P. and the C.P. regarded shipbuilding as a possible undertaking by the government, to reduce the number of the unemployed. The other parties claimed that this project could never be put into practice and that it was mentioned just to catch the worker's vote. As could be expected all political parties promised to strengthen the existing industries, to revive those that were practically extinct and to create and encourage the development of new industries with the aim of reducing unemployment, which stood at 4,933 in 1921.

Emigration

It seemed as if the only solution to unemployment was emigration. In Malta emigration was closely inter-related to the social and economic conditions of the island. Because of strong family ties Maltese workers choose emigration as a last resort and hardly ever took this course willingly. To make matters worse, many countries issued restrictive immigration laws, which had to be respected. As a member of the British Commonwealth the Maltese worker should have enjoyed free access to any part of

12. Rear Admiral G.A. Ballard, *The Development of Malta as a First Class Naval Base since its inclusion in the British Empire* (Malta, 1917).

the British Empire, surprisingly enough, in most British Dominions, the Maltese emigrant was regarded as an alien. The largest flow of Maltese emigration, in the second decade of the twentieth century, was still directed to the Mediterranean littoral.¹³ This fact was used by the pro-British parties and the L.P. in Malta to promote the teaching of the English Language. As a result emigration became deeply submerged in politics. The Nationalists argued that emigration to the British Empire had failed. Many letters, sent by Maltese emigrants to their relatives in Malta, were published in the nationalist press, in order to warn prospective Maltese emigrants of the widespread unemployment abroad.¹⁴ The government was accused of discouraging emigration to the Mediterranean littoral while promoting emigration to the British Empire simply to prove the utility of learning English.

Social Legislation

Emigration was a safety valve for the unemployed. However, something concrete could have been undertaken effectively in order to ease the miserable state of the Maltese workers. No social legislation had been enacted in Malta before 1921 and this was the main moving factor for the organization of trade unions. This consciousness in turn animated the establishment of the Labour Party, whose prime interest was to propose and enact social reform in parliament. The party promised to raise the status of the working classes as regards wages, hours and conditions of employment but more specifically it wanted to enact the Workmen's Compensation Act, the Old Age Pension Act, the Trade Union and Factory Acts, the National Insurance Acts and an act to regulate the increase and decrease of house-rents.

As could be expected all parties followed in the footsteps of the Labour Party and proposed social reform. Workers formed an important part of the electorate and so their claims could not be ignored. The U.P.M. was in favour of social reform only if it was carried out in a fair spirit of compromise between employers and employees. The party did not favour the precipitous adoption of a vast programme of social legislation due to the depleted state of the Maltese treasury. The P.D.N. agreed to all measures of social legislation but it emphasized the importance of granting pensions to widows and orphans of government employees. The C.P. only promised to consider the advisability of adopting the Workmen's Compensation Act. When attempting to form a coalition with the L.P., Strickland, promised to help enact all social legislation proposed by the L.P., in the future parliament. This indicates that he was only ready to support such reform if the L.P. co-operated with him in the electoral campaign. For such measures

13. Out of 3,385 people who emigrated from Malta in 1921, 2,585 went to countries bordering the Mediterranean while only 800 emigrated to the British Empire.
14. Letter sent by D.M. Borg to E. Mizzi 'I Maltesi a Detroit', *Malta*, June 9, 1921.

to be adopted the government would have had to increase taxation and Sir Gerald would surely have opposed such a measure. One of the main cries of the Constitutional Party during the 1921 electoral campaign was precisely 'No new taxation'.

Taxation

Sir Gerald acknowledged that the existing taxes could not be reduced, but he claimed that they could be made more productive to improve the administration. The proposal not to increase taxation was not realistic when the financial situation of the government was taken into consideration. If the prospective representatives of the people sincerely intended to enact social legislation and to encourage the establishment of new industries, additional revenue was certainly necessary.¹⁵ To encourage Malta's industrialisation, the political parties, pledged to exempt new industries from any taxation for a number of years and so other sources of taxation had necessarily to be found.

The system of taxation prevalent in Malta at the time was, to say the least, anomalous. Taxes hit everybody in the same way as they were largely indirect taxes. With the exception of the Succession and Donation Duty there was no tax aimed at the richer classes. The L.P., the U.P.M. and the P.D.N. proposed to revise the tributary system, so as to distribute the burden of taxation more equitably. However, they claimed that no immediate reduction in indirect taxation, levied on commodities, was possible. It was only the Labour Party which proposed the introduction of an Income Tax "if required by circumstances".¹⁶ As could be expected this proposal brought about a negative reaction from the other parties. Opposition to the introduction of an Income Tax also came from the British Government which wanted to protect British citizens in Malta. As long as this state of affairs continued the future appeared to be very bleak. Without a heavy increase in government revenue which necessarily had to come from direct taxation, there appeared to be little hope of enacting social legislation in the near future.

What normally determines the outcome of an election is the position taken by political parties on the most controversial issues of the time. This maxim, however, did not entirely apply in Malta, in 1921. Besides the issues, what featured most prominently in the 1921 electoral campaign, were the personal attacks and recrimination against prospective representatives in the new parliament.

15. The revenue for the financial year 1920-21 amounted to £1,063,743.6s½d, including the imperial grant of £250,000 while the expenditure amounted to £1,060,664.6s.½d. This left a balance of £3,078; when added to the accumulated balance remaining on March 31, 1921, viz:- £61,772, a balance of £64,850 remained.

16. The Labour Party Electoral Programme, *D.M.C.*, Sept 14, 1921.

IL MITO CALVINO

Adrian Stivala

L'interesse di Italo Calvinò nel fenomeno della mitologia, anzi con maggiore precisione, nel mito, come elemento che possa illuminare gli uomini alla ricerca dei meccanismi creativi che di secolo in secolo hanno sostenuto lunghe tradizioni e culture da tutti i tempi e da tutto il mondo, risale agli inizi della sua attività di scrittore, cioè ai tempi della pubblicazione nel 1947 del romanzo *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* la sua prima opera importante. E' il tempo in cui lo scrittore ligure si laurea in lettere con una tesi su Joseph Conrad in cui avviene l'incontro con Pavese, che in un certo senso e' lo scopritore di Italo Calvinò. E' anche l'anno della pubblicazione da parte di Pavese dei *"Dialoghi con Leucò,"* "in cui il dramma del passaggio da una religione di mostri a una religione di dei, da una comunione completa con l'informe al primo dominio della natura nelle tribù agrico'e, è vissuto come una propria esperienza individuale".¹

Già si avverte questa atmosfera dove trascorre la propria esistenza una umanità ancora nello stadio in cui predomina la "religione di mostri", rappresentato dalla società italiana frantumata dalla guerra civile e dalla lotta per la Liberazione da parte della Resistenza. Il personaggio, se così si potrebbe definire la figura di Pin, ne *"Il sentiero dei nidi di Ragno,"* e' un prodotto di questo ambiente violento. La guerra, il culmine della natura umana violentata è già quella natura rousseaviana tradita. Qui un discorso estetico si innesta su un sottofondo ideologico. La creatività umana ha come scopo il miglioramento della civiltà. La figura di Pin è stata confrontata² a Francois Noel (Gracchus) Babeuf (1760-1797), L'autore della *"Cospirazione degli Uguali"* (1796), uno dei radicali democratici e che è considerato l'iniziatore di una lunga tradizione di un primitivo comunismo egualitario in Europa che teorizzò una comunità egualitaria priva di proprietà privata, e perciò senza distinzioni di classe.

Giungendo alle altre opere di Italo Calvinò, noi vediamo quello che era l'interesse di Cesare Pavese nel mito, trasformarsi da parte del nostro autore in interesse della fiaba; fiaba definita in chiave di mito ridotto alla sua forma più semplice e tramandato di secolo in secolo dal popolo e mai toccato da nessuna tradizione intellettualistica. Il passaggio dal mito alla fiaba è visto in vari luoghi *"Fiabe Italiane"* (Einaudi 1977), dove lo scrittore non soltanto raccolse materiale preso dalla tradizione popolare durante gli ultimi cento anni ma anche lo

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1. Cesare Pavese, *La letteratura americana e altri saggi* (Einaudi 1962). Introduzione, p. xxx. Autore di questa introduzione è lo stesso Italo Calvinò.
 2. Giuseppe Bonura, *Invito alla lettura di Calvinò* (Mursia 1974), pp. 47,48.

trascrisse in lingua italiana dai vari dialetti. E qui emerge anche lo spunto linguistico da essere trattato come punto di incontro di tutte le forme dialettali della penisola italiana. Questi due volumi di fiabe italiane sono di interesse centrale per arrivare al nocciolo contenutistico di Italo Calvino scrittore. Tutto questo non potrebbe riuscire abbastanza chiaro se venga scisso dalla partecipazione alla attività partigiana della Brigata "Garibaldi" e la sua adesione al Partito Comunista Italiano tra il 1943-45.

Di queste attività Calvino sembrava trovare una rivendicazione negli scritti di Cesare Pavese che trovò come padre intellettuale il critico americano F.O. Matthiessen che espresse il suo convincimento sulla necessaria relazione fra prosa e responsabilità sociali in *"American Renaissance, Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman"*: "in regime di democrazia, non può esserci che una sola pietra di paragone del civismo, e cioè: quelle doti che voi possedete le usate pro o contro il popolo?"³ La concezione storico-politica della letteratura va rintracciata anche in Antonio Gramsci e Karl Marx.⁴

Calvino cerca di sintetizzare tutti questi elementi tramite una forma che sia semplice e ricca in un momento, appunto la fiaba. Ma è interessante soffermarci a fare alcune considerazioni. Lo stesso Calvino ci rivela che "il metodo di trascrizione delle fiabe 'dalla bocca del popolo' prese le mosse dall'opera dei fratelli Grimm e s'andò codificando nella seconda metà del secolo in canoni 'scientifici', di scrupolosa fedeltà stenografica al dettato dialettale del narratore orale"⁵ ci rivela anche "che solo una parte della fiabe di Grimm furono raccolte dalla bocca del popolo (essi ricordano soprattutto una contadina d'un villaggio presso Cassel); molte furono riferite da persone colte, come ricordavano di averle sentite narrare nell'infanzia dalle loro nutrici"⁶. Facendo riferimento al grande raccoglitore di fiabe ed elementi folkloristici Pitre, che aveva dato luce al fatto che la tradizione di racconto contiene la creazione poetica di chi narra, il quale nella fiaba ricrea ogni volta la stessa fiaba "cosicchè al centro del costume di raccontar fiabe è la persona — eccezionale in ogni villaggio o borgo — novellatrice o del novellatore, con un suo stile, un suo fascino, Calvino sottolinea la creatività che comporta la fiaba, sia raccontata, che scritta. Ed è attraverso questa persona che si mutua il sempre rinnovato legame della

3. F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance, Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (O.U.P. 1941), pp. 15,16.

4. Per una interessante discussione dei fondamenti della critica marxista vedere *Costanti e Problemi della Critica Letteraria del Dopoguerra* (1945-1975), Parte Prima (Stylgraf 1976), di Ruggiero Puletti, docente all'università Italiana per gli Stranieri a Perugia e attuale vice-segretario del PSDI.

5. *Fiabe Italiane raccolte e trascritte da Italo Calvino*, Volume Primo (Einaudi, 1977). Introduzione, p.xviii.

6. *Ibid.*

fiaba atemporale col mondo dei suoi ascoltatori, con la Storia".⁷ Questo ci indica chiaramente come Calvino arrivò a vedere la tradizione fiabesca come una mitologia popolare che riesce a dar luogo alla creatività dell'individuo che racconta in termini collettivi. Passando alla fiaba popolare italiana Calvino dice "tutto il problema della fiaba va riportato in un'antichità che non è soltanto preistorica, ma anche pregeografica"⁸ Ecco il ritorno alle origini primordiali dei *"Dialoghi con Leucò"* di Cesare Pavese. Continuano le sue osservazioni sul collegamento tra la fiaba e i riti della società primitiva.⁹ Ci vengono immediatamente in mente le parole contenute nella introduzione al primo lavoro di Calvino "Quello di cui ci sentivamo depositari era un senso della vita come qualcosa che può ricominciare da zero ..." ¹⁰ Qui abbiamo tutto lo spirito di ricominciamento di una epoca che trascenda la storia, uno spirito nutrito dalla lotta per la liberazione. "... l'accento che vi mettevamo era quello di spavalda allegria... Chi cominciò a scrivere allora si trovò così a trattare la medesima materia dell'anonimo narratore orale..."¹¹ La distinzione del contenuto di questo modo di fare letteratura era quella di appartenere alle imprese e alle avventure dei partigiani che consideravano la propria lotta oltre di natura militare e patriottica, anche di natura sociale, specialmente nelle file in cui militò lo stesso Calvino. L'anno in cui Calvino fa queste osservazioni sulla propria prima opera è il 1964, l'anno dopo averla pubblicata, e durante il quale doveva essere ancora in fase di scrivere il suo altro lavoro *Marcovaldo*. Continuando con la sua introduzione al *'Sentiero dei Nidi di Ragno'* l'autore ci dice: "Alcuni miei racconti; alcune pagine di questo romanzo hanno all'origine questa tradizione orale appena nata, nei fatti nel linguaggio..." Quello che seguiva fare da parte dell'autore, era "... innestare la discussione ideologica nel racconto" ¹².

Però tra la pubblicazione di *'Il Sentiero'* e *'Marcovaldo'* esiste la trilogia *'Il Visconte Dimezzato'* (1952) *'Il Barone Rampante'* (1957) *'Il Cavaliere Inesistente.'* (1959) In queste opere regna supremo l'elemento mitico fiabesco sotto il quale si nasconde una malinconia per la condizione dell'uomo contemporaneo sempre "dimezzato" cioè alienato e mutilato, insomma incompiuto. Oppure il distacco di alcuni strati sociali dalla società contemporanea, appunto il Barone Rampante che si arrampica su un albero e trascorre la propria vita isolato ed allontanato dalla vera sorgente; sono tutti elementi fantasticamente e spavalidamente presentati che portano un discorso di natura sociale sottilmente ricamato entro le fibre narrative e creative di

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, p.xxxv.

10. Introduzione a *Il Sentiero dei Nidi di Ragno* di Italo Calvino, p.vii.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

tutta la trilogia.

Quello che sembra baroccamente eseguito nella trilogia acquista una sobrietà apollonica in *'Marcovaldo'*.

La fonte contenutistica di questa raccolta di questi venti racconti è la figura di Marcovaldo che cerca la natura; ma la natura è stata ridotta ad una irrinconoscibile ombra dalla vita artificiale che si è evoluta nelle grandi città. La città diventa qui il simbolo del massimo punto di snaturamento che l'uomo contemporaneo abbia raggiunto. La città provoca malattie, la città è una giungla di cemento, non è più abitabile dall'uomo che vuole preservare il proprio aspetto di essere nato dalla natura. La città è il prodotto della civiltà contorta. È l'inversione del bosco pieno di mostri di tante fiabe; nient'altro che la trasposizione della grande immagine di questo ambiente che intrappola l'uomo della iconografia fiabesca tradizionale. La fiaba stessa come forma artistico-letteraria diventa anche essa una grande immagine, una mitologia popolarizzata che esprime lo stato in cui si ritrova l'uomo della civiltà tecnologico-industriale che la fase capitalistica della storia ha provocato. I venti racconti di *'Marcovaldo'*, raccontati da un essere che ha tutte le qualità del racconta-fiabe ritengono nel tono e nel linguaggio quelle qualità letterarie di semplicità e elementarità della fiaba. Sanno anche di una altra forma che la fiaba ha assunto cioè quella dei fumetti, la cui origine potrebbe essere rintracciata alle immagini che accompagnavano i canta-storie del Meridione in Italia.

La stessa biografia interna di Marcovaldo ci indica la maledizione che riceve dalla città. È anche un operaio che lavora "... alla Jitta Sbay dov'era uomo di fatica..."¹³ Questo ci indica che Calvino sembra voler dare un impasto classista al suo personaggio ed anche al suo discorso creativo. Marcovaldo è una figura di uomo semplice capo di famiglia numerosa, lavora con una ditta dal nome quasi inpronunciabile e disumano di SBAV, come ci dice lo stesso Calvino nell'introduzione alla raccolta, "L'ultima incarnazione di una serie di candidi eroi, poveri diavoli alla Charlie Chaplin, con questa particolarità: di essere un "Uomo di Natura," un "Buon Selvaggio" esiliato nella città industriali"¹⁴ Marcovaldo diventa la riduzione del "Buon Selvaggio" di Rousseau a fantasma. Questo rende l'opera *'Marcovaldo'* un grande discorso sulla libertà, che ci porta all'opera del grande pensatore del settecento *'Il Contratto Sociale.'* e più precisamente all'inizio di questo libro: "L'uomo nasce libero, ed è ovunque in catene"¹⁵ dalla quale Karl Marx sembra che abbia ricevuto lo spunto per concludere il suo Manifesto Comunista: "I proletari non hanno nulla da perdere oltre le loro catene."¹⁶ Però, vale la pena continuare a prendere in considerazione il

13. Italo Calvino, *Marcovaldo* (Einaudi. 1966), p.9.

14. Citato in Giuseppe Bonura *Invito alla lettura di Calvino* (Mursia 1974, p. 75.

15. J.J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (Penguin 1977), p. 49. (la traduzione è nostra)

16. Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Penguin 1977), pp. 120,121.

resto della parte introduttiva del lavoro di Rousseau:

"Quelli che si considerano padroni altrui sono in verità in una maggiore sciagura di loro. Come venne ad avverarsi questa trasformazione? Io non ho risposte. Come possa essere resa legittima? Questa domanda, credo che possa rispondere.

Se considerassi solo la forza e gli effetti della forza, dovrei dire: "Fin quanto un popolo è costretto ad obbedire, e fa appunto questo, fa la cosa giusta; ma appena possa liberarsi da questo imprigionamento è fa appunto questo, fa una cosa ancor più giusta; perché a quando riottiene la propria libertà tramite lo stesso diritto che la tolse via, un popolo, o è giustificato nel riprendere la propria libertà, oppure non esiste giustificazione per quelli che la tolsero via". Ma l'ordine sociale è un diritto sacro che serve da base a tutti gli altri diritti. E siccome non sia un diritto naturale, deve essere uno fondato sulle leggi..."¹⁷

In queste parole di Rousseau abbiamo il nucleo della "discussione ideologica nel racconto" di cui parla nella citata introduzione al *Sentiero dei Nidi di Ragno*, applicata ai racconti di *Marcovaldo*. Ed è appunto questo che diventa anche *Marcovaldo* al di là delle forme fiabesche e mitiche. Calvino è alla ricerca di una "nuova mitologia" che si esprima in termini contemporanei. È il mito della Libertà che nacque con la Rivoluzione del 1789 trasportato in bocca all'apparentemente insignificante impiegato della Sbaev ed il suo piccolo mondo, il quale, poi tanto piccolo non è perché vi include gli uomini sempre in lotta per la propria libertà. Calvino sembra volerci dire che le leggi di Rousseau su cui si basa il diritto dell'ordine sociale non siano ancora adatte per gli uomini come *Marcovaldo*. E di questo parla Giuseppe Bonura¹⁸: "Favola sì... ma anche impegnata a sviscerare le ragioni storiche per cui l'uomo di Rousseau si è ridotto a una sorta di fantasma svagato e sognante, come è appunto *Marcovaldo*. L'armonia natura-uomo-storia è naufragata in un mare di cemento e in fiumi di detersivi schiumosi. Calvino descrive questa trasformazione con una pietà sorridente e tuttavia consapevole che non bisogna spargere lacrime su *Marcovaldo*, ma denunciare coloro che hanno sottratto a *Marcovaldo* la sua "Natura".

Ed è questo un altro tema fondamentale in *Marcovaldo*, cioè quello della alienazione. Il protagonista si trova allontanato dalla propria vera natura di uomo soggetto alle leggi della stessa Natura che gli diede origine. La ricerca di *Marcovaldo* della natura tra l'asfalto ed il cemento della città non è altro che la ricerca dell'uomo della propria identità perduta a causa dell'alienazione che gli provoca questo smarrimento. Tutto avviene in città dove c'è uno scontro continuo tra uomo e civiltà. E quali

(la traduzione è nostra)

17. J. J. Rousseau, *op. cit.*, pp. 49,50.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

19. Italo Calvino, *Marcovaldo*, p. 9.

sono le caratteristiche della città dove si svolge l'esistenza di Marcovaldo? Una città piena dei segni della civiltà dell'epoca dove "cartelli, semafori, vetrine, insegne luminose, manifesti..."¹⁹ si affollano. Sono i segni della stragrande città centro della civiltà contemporanea dove gli elementi del sistema neo-capitalistico trovano la loro massima espressione, dove il povero diavolo di Marcovaldo, manovale, si trova un estraneo. È un sistema che risulta illeggibile per il nostro personaggio, e al quale Marcovaldo aveva "... un occhio poco adatto..."²⁰ Ed è da questo rapporto di Marcovaldo con il sistema sociale in cui opera come uomo, che nascono le sue avventure, le sue gesta fiabesche, dove c'è la soluzione senza soluzione della fine di ogni racconto, cioè la risata finale che nasconde questa condizione insolubile. È l'alienazione camuffata nella risata che l'alienazione dalla città e l'allontanamento dalla natura causano. È una duplice situazione che si presenta in forma di dilemma perenne e la crisi che sfocia nella risata.

Marcovaldo non partecipa alla vita vera e propria della città e al mondo operaio e i riferimenti a questi rapporti socio-economici con il proprio luogo di lavoro sono esteriori come nel racconto invernale "La città smarrita nella neve." In questo racconto il confronto con vita cittadina ennesimamente presentata in termini imprenditoriali ed affaristici risulta artificiale e vuota in confronto, come quello dell'automobile del grande imprenditore con un mucchio di neve con la forma d'un automobile: "... la lussuosa macchina del presidente del consiglio d'amministrazione commendator Alboino, tutta ricoperta di neve. Visto che la differenza tra un'auto e un mucchio di neve era così poca, Marcovaldo con la pala si mise a modellare la forma d'una macchina. Venne bene: davvero tra le due non si riconosceva più qual'era la vera."²¹ E questa impossibilità di distinguere tra vero e finto tocca anche lo stesso Marcovaldo il quale davanti ad un uomo di neve costruito nei giochi di un gruppo di ragazzi finisce uno tra "... due pupazzi identici, vicini"²².

In tutto questo ambiente la ricerca della natura diventa un'attività buffonesca. I funghi del primo racconto "Funghi in città," dove la natura diventa sotterrata dalla vita cittadina e la pace campestre de "La Villeggiatura in panchina, in cui neanche la notte resta più un momento di ritrovamento dell'uomo di se stesso, essere frutto della Natura, perché la città deve prepararsi per un altro giorno produttivo, sono dei sogni continuamente inseguiti da Marcovaldo. Sono sogni irraggiungibili nella città dove gli altri personaggi dal mondo di lavoro: Vilgelmo, il magazziniere capo, il Commendatore Alboino, presidente del consiglio dell'amministrazione, insieme agli altri emarginati dalla città, Amadigi, lo spazzino di

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, p.28.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

"Funghi in città," e lo stesso Marcovaldo, condizionato dal proprio ambiente, non lasciano che siano realizzati.

Nella città di Marcovaldo, il protagonista ha un modo di esistenza che "affronta la vita come qualcosa indipendente ed il valore nell'essere per se, il prodotto della civiltà in cui vive, lavoro oggettivato, ha un'anima propria, e si stabilisce contraria al lavoro vivo come potere alienato"²³. Questo potere che Marcovaldo possiede la consumo nella ricerca della proprie radici nella Natura. La società borghese che ha prodotto la città in cui vive Marcovaldo è così oggetto di severa critica sotterranea in tutti i racconti di Marcovaldo.

Il tema dell'alienazione presente in Marcovaldo non ha soltanto origini dall'opera di Marx ma anche negli stessi anni in cui lo scrittore scriveva la sua opera. Siamo nell' seconda metà degli anni sessanta in cui movimenti anarco-sindacalisti trovarono la loro massima espressione nel '68 quando uno sciopero generale in Francia e la sembianza di una cooperazione tra studenti ed operai in altri paesi industrializzati dimostravano che le forze sprigionate dalla rivoluzione industriale non avevano trovato ancora l'ambiente politico e culturale adatto. Questi avvenimenti rendevano il tema dell'alienazione uno scottante. Come ci dice lo storico George Lichtheim:²⁴ "Quello che gli studenti — nella loro maggioranza estratti dalla nuova classe media di salariati e professionisti — si ribellarono contro era chiaramente lontano dagli scopi tradizionali del movimento operaio, anche se si possa argomentare che l'alienazione che sentivano era un aspetto di esploitazione".

In questo modo Italo Calvino parte dalla mitologia, passa alla fiaba o alla favola per arrivare a fare un discorso culturale-ideologico sulla condizione della classe di gente di Marcovaldo. Egli cerca di esprimere tramite l'infantilità della forma una verità adulta. Come dice Marx dopo le sue considerazioni sulla mitologia nel *Grundrisse*: "Un uomo non può diventare, di nuovo, un bambino, perché potrebbe cadere nell'infantismo. Ma non è vero che trovi la gioia nella *naïveté* del bambino, e non debba insistere per riprodurre la verità di essa in un livello più alto? Non è vero che l'autentico carattere di ogni epoca trovi vita nella natura dei propri bambini? Perché l'infanzia storica dell'umanità, la sua rivelazione bellissima, come uno stadio che non ritorni più, non debba esercitare un fascino perenne?"²⁵

23. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*. (Penguin Books in association with *New Left Review*, 1977), pp. 452,455.

24. George Lichtheim, *A Short History of Socialism* (Fontana-Collins 1977), pp.297. 298.

25. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 110,111.

WILFRED OWEN: AN INTRODUCTION

Marianne Vella

Wilfred Owen was an English soldier and poet of World War One whose work exercised a major influence on the poetry of the nineteen-thirties.

Born on 18 March 1893 in Shropshire, England, of a middle-class family, he began writing poetry at an early age. By the time he was eighteen, he was earning one pound a month, working with a vicar at Dunsden, Oxfordshire, as his assistant and for a while he seriously thought of going into Holy Orders. This was his first close contact with squalor, sickness and poverty, so typical of that particular area. This experience inspired him with a feeling of compassion which was to characterize some of his best 'war' poems.

In 1912, he went to University College, Reading, but after a short while his bad health necessitated his withdrawal from the cold wintry English climate, so he went to Bordeaux in France to work as tutor in English at the Berlitz School of Languages. In July 1914, he left his post to become private tutor to two boys in a Catholic family in Bordeaux. There he met Laurent Tailhade, French symbolist poet and pacifist, whose non-Christian ethical beliefs broadened Owen's own Anglican ideas. This fact could partly explain why during this time Owen suffered from a lapse in Christian faith — another trait which is evident in some of his poems. Tailhade was probably the only man of letters whose acquaintance Owen made before he met an even more influential poet — Siegfried Sassoon.

A year later, Owen returned to England and enlisted in the infantry. He was sent to France on active service until he was wounded and returned home in the early months of 1917. Between March and June 1917, he was sent to various hospitals. It was while he was at Craiglockart Military Hospital, near Edinburgh, that he met Sassoon, whose bitter anti-war poems were already well-known. Under Sassoon's guidance, Owen's poetic genius developed and improved rapidly. In August 1918, Owen returned to France for active service. Barely a month after he won the Military Cross, he was killed in action by machine-gun fire, on November 4th 1918 while trying to get his men across the Sombre Canal at Ors.

War was by far the greatest influence on his poetry. Instead of destroying his ideas for poetry, it enhanced his vision of life, providing him with a sense of realism and inspiring him with themes which he moulded into some of the best war poetry written in this century. This also explains why his war poetry far surpasses in beauty his earlier poetry.

His early ideas of poetry were influenced by the Romantic school of poet-

ry. Like young men of his own age, he had been taught to appreciate the value of poets such as Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Tennyson. He himself admits a certain affinity with John Keats. For example his phenomenal poetic development, his sense of achievement, his tragically premature death — all these bring to mind the career of Keats whose poetry Owen loved and whose influence is unmistakable in several of the poems written before August 1917. His 'early' themes are typically romantic ones — loneliness, isolation, beauty, love. Most of them are just conventional love lyrics, written in the style of his predecessors. Owen is by no means an 'intellectual poet' and, as his letters reveal, he prefers the emotional to the philosophical aspect of Romantic or Georgian poetry.

By far the most recurrent themes in his early poetry are loneliness and unrequited love. Most of these poems were written while he was at Dunsden and many of them were left unpublished. Even as late as 1916, his poetry betrays an affinity with Georgian poetry as far as structure, theme and diction are concerned. The sonnet "To Eros" written in May 1916 is one example. The theme deals with romanticised disillusionment but there are also hints of spiritual disillusionment and a rejection of Christianity, both of which are brought to the fore later on in his war poetry. The theme of isolation is best illustrated in "The Unreturning" written in July 1914, where imagery is less derivative. Owen, here rejects the conventional idea of heaven. He sees dawn as a hostile menace. The imagery suggests violence. Words such as "crushed" and "hurled" suggest Owen's more mature style. It is evident that Owen is moving further and further away from his previous models carefully choosing a source of imagery and diction that is more personal, less derivative. The word "ghost" evokes a sense of loneliness.

There watched I for the Dead; but no ghost woke.

This is Owen's way of conveying to the reader the idea of death and the irrevocable sense of loss that death brings with it. The same 'ghost' image is taken up in "Shadwell Stair" with the same purpose of evoking a sense of loneliness both in the opening line and in the last one:

I am the ghost of Shadwell Stair
I with another ghost am lain.

Both poems are minor and are certainly not representative of Owen's truly poetic style. It was after he personally experienced what fighting in the trenches really meant, what war was failing to accomplish and that it was eventually destroying everything in its wake that Owen's approach to poetry both in theme and mood changed drastically and incredibly swiftly.

The impact which war first made on Owen was one of embittered rage but its effect on him was not completely negative. War provided him with a sense of realism which had previously been lacking in earlier poems. The atrocities of war, the sheer waste of human lives, the after-effects of war —

both physical and psychological — were some of Owen's favourite themes.

War did not destroy Owen's idea of Beauty. On the contrary, it altered and widened it immeasurably. But "Beauty" as a theme is not often used in his war poetry. Owen's first-hand experience of war and death, his awareness of the great gap between the soldier risking his life for his country and the civilian safe at home and between the frontline soldier and the "brass-hat" was soon to find expression in some of the best poems he has ever written. The harsh and horrible realities of war are first expressed in such poems as "The Dead-Beat" and "Dulce et Decorum Est". His main aim in writing them was to instill loathing for the atrocities of war, to make people aware of what was really happening. In the latter poem, his attitude is rather negative and cynical but its shockingly realistic details are none the less effective in driving Owen's message home. His vivid portrayal of the physical pain that a gassed man has to endure could only be convincingly conveyed to the public by an eye-witness, namely the poet himself, and in this he definitely succeeded. This poem was written in August 1917 when Owen had been sent home as a casualty.

By this time he had met Sasson whose bitter anti-war ideas were no secret and whom Owen looked up to as his guide and mentor. And this first bitter taste of war in the trenches can adequately and reasonably explain Owen's different approach to poetry writing. There is no doubt that by now Owen had not only found his true poetic inspiration but a poetic style for himself and for future poets.

The imagery of "Dulce et Decorum Est" is just as effective and evocative as its diction. The under water imagery in the second stanza is particularly apt in describing the poor man who does not manage to put on his protective gas mask on time:

Dim through the misty panes and thick green light
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

The image of a man's agony by gas poisoning lingers on in the poet's mind and haunts him even in his dreams:

In all my dreams, before my helpless night,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

The sheer intensity of physical pain the soldier endured is illustrated through images such as "white eyes writhing in his face" and "froth-corrupted lungs". But what is even more striking is Owen's final moralising comment where he deliberately strikes at those people who encourage more young men to go to war, who, above all "tell with such high zest".....

the old Lie: Dulce et Decorum Est Pro Patria mori.

emphasising the word "Lie" by purposely writing it with a capital letter.

"The Dead Beat", another August 1917 poem, deals with a soldier whose mind and will have been broken by war — hence the psychological effects of war on the common soldier. Another important point is that in this poem we see Owen using for the first time a blunt, colloquial style. Like "Dulce", it was written at Craiglockhart Military Hospital after his first spell of soldiers' life in the trenches. The animal imagery used with reference to the injured soldier brings out the cruelty, the callousness, the degradation of human mankind — a theme he was to handle more expertly, more poetically in later poems. The casualty is compared to "a cod, heavy like meat". Even more pathetic is the doctor's reference to him as "scum". Through this line, Owen is striking at the 'brass-hats' and emphasising the cold and callous nature of some human beings with respect to others less fortunate than themselves. The poem owes much to Siegfried Sassoon as far as style is concerned. Owen himself admitted this, but it also marks the beginning of Owen's particular style which he was to experiment with and improve upon it in an incredibly short span of time.

So far, Owen's main aim in writing such poems was to inspire hatred for the atrocities and bestialities which the war brought in its wake by giving us vivid, even graphic descriptions of desolate landscapes and unrecognizable corpses both human and animal. Gradually, however, the protest against war became secondary to his intentions as it gave way to more positive sentiments such as pleading for the unfortunate and inarticulate soldier. In the more mature war poems, he is thus more conscious of the poet's three-fold role as participant, observer and spokesman. Negative emotions such as anger and indignation are eventually set aside for a kind of poetry which is more positive, more universal in its appeal to mankind.

One of the finest examples of Owen's mature poetry is 'Strange Meeting'. Like most of his poems, it is inspired by trench warfare, but unlike other war poems, the action does not take place in an ordinary battlefield but in the poet's own mind. The soldier he meets in the tunnel is neither a friend nor an enemy but an 'alter ego'. In the relative silence of the tunnel, the poet isolates himself from the noise of battle in order to assess the personal, artistic and historical implications of the battle that is going on in the outside world. As in other poems, he stresses the futility of war. He mourns "the undone years". He sees the disintegration of values:

Now men will go content with what we spoiled
Or discontent boil bloody and be spilled.

He foresees the retrogression of humanity: "nations trek from progress" — an accurate prophecy of the social and economic crisis as the immediate after-math of war. He mourns "the truth untold". He regrets the fact that he had no chance to use his courage, ability and wisdom to warn mankind and repair some of the damage the war has left behind. He stresses the sheer waste of human lives — lives that could have been of service to humanity:

For of my glee might many men have laughed,
 And of my weeping something had been left,
 Which must die now.

Imagery plays a crucial role in unravelling Owen's message to posterity. At time it can evoke pain: "groan", "moan", "spilled", "boil bloody". At other times the dominant mood is one of pity and compassion not only for the English soldier but for the universal soldier:

I mean the truth untold,
 The pity of war, the pity war distilled.

A few other images have a definitely Christian flavour:

Lifting distressful hands as if to bless

Some even biblical in origin: The line

I would go up and wash them from sweet wells

reminds us of one of Christ's parables. Perhaps even more obvious is the poignant line:

Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were

an image that successfully conveys the idea of mental torture while reminding us of a similar episode in the Gospel, that of Christ's agony in the garden.

Most critics agree that "Strange Meeting" is one of Owen's best poems thematically; it is described by Siegfried Sassoon as Owen's "passport to immortality and his elegy to the unknown soldier of all nations". Technically, it also has its merits. It is a superb example of the use of pararrhyme, also known as half-rhyme or vowel dissonance. He is not an innovator in this particular field. In English poetry, three other poets had, before Owen, used pararrhyme to some effect, namely Gerard Manley Hopkins, Henry Vaughan and Emily Dickinson. However, there is no proof that Owen was familiar with their texts. In Welsh poetry we find internal and end rhymes, alliteration and assonance used as early as the fourteenth century. This probably explains why more than once Owen had been hailed as a Welsh poet by the Welsh. Owen's most probable source, however, was French poetry. During his time as tutor in Bordeaux, he must have read Jules Romains' poems, possibly at the instigation of his poet friend Tailhade, who had a voracious interest in contemporary French poetry. Romains is today better known as novelist than poet but his poems, published before the First World War, must have reached Owen's attention.

Owen's experiment with pararrhyme seems to have begun as early as 1914

but he handles it rather clumsily and it is not until three more years have elapsed that Owen uses it again, this time with more subtlety and success in "Exposure". Unlike the previous poem, Owen uses pararhyme not only at the end of a line but even within the same line such as "flakes" and "flock". By 1918, the year in which he wrote "Strange Meeting", he seems to have mastered the art of using pararhyme couplets all throughout and most effectively too. The constant jarring and discordant sounds of line-ending words such as "escaped/scooped" "moan/mourn" "groaned/groined" "hall/hell" are in keeping with the dominant note of hopelessness, melancholy and frustration so typical of this poem's theme and mood.

In his early experiments with pararhyme he evidently found it hard to master the art but gradually he improved it and in a surprisingly short time he taught himself to use it to his own advantage, to drive the message home more convincingly than if he had used, for instance, blank verse. Reviewing "Strange Meeting" in 1921 John Middleton Murray best describes the impact pararhyme has on the reader:

I believe that the reader who comes fresh to this poem does not immediately observe the assonant endings ... The reader looks again and discovers the technical secret ... These assonant endings are indeed the discovery of a genius ... You cannot imagine them used for any other purpose save Owen's or by any other hand save his. They are the very modulation of his voice; you are in the presence of that rare achievement, a true poetic style.

Owen's participation in the war was also partly responsible for a spiritual crisis which he, at times, hinted at in poems such as "Mental Cases" and "At a Calvary Near the Ancre". In one of his letters he described himself as "a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience", adding in the same letter that "pure Christianity will not fit in with pure patriotism". This particular sense of guilt is illustrated in poems such as "Inspection" and "Mental Cases" where blood is the symbol of universal guilt. Occasionally he goes a step further and attacks Christianity directly, showing the inadequacy and remoteness of the Church in the face of evil such as war. The poem "Le Christianisme" betrays Owen's "very seared conscience", his sense of uneasiness over religious beliefs. In earlier poems such as "Anthem for Doomed Youth" and "Greater Love", Owen implied doubts concerning Christianity but in this poem, written in September 1918 and in "At a Calvary Near the Ancre" written in the same year, his doubts have settled into convictions. In the latter poem he accuses the clergy of betraying Christ:

In this war He too lost a limb.
But his disciples hide apart;
And now the Soldiers bear with Him.

He even strikes at journalists and politicians who fostered hatred and encouraged young men to go to war, thereby opposing the spirit of the martyred

Christ. To him, such people are "scribes" who "shove" and "brawl allegiance to the state" while the soldier is the modern figure of the crucified Christ:

But they who love the greater love
Lay down their life; they do not hate.

In these lines Owen is indebted to the Gospel where Christ teaches: "Greater love hath no man than, that a man lay down his life for a friend"; but Owen is also aware that the soldier who makes this great sacrifice may also be disobeying the fifth commandment: "Thou shalt not kill". Hence the dichotomy in Owen's soul so aptly illustrated in "Strange Meeting":

I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark, for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried: but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now ...

This, therefore, is the image which Owen leaves to future generations that of a soldier-poet whose main concern is not, in Owen's own words "with Poetry":

My subject is War, and the pity of War
The Poetry is in the pity.

In writing war poetry he is confined to a historical and bitter reality well-known to himself as soldier and thus he can take no imaginative liberties with contemporary events. His theme is thus the reality of war and his immediate concern is to communicate that brutal reality to the millions at home who cannot visualize, hence appreciate, the magnitude of the experiences and sacrifices of the common soldier. His poetry is also concerned with portraying the prolonged prosecution of a war which has become particularly senseless to those who are fighting it. To make us aware of the soldiers' predicament, the poet occasionally gives us accounts of the nauseating experiences they had to endure, expressed in crude details of death and decomposition but the overall picture is one of pity and sympathy rather than hatred. Unlike other war poets, he does not confine himself to accidental, casual or personal experiences. Owen surpasses them by giving us as complete a picture of war as possible by depicting not only the physical background of war and its devastating effects on the poor soldier but by adding to it a sense of loss, the pathos of human suffering and above all a keen perception of tragic intensity, thus lending to it a touch of universality. In short, Owen's war poetry transcends the traditional role played by the 'poetry of protest' for it is above it as much as it is part of it.

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ON POLAR CO-ORDINATES

Charles Vassallo

One of the topics mathematics A Level students find hard to master is Polar Co-Ordinates. The aim here is to help such students solve problems involving circles, cardioids, lemniscates and their tangents.

Polar Co-Ordinates

Instead of the variables x and y of Cartesian co-ordinates (so named in honour of the French mathematician Rene Descartes, (1596 — 1650)) in Polars we introduce the variables r and T^* . Instead of (x, y) a point is written (r, T) where r is a number and T an angle. As examples the points $A(2, 60^\circ)$, $B(2, 150^\circ)$, $C(1.5, 240^\circ)$ and $D(3, 330^\circ)$ are plotted in *figure 1*. The horizontal line is called the polar line or initial line: it comes out from a point O called the pole or origin. The number gives the distance of the polar point concerned from O , while the angle is measured upwards from the polar line. Other examples of polar co-ordinates are points $E(2, -120^\circ)$, $F(-1, 150^\circ)$, $G(-2, 210^\circ)$, and $H(-3, -60^\circ)$ (*figure 2*). Note that if the angle is negative then it is measured downwards from the polar line;

* For technical reasons, **theta** has been substituted by T throughout the article and angles are in degrees instead of radians, as is more appropriate

if r is negative the point is reflected to the other side of O . Ex. 1 The student should therefore here plot for himself the above points and others of his own making. To LEARN mathematics one must DO mathematics. The student should work the exercises he meets in this discussion.

Relations Between Polar and Cartesian Co-Ordinates

If a point has co-ordinates (x, y) in cartesian form and (r, T) in its equivalent polar form the relations are given by the two equations $x = r \cos T$ and $y = r \sin T$. Useful consequences of these two are four others which the student can easily obtain on his own: $x^2 + y^2 = r^2$, $x^2 - y^2 = r^2 \cos 2T$, $2xy = r^2 \sin 2T$ and $y/x = \tan T$. It is these six relations that are utilized when problems ask to change cartesian equations into polar ones and vice-versa. The student is advised to remember the first basic two and be able to obtain the other four.

Ex. 2 Use diagrams to prove the two basic relations between cartesian and polar co-ordinates. Hint: Let the point be in each of the 4 quadrants, respectively.

Ex. 3 Starting with the cartesian forms below obtain their equivalent polar forms.

CARTESIAN FORMS

POLAR FORMS

lines

$$x = \pm p$$

$$r = \pm p \sec \theta$$

$$y = \pm p$$

$$r = \pm p \operatorname{cosec} \theta$$

$$y = x \tan b$$

$$\theta = b \text{ (constant angle)}$$

circles

$$(x \mp a)^2 + y^2 = a^2$$

$$r = \pm 2a \cos \theta$$

$$x^2 + (y \mp a)^2 = a^2$$

$$r = \pm 2a \sin \theta$$

$$x^2 + y^2 = a^2$$

$$r = a$$

cardioids

$$(x^2 + y^2 \mp ax)^2 = a^2(x^2 + y^2) \quad r = a(1 \pm \cos \theta)$$

lemniscates

$$a^2(x^2 - y^2) = (x^2 + y^2)^2$$

$$r^2 = a^2 \cos 2\theta$$

$$2a^2xy = (x^2 + y^2)^2$$

$$r^2 = a^2 \sin 2\theta$$

NOTE carefully the polar lines above since they play an important part in polar problems.

Ex. 4 Starting with the polar forms obtain the cartesian forms.

Ex. 5 Sketch the polar lines and circles listed, using their familiar cartesian forms as a guide.

After that general but important introduction, we may now study certain curves in detail, starting with the cardioids.

The Cardioid $r = a(1 + \cos \theta)$

This curve is so called because it is heart-shaped. Points on it are $(2a, 0^\circ)$, $B(3a/2, 60^\circ)$, $C(a, 90^\circ)$, $O(0, 180^\circ)$, $D(a, 270^\circ)$, $E(3a/2, 300^\circ)$ and again $A(2a, 360^\circ)$ (figure 3). Recall that $\cos 360^\circ = 1$, $\cos 270^\circ = 0$ and $\cos 180^\circ = -1$. These results are very useful in polar curve sketching and must be memorised. NOTE that at 60° occurs the highest point and at 300° (its reflection) occurs the lowest point. Later we shall prove this.

The Cardioid $r = a(1 - \cos T)$

Points on this curve are $O(0, 0^\circ)$, $A(a, 90^\circ)$, $B(3a/2, 120^\circ)$, $C(2a, 180^\circ)$, $D(3a/2, 240^\circ)$, $E(2a, 270^\circ)$ and again $O(0, 360^\circ)$. Its sketch is *figure 4*.

Ex. 6 What are the co-ordinates of the highest and lowest points of $r = a(1 - \cos T)$?

Ex. 7 Sketch $r = 3(1 + \cos T)$, $r = 3a(1 - \cos T)$, showing the highest and lowest co-ordinates.

The Limacon $r = a \cos T + c$, with c greater than a

Strictly speaking $r = a(1 + \cos T)$ call it a cardioid. When c is larger than a the heart shape remains but the cusp (sharp point on a curve) disappears also a limaçon, with $c = a$. But to better distinguish between them we appear, to be replaced by a 'bend' there. As example we take the curve $r = a \cos T + 3a$. Points on it are $A(4a, 0^\circ)$, $B(3a, 90^\circ)$, $C(2a, 180^\circ)$, $D(3a, 270^\circ)$ and again $A(4a, 360^\circ)$ (*figure 5*).

Ex. 8 Sketch the limaçon $r = a \cos T + 2a$. Show that its cartesian equation is $(x^2 + y^2 - ax)^2 = 4a^2(x^2 + y^2)$.

Symmetry In Polar Curves

NOTE that all the above mentioned cardioids and limaçons are symmetric about the x -axis (i.e., the line $T = 0^\circ$). This happens whenever the curve contains, or can be written to contain, only $\cos T$ and its powers. When only $\sin T$ and its powers oc-

cur in a polar curve equation that curve is symmetric about the y -axis (i.e., the line $T = 90^\circ$). This is important to remember since it simplifies the sketching of polar curves.

The Limacon $r = a \cos T + c$, with c less than a

Here the cardioid shape is retained but something is added to it. As example consider $r = 2 \cos T + 1$. Points on this curve are $A(3, 0^\circ)$, $B(2.4, 45^\circ)$, $C(1, 90^\circ)$, $O(0, 120^\circ)$, $D(-10.7, 150^\circ)$, $E(-1, 180^\circ)$, $F(-0.4, 225^\circ)$, $G(1, 270^\circ)$, $H(2.4, 315^\circ)$ and again $A(3, 360^\circ)$ (*figure 6*). NOTE that point E occurs when $\cos T = -1$, that is at $T = 180^\circ$. The other points on the inner loop correspond to those values of T for which $2 \cos T + 1$ is negative, i.e., for $\cos T$ less than $-\frac{1}{2}$; i.e., for T between 120° and 240° (verify this).

Ex. 9 Investigate the symmetry of these polar curves, then sketch: $r = 4 \sec T$, $2r = \operatorname{cosec} T$, $r = 4 \cos T$, $r = -3 \sin T$, $r^2 = 4 \cos T$ and $r^2 = 4 \sin 2T$.

Ex. 10 Sketch the limaçons: $r = 2 \cos T + 3$, $r = \cos T + 2$, $r = 4a \cos T + 3a$ and $r = 3a \cos T + a$.

Theorem I The highest point on the cardioid $r = a(1 + \cos T)$ occurs at $T = 60^\circ$.

Proof: Refer to *figure 7*.

Let A be the highest point and (r, T) its co-ordinates. In triangle OAB , $p = r \sin T$. From calculus we

argue that p will be maximum when $dp/dT = 0$. So $r \cos T + \sin T \, dr/dT = 0$. From the cardioid equation, $dr/dT = -a \sin T$. So $2 \cos^2 T + \cos T - 1 = 0$; i.e., $(2 \cos T - 1)(\cos T + 1) = 0$; i.e., $\cos T = \frac{1}{2}$ and -1 . The solution we are after is, then, $T = 60^\circ$. // // //

Ex. 11 Find the co-ordinates of the highest and lowest points on $r = a + a \cos T$.

Ex. 12 Hence find the equations to the tangents parallel to the initial line for this cardioid.

Ex. 13 Show that if (r, T) represents the highest point on the limaçon $r = c + a \cos T$ then T satisfies the equation $2a \cos^2 T + c \cos T - a = 0$. (The procedure is as that for the above proof.)

Theorem II The double tangent of the cardioid $r = a + a \cos T$ has the equation $4r = -a \sec T$.

Proof: Refer to figure 8.

Let $B(r, T)$ be one point of contact of the tangent. The equation of the double tangent AB is $r = -p \sec T$, where p is the perpendicular distance AO of the tangent from O.

First we shall find the co-ordinates of B. Imposing $dp/dT = 0$ at maximum p and using the fact that $dr/dT = -a \sin T$, we end up with the trig equation $\sin T + \sin 2T = 0$. The solutions between 0° and 360° are $0^\circ, 120^\circ, 180^\circ, 240^\circ, 360^\circ$; from which we retain $T = 120^\circ$ at point B.

So B is the point $(a/2, 120^\circ)$. And from $r = -p \sec T$ we get $p = a/4$. So AB has equation $r = -p \sec T$

$= (-a \sec T)/4$; i.e., $4r = -a \sec T$. // // //

Ex. 14 Write the equations of the double tangents to the cardioids $r = 3 + 3 \cos T$, $r = 1 + \cos T$ and $r = 2a(1 + \cos T)$. Sketch your results.

Ex. 15 Prove that the equation of the double tangent to the cardioid $r = a - a \cos T$ is $4r = a \sec T$.

Ex. 16 Write the equations of the double tangents of the cardioids $r = 2(1 - \cos T)$ and $r = 4a(1 - \cos T)$. Sketch your results.

The Lemniscate $r^2 = a^2 \cos 2T$

Since r^2 is greater than or equal to zero and a^2 is positive, $\cos 2T$ must be greater than or equal to zero. So $2T$ can have values in the ranges $(-90^\circ, 90^\circ)$ and $(270^\circ, 450^\circ)$ inclusive. Hence, T can be in $(-45^\circ, 45^\circ)$ and $(135^\circ, 225^\circ)$ inclusive for the curve to exist. To this we add that since $\cos 2T = 1 - 2 \sin^2 T$, the curve is symmetric about the y-axis. Also $2T = 2 \cos^2 T - 1$ implies that the curve is also symmetric about the x-axis. Points on this curve are:

$$(\pm a, 0^\circ), (0, \pm 45^\circ)$$

$$\text{and } (\pm 0.7a, 30^\circ).$$

The sketch is figure 9.

Ex. 17 Write the equations of the tangents to these lemniscates (i) at the origin and (ii) perpendicular to the initial line: $r^2 = a^2 \cos 2T$, $r^2 = 2 \cos 2T$. Sketch your results.

Theorem III. The highest points on the lemniscate $r^2 = a^2 \cos 2T$ occur at $T = 30^\circ$ and 150° .

Proof: Refer to figure 10.

Let A (r, T) be one of the two highest points. Let $AB = p$. In triangle OAB, $p = r \sin T$. Imposing $dp/dT = 0$ at maximum p and using $r dr/dT = -a^2 \sin 2T$ we get the trig equation $\cos T \cos 2T - \sin T \sin 2T = 0$, i.e., $\cos 3T = 0$. Hence $T = 30^\circ$ is the solution we are after here. From the sketch of the lemniscate and its symmetry it is obvious that the other highest point is at $T = 150^\circ$. // //

Ex. 18 Find the equations of the two horizontal tangents to the lemniscates: $r^2 = a^2 \cos 2T$, $r^2 = 9 \cos 2T$ and $r^2 = 2 \cos 2T$. Sketch your results.

The lemniscate $r^2 = a^2 \sin 2T$

The sketch is that of the previous lemniscate rotated through 45° about O in an anti-clockwise direction. The shape and size remain the same. To help the student understand why this happens the following simple trig argument is given:

$r^2 = a^2 \sin 2T$ (the given curve) $= a^2 \cos (90^\circ - 2T) = a^2 \cos 2(45^\circ - T) = a^2 \cos 2Z$, say, which is the form of the lemniscate $r^2 = a^2 \cos 2T$. This explains why the shape and size of the given lemniscate are as those for $r^2 = a^2 \cos 2T$. Further, since the new angle is $45^\circ - T$ the rotation is

*

Answer: $2.828r = \pm a \operatorname{cosec} \theta$

of 45° and anti-clockwise. The now-obvious sketch is left for the student.

Ex. 19 Write the equations of the two tangents at the origin for the lemniscates $r^2 = a^2 \sin 2T$, $r^2 = 2 \sin 2T$. Sketch your results.

Theorem IV The highest point on the lemniscate $r^2 = a^2 \sin 2T$ occurs at $T = 60^\circ$.

The proof is left as an exercise. The procedure is as in Theorem III.

Ex. 20 Find the equations of the two tangents to $r^2 = a^2 \sin 2T$ which are parallel to the polar line.

Theorem V The two vertical tangents to the lemniscate $r^2 = a^2 \sin 2T$ are given by the equation,

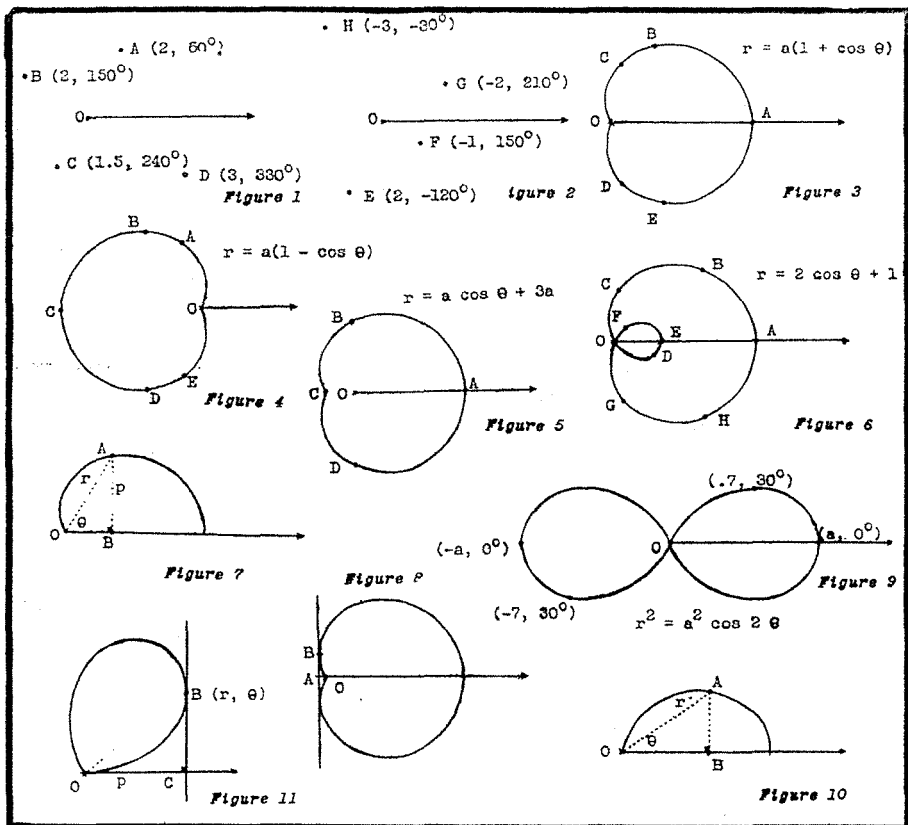
$$2r\sqrt{2} = \pm 3^{\frac{5}{4}} a \sec \theta,$$

$$\text{i.e., } r = \pm 0.81 \sec \theta.$$

Proof: Refer to figure 11.

Let (B(r, T)) be the contact point of one tangent. We first find the co-ordinates of B by imposing $dp/dT = 0$ at maximum p . Using $r dr/dT = a^2 \cos 2T$, one ends up with the equation $\cos 3T = 0$, solutions of which are $T = 30^\circ, 90^\circ, 150^\circ$ and 270° . For point B we retain $T = 30^\circ$. The co-ordinates of B are, then,

$$(3^{\frac{1}{4}} a / \sqrt{2}, 30^\circ).$$



By triangle OBC

$$p = 3^{\frac{3}{4}} a / 2 \sqrt{2}.$$

Since the tangents are given by

$$r = \pm p \sec \theta,$$

the required result follows. ////

In closing I would like to re-emphasise the importance of the exercises given. These exercises cannot be separated from the discussions encountered without weakening the student's ability to understand these same discussions: To LEARN mathematics one must DO mathematics.

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METHODS OF LIBRARY RESEARCH

John Sare

The need for information

A society produces and uses information. All activity whether in science, industry, commerce or government today takes place in such a complex environment that it must be based on a specially acquired information. At the same time, every act gives rise to information and recorded knowledge grows apace. To find information one seeks within the huge mass now available, becomes even more difficult. If the information is to be accessible, it must be organised.

Diffusion of information comes in many ways. The foremost is by way of mouth — lectures, meetings, conferences, organisations or associations. Bringing people together with similar interests is a potent way of organising the flow of information. More often than not, information by way of mouth finds itself recorded in a documentary form. This in itself becomes a source document.

Many people, from the man in the street up to a head of an institution, help to organise this documentary record. The editor who assembles a series of articles into an issue of a journal is doing the same. But a wider organisation is achieved by the library which arranges a collection of books and journals in a subject sequence. Encyclopaedias are essays organised in a summary form which are whole fields of knowledge. The librarian is always trying to collect, digest and collate existing information, hoping to ease the task of whoever uses the library.

An outstanding feature of the present scene is that information is recorded in innumerable, separately published documents. The user of the library with a problem to solve and actions to take, needs a great variety of information. No matter how well educated he is in his field, information that is new to him is continually being recorded. He needs a selective service to keep him aware of current developments. When faced with the problem, he may find that his fund of knowledge is not adequate. He may wish to obtain data, a process, a method, a theory to help him to solve the problem. On some occasions he may need to survey thoroughly a subject that is new to him. He may need to extract from the documentary mass a high proportion of the available information on this subject.

Information needs have been divided in three main types: current aware-

ness; everyday information and exhaustive survey. To satisfy the three types, documentary information must be collected and stored. The main factor is to select from the library, the information needed by the particular user at a particular time. This is how information is acquired.

Information is recorded in many and varied types of documents. If one needs information on a particular aspect of education one has to refer to publications which survey this particular aspect, books useful for ready reference to facts, methods or theories and primary sources of detailed results and discussions. Among such publications we find textbooks, monographs and treatises: ready reference books include encyclopaedias, handbooks and manuals. Primary sources are even more varied — journals, theses and dissertations, bulletins, reports, literature and, perhaps, correspondence.

Each of these types of documents may contain the necessary relevant information. The information system as a whole has the task of so organising the mass documentaion that the right information wherever it may be recorded, can be located when needed. Up to a point our library is achieving this. While admitting that the the whole of knowledge is available for everyone to use, there is a feeling that it is becoming too difficult to keep track of the mass information which is constantly flooding us. Information retrieval was, is, and will always be, a problem. Tools exist to identify documents like bibliographies, catalogues and indexes. The total volume of documents doubles every ten years and to discover information today is twice as difficult than it was ten years ago. Librarians all over the world talk of this problem as a crisis.

In 1807 Thomas Young wrote that "... there is great reason to apprehend, from the continual multiplication of works, which are merely repetitions of others, the sciences will shortly be overwhelmed by their own unwieldy bulk ..." This is more evident today. Three books come to mind — An Introduction to Economics; Economics: an introduction, and Econimics, a beginner's approach. Clearly this is repetitive work but the library cannot choose one book and discard the others. Even though we have those wonderful abstracts — a very modern tool for discovering information — the task of keeping up with the literature is becoming impossible. The problem of selecting documents to read is even more difficult.

Reference tools

One aspect of education which is being given little attention is learning how to find out — the art of discovery — whether by direct questioning of nature or the interrogation of books. Literature search should be quickened by making the necessary retrieval tools more efficient, more widely available and more familiar to the user.

Literature search:

Whenever possible the search for information should go directly to its source, to the paper or the report that contains it. But since these primary sources are rarely known without investigation, the first step is often to a reliable compendium of knowledge — to one in the group of work which are called reference books: encyclopaedic articles, handbooks, treatises, depending on what type of knowledge is sought.

Reference books though valuable first aids, may fail to provide what is wanted, either because the library resources are limited or because the subject is unlikely to have appeared in such texts. In the first instance the next step will be to discover other books covering the subject which can also be consulted: bibliographic guides of all kinds ranging from reading lists to universal bibliographies. These can be guides which introduce the reader to other books not necessarily found in the reference section or the reserved shelf.

Rather than searching for further complete books on the subject, an alternative course can be taken. In this case it is necessary to go beyond the reference book and to look to the primary source. Here an amount of previous knowledge is of no more than occasional help: the volume and the variety of literature is too great. It is at this point that guides are essential.

Bibliographies for retrieval vary as to purpose. Some are designed to encourage reading or purchase; some are provided to give authority to information quoted; yet others aim simply to record the existence of items cited. Bibliographies may be restricted to listing works of a single physical form — books, films, microfilms, manuscripts — or a single literary form — atlases, serials, theses — or they may cover both forms. The subject matter may be limited or universal in scope; the coverage may be retrospective or current; comprehensive or selective. The items listed may be limited to those available at a given point — the library — or not available in the library because they are lost. The style of the list can vary as to arrangement which may be alphabetical by author, title, subject, as to fulness of description of the items listed and as to the physical form of the bibliography itself.

Lists of books:

All lists of books are only of occasional use in retrieval, valuable though they may be to the lecturer who must recommend books to his students. Reading lists, select bibliographies, literary catalogues, national bibliographies and acquisition lists have their uses but also their limitations which prevent them from being more than a supplementary tool in the information search.

The simplest type of booklist is perhaps the reading list on a given subject, produced by lecturers for their students. The value of a reading list is that it can be intimately attuned to the exact needs of the students.

The catalogue of a library can often serve as a fairly complete list or be

selective, limited to books on a particular subject. The library catalogue is in fact the oldest type of booklist known. The catalogue enhances the value of a bibliography.

National bibliographies:

Because of ease of access and also for linguistic reasons, the listing of all publications of a single nation has always been more realistic than world bibliography — though no nation has as yet succeeded in listing its total literary output, even of books alone.

Our library receives regularly the British National Bibliography, British Books in Print and Paperbacks in Print. Unfortunately our library does not receive books by legal deposit, so our catalogue does not act as a national list for books printed locally or received by our library. The value of a national bibliography to the specialist is that it serves as a makeshift list in subjects lacking adequate bibliographic organisation, necessary for verifying references and for additional publication details. The national bibliography serves, therefore, only as a supplementary aid. But it is an essential background for a really complete coverage of books in any subject field.

Abstracting and indexing services:

The most important and fortunately the most numerous of the analytic guides, are the abstracting and indexing serials. These are distinguished according to the fullness with which they describe the papers they list. Serials which refer only to title, author and source of each article are simply indexes. Such publications have a long history, and they first appeared in 1683 at Amsterdam. Serials that index current papers have continued and even developed — the latest being computer based indexes to the title of papers.

Usually, however, abstracts are expected to do more than index the items they cite. Some form of summary of the information contained in each citation is required — an abstract which briefly indicates, fully summarises or even even critically assesses this information. Abstracts of this kind first appeared in the beginning of the 19th century. The abridgments took the form of a precis, sometimes running into several pages. The most famous of all abstracting journals is the Chemical Abstracts. There are at present no less than a thousand abstracting and indexing serials published throughout the world. Some are very broad in scope, especially those which cover the whole field of science.

