

## BOOK REVIEWS

J. AQUILINA, *The Structure of Maltese: A Study in Mixed Grammar and Vocabulary*.  
The Royal University of Malta, 1959 Agents, Luzac (London), 45s. ix + 358pp.

THOSE who have followed the steady output and scholarly standard maintained by Professor Aquilina in his publications since 1940, when he started lecturing on Maltese at the University, might well think that this volume is the culmination of his linguistic researches, the crystallisation of his conclusions on the nature and structure of Maltese. This is true only in part. The present work, as the author says in his preface, 'is a revised and enlarged version of a thesis accepted during the Session 1939-40 for the degree of Ph.D. in the University of London'. Revision and enlargement there have been — and this is inevitable — but the substance of the work, and the approach to the subject remained basically the same. This should be borne in mind in assessing the value of Professor Aquilina's book from (i) the personal and (ii) the historical angle.

Between 1931 and 1937 Aquilina had distinguished himself as an undergraduate for his literary contributions in English, Maltese and Italian, for his competent editing of the *Journal of the University of Malta Literary Society*, and for his stout defence of Maltese as the national language — a defence which often involved him in long and embittered controversy in the Press. Jointly with Professor P.P. Saydon, he had compiled a graded three-volume anthology *Ward ta' Qari Malti* for use at Secondary School and University level, and by studies on G. Muscat Azzopardi, Dun Karm and A. Cremona, he had made his mark as a literary critic and placed the art of criticism on a sound footing in Malta. In addition, he had written a prize-winning novel *Tabt Tliet Saltmiet* in 1935. Thus, apart from a list of words unrecorded in Maltese dictionaries, which appeared in *Leżen il-Malti* (1931-5), the first phase of Aquilina's activities lay wholly in the field of Letters.

In 1938, in terms of his appointment to the Chair of Maltese at the University, Aquilina left Malta for postgraduate studies at the London School of Oriental and African Languages. On the face of it, the change over from literature to the more disciplined science of philology was at best a risky experiment as these two branches of study are often incompatible with one another and are but rarely found together in the same person. Aquilina, however, succeeded beyond all expectations. In the short space of two years at the School he not only read Arabic and other Semitic languages, but also acquired a sound knowledge of the science of language which, in his turn, he has been imparting to successive generations of students for the past twenty years through various stimulating studies in Maltese Linguistics published in learned local and foreign reviews.

The work under review was written during his stay in London. In many respects it forms a milestone in the history of Maltese Studies. For two centuries the language had engaged the attention of Maltese and foreign writers, but never before has anyone projected a work on such a scale, or brought into his work such a vast scholarly apparatus in both the Semitic and Romance fields of languages. Indeed, insufficient preparation, preconceived ideas or political bias marred the efforts, however praiseworthy, of previous writers such as De Soldanis (1750), A. Preca (1904), V. Caruana Gatto (1906), B. Roudanovsky (1911), L.F. Mizzi

(1923) and E. Rossi (1929). Scholars of repute like W. Gesenius (1810), H. Stumme (1904), L. Bonelli (1897-1907), and Th. Noldeke (1904) introduced Maltese to the world of scholarship with their valuable writings, while nearer to us in point of time, N. Tagliaferro, C.L. Dessoulavy, A. Cremona, P.P. Saydon and G. Micallef also worked on the right lines. Their work was a notable contribution but it never came to full fruition mainly because of peculiar local circumstances that made of Maltese orthography a political issue for many years and prevented anyone from attempting a large-scale, organic study of Maltese. The creation of a Chair of Maltese in 1938, shortly after its recognition and elevation by the Government to the status of an official language in 1934, promised to provide a new direction to the study of Maltese, and Professor Aquilina has more than fulfilled that promise. A review of Professor Aquilina's book and output, both literary and linguistic, must take note of this historical background.

The greater part of this volume consists of tables listing Maltese words, often with their Arabic or Romance equivalents, which are given as examples to prove a rule or to illustrate a pattern established by the author. Aquilina makes a thorough analysis of the Maltese vocabulary, forcing the language, as it were, to yield up the rules of its phonology and morphology. It is evidently impossible to attempt even a short summary here. However, the following extract from the author's preface helps to show the method, extent and scope of the linguistic enquiry. 'Maltese is a separate language resulting from the interaction and fusion of North African Arabic, but with its own dialect features outside the North African group, and Siculo-Italian, covering two different cultural strata... The result of this harmonised fusion is a mixed grammar and vocabulary... In order to be able to distinguish and mark off the two elements, I have established a series of descriptive criteria which together make possible a detailed phonological analysis of the language. The thesis begins with a description of Maltese sounds, followed by Phonology, where these criteria are based on a study of the vowels, their quantity, position and sequences; the Semivowels, the Diphthongs, their position, Stress, the Consonants and their sequences including initial groups in phonological junction (zero vowel). In Morphology the words are studied as patterns, with particular attention to the formal arrangement of the consonants and the correlative vowels which are described in their various semantic changes with lists of examples from spoken and archaic Maltese. In both parts the two elements have been treated separately but under Semitic Maltese are treated those words which have been assimilated partially, or completely, to a Semitic pattern. Words which have not been so assimilated are treated in the section devoted to Romance Maltese'.

In addition, Aquilina reduces Maltese Syntax to a series of combinations indicated by a series of formulas built up generally from the initial letters of easily recognisable grammatical nomenclatures. This aspect of Maltese, which has not been thoroughly studied so far, leads to the interesting conclusion that 'though the syntactical combinations are largely Arabic, the manner of self-expression is largely un-Arabic, a linguistic situation that is the product of a series of Semitic syntactical combinations conveying in many instances sequences of stylistically un-Arabic manners of self-expression, briefly a series of Siculo-Italian calques' (p. 323).

An important feature is the wealth of material illustrating phonological, morphological or syntactical correspondences of Maltese with Arabic and other

Semitic tongues, as well as with Sicilian, Italian or other Romance languages. As a result of this minute, microscopic analysis of the language, the author reached the following conclusion: '... throughout we noted that Maltese, the language spoken by a Christian people about half-way between North Africa and Sicily, has developed phonetic, phonological, morphological and syntactical characteristics of its own, some of them completely Indo-European, others half-way between Semitic and Indo-European. It is these characteristics that, with other syntactical developments, differentiate Maltese from the Arabic and the Romance dialects' (p. 351).

The chapters dealing with non-Semitic Maltese are among the most useful in the book. For many decades, while the 'language question' dominated the life and mind of the Maltese people, this element of Romance loan-words gave rise to much muddled thinking and to quite a few pamphlets, politically coloured and scientifically untenable. Professor Aquilina tackles this question with scientific detachment. Indeed, the very fact that right on the eve of the Second World War he wrote the section on Romance Maltese, with the useful enunciation of a set of rules or criteria establishing phonological as distinct from lexical proofs of the non-Semitic origin of a considerable number of loan words, is an eloquent proof of the author's fairness and unbiased judgment. These criteria are based on (i) consonants and their sequences, (ii) consonants in phonological junction, including initial groups (iii) vowel criteria, (iv) the semi-vowels *w* and *y*, (v) vowel sequences, (vi) diphthongs and (vii) stress criteria.

As its name implies, *The Structure of Maltese* deals comprehensively with the language from the structural angle. Naturally, it leaves out other aspects that call for further study and research. Professor Aquilina himself refers to two such aspects. On the subject of Maltese dialects, but vaguely adumbrated by Vassalli in the introduction to his *Lexicon* (1796), Aquilina writes: 'The number of phonetic dialectal variations, none unintelligible elsewhere in the same area, is considerable and calls for a specialised study of Maltese dialectal phonetics which is beyond the scope of this work' (p. 1). Again, under Verbal Nominal Patterns (p. 146) he gives lists of Arabic correspondences to illustrate agreements and disagreements of word-forms in Maltese and Arabic. He also notes that, as compared with Arabic, Maltese which has altered the structure of a good number of the Arabic forms, has loosened the original relationship between meaning and pattern, in many instances. Then he goes on to say: 'The numerous examples from both languages illustrate the preservation and abandonment of the relation between meaning and structure in Maltese as compared with Arabic, providing a fruitful field of study that could be extended to comparative linguistic research of Semitic dialectology'.

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Though Professor Aquilina's book is primarily a book for scholars, it should also find a place in the home of all lovers and students of the Maltese Language which, thanks to him, has been definitely placed on the scholar's map where it will surely secure international recognition in the world of learning.

J. CASSAR-PULLICINO

The need for a clear understanding of the Maltese needs, characteristics and views by the British... has never been greater.

THESE words are taken from the political leader in the *Times of Malta* for 15th October, 1960. The same sentiment underlies the recently-published *Maltese Anthology*. A. J. Arberry, Adam's Professor of Arabic in the University of Cambridge, recuperating in Malta from an illness in the winter of 1957, realised the need for a better understanding in Britain of Malta's problems, aspirations and ideals. Immediately after the War, Britain was full of admiration for the smaller sister-island that had undergone an even more concentrated blitz than she herself had suffered. But, in the years that followed, something went wrong and bitterness crept in. And, if the politicians have not yet found a satisfactory solution to the Maltese problem, it is even more certain that English writers on Malta have failed almost completely to explain the Maltese scene to their English readers. And so Professor Arberry decided that the Maltese should speak for themselves. He concludes his Preface with the words:

It is my earnest hope that this modest work will make a contribution towards better Anglo-Maltese understanding, by bringing before the English-reading public the voice and heart of Malta, the expression of Malta's long and glorious history and of its people's ideals and aspirations. (p. vi).

Few literary enterprises of recent times can have been inspired by a more worthwhile motive than this; and Professor Arberry, as he is quick to acknowledge in his Preface, was fortunate enough to find collaborators worthy of the occasion. His assistant was Fr. Prospero Grech, his constant adviser Professor Joseph Aquilina; the first as promising among the younger generation of Maltese scholars as the second is outstanding among those of more established reputation.

Professor Arberry enlarges upon his purpose of letting the Maltese speak for themselves in a 26-page Introduction — perhaps a little too long and a little too linguistic for the English layman who reads his literature for pleasure:

Maltese literature is a comparatively modern development, having a history of little more than a century, and an effective history of considerably less than that time: (p. xi).

In this anthology of Maltese literature the attempt has been made to illustrate the main stages through which Maltese has passed in the course of its short history as a written language. (p. xx).

... the poems have been selected not for their intrinsic merit alone, but also and especially for their relevance to the Maltese scene; many excellent pieces have been passed over because their themes are common to all poetry and because in their treatment of these themes no typically Maltese imagery is apparent. ... (p. xxxiv).

These are Arberry's aims, and he certainly does his best to carry them out: a reasonably comprehensive picture of the Maltese scene may be deduced from the selected passages. We have Malta's history in her three moments of truth: the

Great Siege of 1565 described by Dun Karm; the resistance to Napoleon centred round Dun Mikiel Xerri; and a number of pieces, both prose and poetry, dealing with Malta's agony in World War II. Then there is Malta's scenery: no lakes, no mountains, no lush greenery, none of the pictures beloved of the English nature-poets, but blue seas and brazen skies:

And I too felt deeply, for before I left you,  
my little homeland,  
I left you smiling, full of vitality,  
swimming beneath the August sun  
warm in the blue sea,  
and I never dreamed what you would suffer. (p. 249).

There are also many pieces of a religious nature, for, as Arberry points out in the Introduction:

The pervasive religious atmosphere represents a people passionately attached to Catholic Christianity and naturally devout: the Maltese are the only Arabic-speaking Christians to have produced a worthy and vigorous Christian literature. (p. xxi).

Perhaps the aspect of Maltese life that strikes an English visitor most forcibly is the tremendous size of Maltese families; even this finds a place in the *Anthology*, in an epigram of a lighter vein that seems altogether:

Catherine, with your great eyes looking so anxious,  
Don't be afraid, you'll wed and be happy one day;  
And in three years' time you'll have one kiddy walking,  
Another in your arms, and a third just on the way. (p. 255)

One important point that we should not forget is that all these selections were written in Maltese, by Maltese and for Maltese: the picture of Maltese life they give is therefore completely unselfconscious, not a posed photograph for foreign consumption.

Arberry's second aim is to show the Maltese language at various stages of its development by selecting passages from different periods of Maltese literature; and a mere review of the subject matter treated in the *Anthology* will show how faithfully he has carried out his purpose. The book is divided into three sections; Part I contains the folk-literature — proverbs, fairy-tales, riddles and popular songs; Part II consists of modern Maltese prose and a one-act play, and in this brief compass we find a short story, a detective story, a religious essay, an excerpt from a novel, a piece of literary criticism, and various passages of historical interest; Part III, with the single exception of the first extract, gives us a selection of modern Maltese poetry.

No critic of the *Anthology* will deny that Arberry has shown great catholicity of taste in his selections; from a limited corpus of Maltese literature he has chosen a wide variety of themes and genres. And he has carried out his stated aims faithfully and conscientiously. But neither of his two stated aims is a purely literary aim; one is partly propagandist and the other partly linguistic.

In my view, Arberry's propaganda-purpose, excellent though it is in itself, imposes serious artistic limitations on the *Anthology*. The conscious search for the typically Maltese has led the editor away from the universals which must

inspire the best of Maltese, in common with every other literature. *The Times of Malta*, in its review of the *Anthology* on 14th October, 1960, makes this very criticism, and lists the names of those Maltese writers who ought to be included, but are not. The English reader, for all his interest in things Maltese, feels a sense of relief at finding common ground of experience; he will like *The Captain* and *The Sentinel*, the first because he too belongs to a seagoing, island people who suffered from air-raids, the second because he loves all animals, especially dogs and children. He will be particularly interested in those Proverbs that echo his own, — 'I likened you to those I saw you with' (Judge a man by the company he keeps), 'Don't waken a sleeping dog' (Let sleeping dogs lie), 'Necessity makes you do everything' (Necessity is the mother of invention).

Dun Karm is a particular case in point. He has a much more varied scenic background to his poetry than the other poets of the *Anthology*, because his experience is wider — not merely more Italian but more universal. In *Non Omnis Moriar* he echoes Spenser's and Milton's conviction that has he written something that future generations will not willingly let die:

Yet the song shall not die:  
From under the slab  
Of the solitary grave there shall still issue clear  
The beating surge that took shape in my heart  
In the dream of my youth...  
The poet perishes: the song is immortal.' (p. 217)

It is rather frustrating to read in Aquilina's critique of Dun Karm's poetry that *Mater Purissima* is a jewel of literature which should be learned by heart if only for the music of its verses, the lofty controlled thought, and the fragrance of sublime beauty, and then not to find this jewel among the selections. Perhaps it is because they themselves have felt this that Arberry and Grech are collaborating a second time to produce an anthology of Dun Karm's poetry in translation in the near future.

My second doubt is whether Maltese language and literature is an instrument of sufficiently high temper to carry out the task which Arberry has set it. It is obvious from Cuschieri's poem on *The Maltese Language* that it was not held in high repute in some quarters:

Who said that it is heavy, and crawls  
like a snake creeping on its belly? (p. 223)

There are languages, particularly those of small countries, not strong enough to take an undue strain; Swedish students, for example, submit theses for higher degrees in either English or German. One of Arberry's aims is to try and show the English reader that Maltese has become a language worthy of the most literary of her sons; in the Introduction he writes:

Out of a poor dialect, banished from cultured homes to the kitchen and the fields, it has been transformed into a literary language enjoying all the prestige inherent in high style. (p. xxx)

Aquilina's greatest praise of Dun Karm is that he did with Maltese what Chaucer did with English, — showed that it was worthy to be a literary language by writing poetry in it successfully:

Of a truth the perfect command of the Maltese language, the subtle ability to shape and chisel it into sweet and powerful verses — these constitute the greatest merit of our national poet, and no small merit at that. (p. 73).

Professor Aquilina is himself responsible for much of the increasing respect for Maltese as a language, both in Malta and abroad. Maltese in the past generation has achieved much of what English achieved in the time of Edward III; it has become the official language of Parliament and law-court; it is taught in the schools, though it is not the universal medium of instruction; while on the declaration of war by Mussolini, the Government of Malta ordered a translation of Italian street names into Maltese and English, *Strada Reale* in the villages becoming *Triq il-Kbira* (High Street).

It may be thought that this increasing stress upon Maltese is against world-trends in an age of quicker communications and shrinking frontiers. But no Maltese scholar is insular enough to deny the need for a universal language like English; what he would claim is that the Englishman in his turn should be made aware that here is a literature worthy of Malta's history, and a language worthy to carry the thoughts of Malta's writers and the imaginings of her poets.

This attempt to show in translation that Maltese is a developing and worthwhile literary instrument has led Arberry and Grech into a theory of translation which is open to criticism. Where the Maltese original is crude or naive, they have tried to make the English translation appear the same. In *The Seven Citron Maidens* this is a success; my five-year-old son's only objection to this as an English fairy-tale was that it was silly to make fountains of oil instead of water. Where the original is mature and sophisticated, so is the English translation; Aquilina's essay on *Dun Karm as a Poet* reads so naturally that I had to enquire whether it was in fact a translation. But there are some pieces where the relationship of style to content is by no means so decorous. I am prepared to accept that Cremona's essay on *Vassalli and his Work* is difficult to follow because the Maltese sentences too are overlong and the syntax involved; but there were times, both in *Dun Mikiel Xerri* and in *The Decision*, an excerpt from Aquilina's novel which reads in translation more like a Russian than a Maltese novel, when I felt strongly that an English audience would have appreciated the Maltese outlook much better had it been couched in a more easily-comprehensible English idiom.

The translation of poetry into verse is always a difficult business, even when there are no special interests to be served; *Rubaiyats* are few and far between. Incidentally, Professor Arberry has shown in his own translations from the Persian that he is no mean verse-translator.<sup>1</sup> We must have either truth to the original or truth to poetry; we can rarely have both. Arberry's first concern is to present the thoughts of Maltese poets on a number of typical themes to an English audience; quite understandably, he favours truth to his original. It is therefore hardly surprising that, with the possible exception of the anonymous *Sonnet*, very few of the poems are memorable in their own right as literature. It would be little short of miraculous if they were.

Arberry is a scholar and a linguist, and his linguistic interests cause him to fall between two stools. The *Anthology* is obviously not intended for linguistic scholars, who would require a more extensive apparatus than the blessedly-brief

<sup>1</sup> A. J. Arberry: *An Anthology of Persian Poems*, Everyman Library No. 996.

notes' at the end; why then are the Maltese originals of every extract in Part I included? They are quite useless to the English reader for whom the *Anthology* is primarily intended. Include Dun Karm's National Anthem by all means; these four lines will be quite enough to let the English reader see what the Maltese language looks like.

My last criticism is directed at the Oxford University Press. For a price of 30/- I feel we are entitled to expect a technical standard of perfection that would not omit the second prose passage entirely from the index, nor print 'masted' on p. 266 where 'mastered' is obviously required. At 30/- Arberry's *Anthology* may well be thought expensive. It is, admittedly, a very high price to pay for a book: but it is a very small price to pay for better international understanding.

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