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PRIMITIVE INFANCY, NATURE, DEATH, RELIGION AND
LIFE BEYOND DEATH IN THE WORKS OF TWO
ROMANTIC POETS FROM GOZO

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The linguistic history of a country usually reflects its political history. Therefore, in the Maltese archipelago, scenario of various foreign dominations, one finds at least five official languages in use over the past 900 years or so. These are Latin, Sicilian, Italian, English and Maltese. It follows quite naturally, then, that Maltese literature should also have been written in different languages (Arabic, Italian, English and Maltese). This article examines the poetic production of Ġorġ Pisani (1909–) and Roger Scicluna (1898–1942), two romantic poets from the small island of Gozo, who wrote respectively in Maltese and in English.

Despite Pisani's use of a peripheral language (Maltese) and Scicluna's use of an international one (English), the essence of their Gozitan romantic poetry is virtually the same and fits in perfectly within the mainstream of Maltese romantic poetry. However, the clearly localized features of the natural elements as portrayed by the two poets; the strong attachment of Pisani to all that recalls the innocence of early times and Scicluna's deep-rooted respect for Catholicism and its rituals, all contribute to give these two authors' poetry a particular and distinctive imprint.

The prevailing mythology in their poetry, whether Christian or pagan, is typically mediterranean. This mediterranean 'animus' is highlighted in the poets' deep-rooted attachment to their birthplace, an intense attachment verging on the morbid, which only islanders can understand. Pisani's yearning for primitive infancy and Scicluna's quest for a future without any existential doubts are the two contrasting facets inherent in the average Gozitan, attached as he is to his island culture by an unseverable umbilical cord which, at the same time, constitutes a severe limitation to his freedom of movement and thought.

The Cultural and Linguistic History of the Maltese Archipelago

The history of Malta, over the past millennium or so, is extremely varied and constitutes a unique example of how different cultures, i.e. the Semitic, the Italian and the British ones, can interlace with the local cultural substratum to form what is today the cultural identity of the Maltese people.¹ This three-pronged influence manifests itself not only in the structure of the Maltese language, which is essentially semitic in its morphology and syntax whilst prevalently Siculo-Calabrian and marginally English as regards lexis, but also in the linguistic history of the island.

Whilst Maltese has been the only language of the people since the re-romanization of the island,² the cultural and administrative languages of the island have been no less than five. In the 13th and 14th centuries Latin was the uncontested language of the administration, but as from 1409 onwards Sicilian was used alongside Latin. Towards the latter part of the 16th century—in 1530 Malta had been granted as a fief to the Knights of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem—the Tuscan variant of Italian became the first language of the administration, and the predominance of the Italian language

was practically maintained until around 1934, when Maltese joined Italian and English as the third official language of the island (English had become an essential requirement for employment in the Civil Service during British rule, in the 19th century). Today, the national language of Malta is Maltese, whilst Maltese and English are the official languages of the archipelago.³ With language being the essential tool for the production of literature, it then follows quite naturally that the languages of Maltese literature are essentially three: Italian, English and Maltese.⁴ Whilst Italian, as a tool for literary composition, is gradually dying out, Maltese and English are still fully productive. Maltese literature is relatively young in age when compared to the literatures of other European countries. As has been rightly pointed out, mainly in the critical works of O. Friggieri,⁵ Maltese literature prior to the 1960s has been greatly influenced by the works of the major Italian and British romantic writers: Foscolo, Leopardi and Manzoni; Keats and Wordsworth have certainly left their mark on the Maltese poets and novelists of the first half of the 20th century.⁶

The Literature of Gozo

The Maltese archipelago is made up of Malta, Gozo, Comino, Cominotto and Filfla. However, only the first two islands are inhabited by a resident population. Despite it being nearly half the size of Malta, Gozo can only boast of 25,000 inhabitants vis à vis Malta's 320,000.⁷ Considering its relatively small population, the sister island of Malta has given birth to an exceptional number of intellectuals, poets and writers who have asserted themselves at national level. Amongst these, G.P.F. Agius de Soldanis (1709–1772), N. Cremona (1880–1972), A. Buttigieg (1912–1983) and J. Aquilina (1911–) are certainly worthy of mention.

One must however keep in mind that these intellectuals left their homeland quite early in their youth to settle down in Malta and thus acquired a 'city' mentality which, strictly speaking, excludes them from being considered typical Gozitan writers. The purpose of my essay is to deal with two Gozitan romantic poets who spent the greater part of their lives in the peripheral environment of their island. The best known 'typical' Gozitan poet is Ġorġ Pisani (1909–).⁸ The 'peripheral' element in his poetry is highlighted through his use of language (which is limited exclusively to Maltese) and his insistence on the imagery of a rural community. A third Gozitan poet, a contemporary of Mejlaq and Pisani, has practically passed by unnoticed by the general public. This poet, Roger Scicluna (1898–1942), published two collections of poems in 1937 and 1938, using English as a medium.⁹ By resorting to the use of the English language Scicluna seems to be refuting his 'peripheral-insular' condition in favour of a wider 'international' dimension. Nevertheless, his 'English' production actually embodies the epitome of Gozitan-Maltese romantic poetry: the rural landscape of Gozo and the figure of an omniscient and all embracing Catholic God permeate every tissue of Scicluna's Anglo-Gozitan poetry.

The Pagan and Primitive Imagery of Ġorġ Pisani

Ġorġ Pisani is best appreciated as a poet for his regular and effective portrayal of those historical events, places and features which have characterised the past of the Maltese people. In fact he has earned for himself the title of *Il-poeta ta' l-istorja u l-preistorja* ['The poet of history and pre-history']. However, it would be quite restrictive if one

were to limit poems like *La Valette*, *F'Ħagar Qim (In Ħagar Qim)*, *Il-Ġgantija t'Ġhawdex (Ġgantija in Gozo)* and *Għar Dalam* (Pisani 1963: 59; 56; 58; 54) only to their function of keeping alive memories of the past. Basically, rather than simply rekindling the fire of history and reviving memories of a rapidly disappearing past, through his poems Pisani is trying to highlight the collective symbology and imagery of the Maltese and Gozitan society of today, thus bringing out that link of continuity which connects the past to the present. It would therefore seem more apt to consider Pisani's poetry as a pilgrimage into the hazy past, having the present as a clear point of departure, rather than departing from the past to get to our days. Synthesizing, Pisani's exploration of the past would be less of a *recherche des symbols perdus* and more of a *confirmation des symbols presents!*

Pisani's attachment to the past is not exclusively evidenced in his poems on history. The past, as opposed to the highly developed but anonymous society of today, is characterized by the primitive structure of simple rural communities, whose life-style is built on and fed by a system of rites, rituals, myths, legends and song. Gozitan society, even today, is rather akin to primitive cultures, that live off the land, within a closely knit family and village unit. Despite professing its deep faith in the Catholic religion, Gozo still maintains a legacy of its pagan past.¹⁰ The opening poem in Pisani 1963, *Il-Għid taż-żgħozija* (which also gives the title to the whole collection), is a tribute to the vigour and freshness of youth and to the modern God of progress. In a triumphalistic tone quite reminiscent of Marinetti's *futurist* movement, Pisani dispels all thoughts of suffering and disease since through the inventions of science, considered to be synonymous of progress, man is totally in command of what was once ignorance, sickness and death:

... Il-mard sħaqnielu rasu Bħal serp l-aktar moqżież; Irridu xemx u arja U l-baħar ta' bla qies.	... [We cut off disease's head Like the most disgusting snake; We want sun and air And never ending sea.
Id-duwa u l-misturi Tħażżew mat-tifkriet, Għalqu mużejjet qodma, Il-bwieb l-isptarijiet.	Medicines and syrups Disappeared like old memories, Old museums closed down, And so were hospital doors.
U t-tobba u l-ispiżjara Bghatniehom għall-mistrieħ; M'għadx fadal iżjed morda, M'għadx fadal iżjed qligh!...	The doctors and the pharmacists We sent away to rest; Sick people no more are left, Profit no more is left!]. . . ¹¹

Technological progress also provides us with comfortable means of transport, which render modern life much more bearable than what it used to be in olden times. One would think that this hymn to progress is a total condemnation of the old way of life, which Pisani seems to consider synonymous of harshship (*tbatija*):

... Żewġ fbieb ksibna lill-bniedem Qerrieda tat-tbatija: Fil-baħar il-vapuri, Fuq l-art il-ferrovija. [Two friends for man we found Destroyers of all hardship: The ships which sail the seas, The trains that run on land]. . .
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Yet the poet's way of exalting these modern conquests very much recalls the pagan

manner of celebrating, which reveals a deep attachment to the earth and the fruits of one's labour. *Il-Ghid taż-żgħożija* starts off with an invitation to celebrate the triumph of youth by drinking to one's heart content:

Nixorbu lkoll mitlufa	[Let's all drink lost
Go ħolma ta' tgawidja	In a dream of enjoyment,
Qabel ma tghib għal dejjem	Before the loss forever
Ix-xrara taż-żgħożija	Of the spark of youth.
L-inbid qed jistedinna	Wine is inviting us
Għall-ferħ u għat-tbaħrid,	To joy and revelry,
Ninsew fil-hena tiegħu	In its contentment we forget
Il-hemm u kull taħbit . . .	Sorrow and all worry.] . . .

Grapes, and therefore wine, are one of the most ancient products of the earth. This fruit symbolizes man's attachment to earth, but also to life, as can be witnessed by the innumerable grape and wine festivals held all over Europe, even to our days. For many Gozitans, wine is an essential 'ingredient' of every day life and indeed Gozitan wine is known, amongst Maltese people, for its genuineness, simplicity and purity. Simplicity and genuineness are also the qualities of primitive and/or rural communities, and the wine imagery in Pisani's poetry certainly fulfils the function of conveying to the reader the picture of Gozo as an idyllic untouched island immersed in a timeless and unfathomable past.

The impression of Gozo as a heathen and hedonistic island rather than a Christian one is further strengthened by the poet's use of vocabulary. Wine and grapes are genuine products of the earth and symbolize the genuineness of a simple people. Wine is also of great symbolic significance to all followers of Christ, since it represents the Redeemer's bloody sacrifice for mankind. In *il-Ghid taż-żgħożija*, however, this is not the case. The consumption of wine is totally unrestricted: the aim behind it is the attainment of contentment (*ferħ*) and revelry (*tbaħrid*) whilst the end result is actually the loss (*mitlufa*) of all control on the senses. Rather than a religious ritual pertaining to Christianity, we are here presented with a situation which is reminiscent of the Greek Dionysian cult or the Roman *Baccanalia*, where the uncontrollable pleasures and desires of the body seem to rule the day, as opposed to the practice of self sacrifice and restraint which is characteristic of Catholicism. That the theme of inebriation is the dominating one in the poem can be confirmed by the author's insistence on the imperative 'Let's drink' (*Nixorbu*) in stanza sixteen and by his final exhortation to drink from the ruddy cups (*Ejjew, l-aħwa, nixorbu/It-tazzi ħamranin*) in order to obtain the final and decisive victory, the victory over ourselves (*Għar-rebħa tagħna nfusna*). It is only by letting ourselves go, in what seems to be a very pagan ritual, that this victory can be attained.¹²

The negative connotation of these 'pagan' orgies is confirmed in the war poem *Pax* (Pisani 1963: 6–7), where the war mongers are portrayed together at a banquet, revelling unbridled to their hearts' content and quenching their, and the world's, lust for power by drinking the blood of those youngsters who sacrificed their lives on the battlefield for their labels:

. . . Imbagħ'd x'hin demmna l-għatx tad-dinja qata',
 U xabba' r-regħba ta' saltniet għajjura,
 Fliemkien iltaqgħu u fuq mejda kielu,
 Tbaħ'rdu kemm felħu bla ma ħarsu lura . . .

... [Then when our blood the world's thirst quenched,
And satisfied the lust of envious realms,
Together they met and at table they ate,
Revelling unbridled without looking back.] ...

The youngsters' blood, here drunk at a banquet as if it were wine, again brings to our mind another episode in Christ's life which is so dear to Christianity: the Last Supper, where the wine/blood of Christ was offered in sacrifice for the redemption of mankind. What we have here is also a human sacrifice (the crucifixion), but Christ's sacrifice was not in vain because it did actually serve to redeem mankind: the sacrifice of his blood was the price paid for a positive objective. In the case of the poem *Pax* the human sacrifice is totally unproductive since the killing of the youngsters does not lead to any progress in the behaviour of mankind.¹³ This means that the human sacrifice element in Pisani's poetry is more akin to pagan rituals than to Christian ones.

The human sacrifice reappears in the historical poem *Il-Ġgantija t'Ghawdex* (Pisani 1963: 58–59), which portrays the typical primitive Gozitan setting of the neolithic *Ġgantija* Temples. The author revisits what happen to be the oldest neolithic temples in the Maltese archipelago (c. 3500 B.C.) and presents us with a typical scene of ancient mythology: Gozo is passing through times of famine and hardship and the local minister, mouthpiece of the pagan gods, requires the inhabitants of the island to offer a virgin in sacrifice to the gods of fertility in order to placate them and to deliver the island from famine:

... Għall-qerda ta' dal-guħ li qed jifnina
L-allat iridu fis, sabiex jaħfrulna,
Tfajla li tmut għalina. ...

... [To destroy this famine that's destroying us
the gods demand at once, in order to forgive us,
A virgin sacrificed for us]. ...

The sacrifice of a virgin is common both to Germanic and Latin mythology.¹⁴ In our case it is a golden haired, blue-eyed Gozitan girl (*Tfajla, xuxtha tad-deh'b, ghajnejha żoroq*) who takes up the challenge and offers her life (*ħajti*) and virginity (*xbubiti*) to the primitive Gods for the love of her homeland, *Ghawdex tiegħi* ['My Gozo']. The tribal ritual of human sacrifice is carried out amidst the beating of drums and the chanting of funerary hymns (*ghanjiet tal-mewt*). In this poem, the young Gozitan girl's offer to sacrifice herself is not in vain: just as Christ's self chosen death brought about the desired redemption of mankind, the girl's self chosen martyrdom redeems the Gozitan people from the period of suffering and spells the beginning of a new era of abundance for all (*kulħadd*), and 'pagan' revelry for many (*bosta*):

... U l-ghada Għawdex haddar,
Faru bil-ġwież u l-qamħ l-egħlieqi tagħna,
Xorob u kiel kulħadd, u tbaħ'rd u bosta;
Kull qalb sebħet ferħana. ...

... [The following morn Gozo was green,
Our fields overflowed with fodder and wheat,
Everybody ate and drank, and many revelled;
Each heart awoke in bliss]. ...

The reference to the world of mythology and legends is a constant feature in Pisani's poetry, and contributes to highlighting the 'primitive' element inherent in Gozitan literature. In the poem *Quddiem tfajjel li għadu jitwieled [In the presence of a new born child]* (Pisani 1963: 47), death is personified and portrayed as a rider who, having lost all cognizance of rationality, gallops about in a senseless way, sowing the seed of destruction on his way (*U l-Mewt tigri fuq żiemel bħal miġnuna*). The picture of death riding a horse seems to be taken from the Book of Apocalypse, where on the day of the Last Judgement the indecipherable Knights of the Apocalypse ride their steeds amongst the sinners, condemning them to an eternal death for their earthly misdeeds.

The author then passes on to compare death to a second mythological figure: the almighty giant (*qisha ġgant*) of Ovidian fame who is able to crush to bits indiscriminately powerful kingdoms (*xettri u kuruni*), innocent lambs (*ħrief ġwejġin*), mighty lions (*l-iljuni*) and whole cities (*Iġġarraġ bliet*). The Ovidian giants are extremely powerful on earth but the moment they attempt to dominate the divine realm of the gods they are struck to death by Jove's thunderbolt: the presumptuous pretension of challenging the god's power can only lead to destruction. Likewise, Pisani's Death-Giant, absolute dominator of all creatures on earth, has to give up his power when confronted with a new-born babe, synonymous of the new-born Christ, who is capable of offering mankind love, tranquillity and peace (*Imħabba, serħ u żmenijiet ta' Sliema*).

The influence of primitive cultures in Pisani's works is not limited to well-known mythological or universal legends.¹⁵ In the course of history Gozo has always been a peripheral outpost, cut off from the various capitals of the Maltese archipelago (Palermo, Mdina, Valletta), which constituted or still constitute the real centre of power. Being so far from the centre, Pisani often takes his imagery from the world of local and localized legends, folktales, folk-songs and customs, which permeate the texture of rural societies. In *Taħt l-Arloġġ il-Qadim tal-Kastell ta' Ghawdex [Under the old clock-tower of the castle in Gozo]* (Pisani 1963: 46–47), e.g., the Gozitan clock-tower is portrayed as the now silent witness of a historical past when Knights of the Order of St. John used to meet secretly with their lovers to consume their forbidden love.¹⁶ This theme is a common one in local folk-lore and folk-songs, and usually ends up in tragedy with the Knight and his lover being assassinated by the latter's husband.¹⁷

References to the contents of Maltese or Gozitan folk-songs (*ghana*) or to local customs appear quite frequently in Pisani's poetry. In days of old, the clock-tower must have been a living witness to midnight plots and to the perilous deeds of youths and damsels escaping from prison.¹⁸ These adventurous stories provided abundant material for the local *ghana*, which was a very popular feature of closely knit societies (*Kif iġħidu ħafna ghana/Li taf il-kotra taġħna*). Nor are local habits lacking in Pisani's poetry. The popular donkey and horse races held in the uphill going main street of the Gozitan capital Rabat on particular feast days, such as those of *Santa Marija* (15th August) and *San Kaloġeru* (16th June),¹⁹ seem to be at the back of the author's mind in *L-Għolja [The Hill]* (Pisani 1963: 10–11), where mankind is portrayed in its efforts to see the light of truth at the top of a perilous hill (*L-imdawla quċċata*), where the description of the vegetation is most reminiscent of Dante's *selva oscura* in the *Divina Commedia*:

. . . Qalila, mwieġħra l-ġħolja
Miżġħuda ħofor, minsuġin bl-ġħollieq,
Mimlija b'siġar kbar, koroh u suwed
Li jarmu waħx u dieq. . .

. . . [Difficult and tortuous is the hill
 Pot-holed, and woven with brambles,
 Covered with huge trees, ugly and black,
 that emanate horror and grief.) . . .

Naturally, various other features of Pisani's poetry point to a Gozitan/primitive matrix: the imagery he very often resorts to (the sea; the herds/flocks and goats/sheep; the nests), the colours he evokes (yellow; blue; green), the sounds (pealing of church-bells; peasants singing) and the scents (*ġnien ifuħ* ['perfumed garden']) he reproduces on paper are the heart and soul of the isle of Calypso. Gozo itself becomes the direct subject and protagonist of many of Pisani's poems,²⁰ while the author devotes the third part of his 1963 collection to *Mill-Ghana għat-tfal* [*Nursery Rhymes/Children's songs*]. This return to infancy through children's songs can only be interpreted as a strong desire for deep immersion into a world of innocence.

One final comment about Pisani's use of language. Whilst in most cases the author makes use of standard Maltese to convey his poetic message, there are instances where Gozitan dialectal features prevail. This happens mainly in the use of vowels. On the one hand Gozitan vocalism tends to maintain the mid-front vowel *-e* vis a' vis the modern tendency to change it into *-o*. Thus, it is quite common to come across *ġe* for *go* in Pisani's poems (*ġe qalbi* ['in my heart'], in *Lill-imhabba* [*Ode to love*]; *ġe Malta* ['in Malta'], in *Epithalamion*; *ġe xuxtek* ['in your hair'], in *Lil palma xiħa* [*Ode to an old palm tree*], etc.), even though examples with *go* are also to be found (e.g. *ġo mohħom* ['in their minds'], in *Tbissim ta' Mejju* [*May Smiles*] or *ġo dan* [in 'this'], in *Pax*). On the other hand, Gozitans tend to conserve the original open vocalic sound *-a-*, which in current Maltese is gradually being replaced by *-e-*. This tendency is reflected in, e.g., the following words which Pisani prefers to the standard Maltese form: *għab* ['he disappeared'] for *gheb*, in *Lejla ta' Frar* [*February evening*]; *jargħa'* for *jergħa'* ['he will come again'], in *Gnien is-Sultan* [*The Sultan's garden*], etc.

The standard usage of languages imposes a fixed norm on speakers. Any norm signifies lack of freedom. Primitive cultures would not accept such linguistic limitations and dialects therefore are, in a way, a distinctive expression of freedom since they refuse to conform to the rules imposed on the community by 'civilization'. In Pisani's case, the recourse to the archaic or dialectal variant vis à vis the current but standardized form is a clear choice on the author's part in favour of the innocence and simplicity of primitive infancy rather than the comforts of an affluent but tainted society.

Roger Scicluna and His Portrayal of Nature, Death and Religion

Roger Scicluna is a relatively unknown poet. Biographical information about him has also been quite scanty until recently. The entry concerning him in Mifsud Bonnici's biographical dictionary reads:

SCICLUNA ROGER (20th century), Gozitan poet. In 1937 he published 'A Book of Verse', pages XII–80 and a year after, in 1938, published '50 Sonnets', pp. XIV–50. Some of these copies may be found at the National Library of Malta. Vide R.M.L.'s Catalogue (Mifsud Bonnici 1960: 468).²¹

This entry is not sufficiently informative to explain why Scicluna, despite his living away from the main centres of culture in Malta and therefore out of touch with the two

languages of 'prestige' (English and Italian), actually used the 'English' medium to convey his literary message. His native language, Maltese, would seem to be a more appropriate vehicle in the circumstances.

The answer to this apparent anomaly is to be found in the author's upbringing. Roger Scicluna received his Primary and Secondary education at the Government Schools in Rabat, Gozo. His father Ġuzeppi, after an initial period as a textile merchant and another four years working in Marseilles, France, settled down in Gozo. He was employed as a clerk in a Notary's office and possessed a well stocked private library. The majority of these books were in English and about English literature.²² It comes, therefore, as no surprise that Roger, who must have spent his childhood browsing in the family library, developed a love for English literature. Wordsworth's influence upon him, for example, is implicitly acknowledged by Scicluna in the introductory note to his first collection of poems:

For inspiration I have drawn largely on the treasures of the countryside and nature in general (Scicluna 1937: VII).

After having served as a volunteer in Greece during the first World War, followed by another two and half years abroad, Scicluna returned to Gozo to work as an accountant with a local firm. However, his love for the letters and the English language prevailed over all other interests. In fact, he gave up this last job, which was certainly more rewarding financially, to take up the post of master of English at the Archbishop's Seminary, where he was considered to be an exemplary teacher by his superiors, colleagues and students.²³ His love for the English language prompted him to resort to its use as a poetic medium. However, despite the foreign linguistic garb, the imagery of most of his poems remains predominantly Gozitan.

The romantic influence in Scicluna's works, which manifests itself in his love 'of the countryside and nature in general' in *A Book of Verse*, is further highlighted in his second major work, *Fifty Sonnets*. The author here describes his poems as:

of a reflective nature—that is, they depict my thoughts and feelings when in contemplative mood" (Scicluna 1938: IX).

In *Fifty Sonnets* the Wordsworthian naturalistic vein of Scicluna's first book seems to have developed into lyric poetry of an intimate and subjective nature, reminiscent of other great romantic figures, such as Keats and Leopardi. One should not, however, underestimate a third facet of romanticism, or rather pre-romanticism, which stands out in Scicluna's first book, i.e. the nocturnal element and the sepulchral imagery, that may have been inspired by Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* and Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*.

The vast majority of the poems contained in *A Book of Verse* refer to nature and its various elements. The seasons, daybreak, evening and sunset, trees and sheep, valleys and hills, the sun, the sea and the moon are the real protagonists of Scicluna's verse. In modern terms, this Gozitan romantic would be defined an 'ecological' poet, whose main concern is the portrayal and enjoyment of nature, undefiled by human greed. Scicluna's descriptions are not, however, the picture of an unattainable ideal, which can only exist in a world of fantasy. What he describes are fragments of a bucolic world, which exists in real life and in which human beings participate fully, by contributing their positive share whilst enjoying the benefits of such idyllic surroundings. The opening poem of Scicluna's first collection gives a clear and synthetic picture of the prevalent poetic imagery in *A Book of Verse*:

Daybreak

Before my eyes there stretched the sea;
The lark trilled sweetly overhead;
All Nature seemed so gay to me,
Whilst, singing birds around me sped.

The sun his wealth of splendour brought
And flooded all with glorious light;
The earth with joy the radiance caught.
And all the land drank in delight.

The road was thronged with lowing herds;
The farm-hands hastened down the hill;
The trees were full of happy birds,
And then the air was not so still.

The sea so gently seemed to move;
The sailing boats went skimming by
With careless joy and far above
The cloudlets flew swift in the sky.

The cock's shrill note awoke the vale
And told the coming of the morn;
The fragrant flowers of the dale
Breathed sweetly. A new world was born!

I wandered round about the shore,
In all its beauty felt my part,
And, filled at last, with Nature's lore,
Turned homewards, with a happy heart.

Basically, the poet considers nature to be a veritable world of harmony. 'Happy birds' are singing, the sun emanates 'glorious light', the earth absorbs it 'with joy', sailing boats skim 'with careless joy' and fragrant flowers breathe 'sweetly'. He himself aspires to be part of that harmonious order which manifests itself at daybreak, through the daily paligenetic rebirth of 'A new world'. This desire easily comes true because, in Scicluna's concept of life, humankind is an essential part of the global 'natural' harmony. Nature does 'fill' the poet with 'all its beauty', thus endowing him 'with a happy heart'. On the other hand, the whole concordant cycle of nature would be incomplete without man's participation in this festival of harmonies.

Nature and the untainted countryside constitute the ideal 'habitat' for Scicluna. At the same time, in all the poems of his first volume that are dedicated to his homeland, Gozo is always identified with natural elements which evoke simplicity and purity. Gozo the island, but also the lemma *Gozo*, is invariably associated with shepherds, villages, bays, hills, reefs and landscapes.²⁴ The syllogism is quite evident: if the 'ideal' condition of humanity can only be attained through total immersion into uncontaminated 'natural' spots, and if Gozo is teeming with such spots (villages, reefs, bays, landscapes, etc.), it only stands to reason that *Gozo is* the real source of true harmony. The island thus constitutes a tangible and concrete example of what would otherwise seem to be just an ideal but utopistic condition. 'Gozo, thou island blessed by bountiful grace' seems to be the prevailing theme of Scicluna's Gozitan poems, as can easily be confirmed by one of the last poems in his first collection:

A Landscape in Gozo

It is a glorious morning, fair and bright
 The beetling cliffs with silver dewdrops shine;
 The lowing sounds of distant feeding kine
 Add peaceful music to this blissful sight.

The sky is blue, and every grassy height
 Is covered with thick trees and yielding vine;
 The fruit-trees o'er the steepy rocks incline
 And dimpled vales are flooded with sunlight.

Pleasant it is over the ling to stray
 Where no winds sigh, and merry sparrows sing
 Their sweetest carols, and along the bay

The lark flies swiftly on his crimson wing,
 And lofty hills and winding shore, sand-grey,
 Sweet bygone memories to me ever bring.

The adjectives that qualify the Gozitan landscape all contribute to give an extremely positive picture of the island, a veritable haven of serenity ('peaceful music', 'sweetest carols', 'sweet bygone memories'), happiness ('Blissful sight', 'merry sparrows'), and fertility ('grassy height'), 'thick trees', 'yielding vine'). Such 'positivity' is synthesised through the use of other adjectives such as 'glorious', 'fair', 'bright', 'silver' and 'blue'. Apart from depicting the pleasant weather conditions usually prevailing in Gozo, these adjectives also point to an ideal 'psychological' climate that is to be found there. Scicluna's poetry seems to imply that the 'serenity' associated with Gozo is just a normal consequence and an offshoot of any primitive island culture.

Yet, since the human cycle must inevitably go on, the 'harmonious life' which emanates from an island culture, with all its serenity, happiness and fertility, just cannot stop the author from turning his thoughts to an impending fatality, i.e. death. The author's anxiety about the inevitable 'fall' of man on this earth is mainly highlighted in his poetic meditations by some solitary tombstone or grave in country churchyards. In *A book of verse*, there are ten such poems which explicitly refer to a tombstone or a churchyard in their title. In some of these poems nature sheds the image of serenity and happiness that is usually identified with the Gozitan landscape, and assumes the sombre garb which is more fitting for a mourner. Basically, the author is here adopting the poetic technique known as *transferred epithet*, whereby human sentiments are transferred onto non-human creatures or elements. A typical example of this solidarity between the suffering human being and the sympathetic elements of nature is to be found in *My friend's grave* (Scicluna 1937: 39):

My friend's grave

Alone I pause behind the yew
 Where buried lie the silent dead;
 I wonder who can stand the view
 That fills my soul with grief and dread!

The streamlet glides in silence there,
 And stillness reigns o'er all the place;
 No bird sings songs in that still air,
 No sunbeams weave their golden lace.

Though roses shed their sweet perfume,
Black falls the shade of cypress trees;
Alone I stand by my friend's tomb,
Dank with the chill of evening's breeze.

I see no wreath upon the grave
Which holds the ashes of my friend.
The gloomy wash of tide and wave
As dirges with my musings blend.

I leave the spot at close of day,
And with slow steps I homeward go:
The sky above grows dark and grey,
And night bedims the land below.

The poet starts his lament by inverting the syntax of normal speech ('Alone I pause' instead of 'I pause alone'). The relevance given to the adverb 'Alone', written with a capital letter at the beginning of the poem, is not accidental: the poet feels abandoned by the rest of humanity and assumes that he has to bear his grief all alone. Yet, this is not so. Scicluna might rightly feel abandoned by the rest of humanity, but he certainly has not been forsaken by the 'humane' elements of nature. Though the poet's soul is filled 'with grief and dread', he can still rely on the streamlet, the birds, the sunbeams and the other elements of nature. These, out of respect for the solitary sufferer, refrain from making their presence felt, by not sounding their voices ('in silence there'; 'No bird sings songs') or not lighting up the dark and mournful atmosphere ('No sunbeams weave their golden lace').

This solidarity between nature and the suffering poet does come up elsewhere, such as in *The Churchyard Cross* (Scicluna 1937: 59), where the poet's state of 'grief and sorrow' is fully understood by the stars that, out of solidarity for his suffering, 'no more their splendour show' or 'pierce the gloom o'erhead'. In other 'churchyard' poems, however, while the poet is totally enveloped in grief, nature dons a dual garb: some natural elements share the poet's grief while others present themselves in all their glory. Such is the case in *The Churchyard on a November Evening* (Scicluna 1937: 62):

The Churchyard on a November Evening

Behind the yew dim shadows I espy,
From swaying branches mournful whispers rise,
A cross points silent finger to the skies,
And birds sing requiems to the dead who lie
Waiting God's time, these grassy mounds below,
Through golden day and quiet silver night
Summer's warm flush and winter's pall of white.
Here lilies yield their incense, roses strow
Their lovely petals, and the breezes sigh

And I too bring my flowers of memory
Unto the graves of those so dear to me,
And mourn my dead with interceding cry:
'God of all mercy, grant them peace and light!'
A silver star speeds through the purple night.

Scicluna here creates a contrast between the inevitable human tragedy, death, and the likewise inevitable continuity of life. Death is here portrayed through the image of the poet-mourner, the sympathetic 'swaying branches' from which 'mournful whispers rise' and the birds that 'sing requiems to the dead who lie'. On the other hand, the tribute to a continuously flourishing life is conveyed by the picture of the 'lilies yield[ing] their incense', the 'roses strow[ing], their lovely petals' and the 'silver star speed[ing]' through the night. It seems that the message Scicluna would like to convey is that life on earth is a contradiction in terms: despite knowing that death is the inevitable destiny of all, human beings still behave as if life were to last forever.

Death is normally a harbinger of sorrow and melancholy. But in Scicluna's poems, this melancholy only invests living people . . . and himself in particular. The dead are quite content with their lot. In *On visiting the tomb of a young lady* (Scicluna 1937: 69), whilst 'larks of hope their sweetest songs resume' and 'jovial sparrows sing far overhead', it is the poet alone who 'Amid the solitude [. . .] sits and weeps'. The dead, 'in their cells for ever sleep' and do not lament their lot in the least way.

In Scicluna's poems, death can even be an extremely positive experience as when, for example, one dies for one's homeland. This is the message in *Thoughts in a Churchyard* (Scicluna 1937: 28), where the author states explicitly: 'Why grieve for him who for his country dies'? Therefore, going through death can be a satisfying 'experience' and, in any case, it is not the dead who bemoan their own 'ceasing to be'. On the contrary, the dead 'sleep serenely in [their] narrow room' and enjoy 'eternal peace', whilst the living poet has to endure 'The bitter pangs of desolating woe [. . .] With aching heart' (*The Silence of the Tomb*, Scicluna 1937: 16).

What is it that can turn a traumatic event like death into a positive one, as to have it termed 'the rapture of eternity'? The answer is: faith, prayer and communion with God, as can be witnessed in *The Mourner* (Scicluna 1937: 14):

The Mourner

Sweet Mary mourns beside her lover's tomb
Beneath the shadow of an ancient yew,
Where grass lies heavy, wet with noisome dew
And stars shine palely through a twilight gloom.

With tearful eyes upon the monument
She voices all her sad heart's agony:
Right gladly would she with her lost one lie
Earth's troubled journey o'er, life's last sigh spent –

Her soul with him and those with him at rest
Amid the rapture of eternity.
Hard is it for sweet Mary to descry

With Faith's clear eye that God indeed knows best;
Yet still she prays – and will not pray in vain:
God's benison shall conquer sharpest pain.

Sincere trust and true faith in God, a God clearly identified with the Catholic tradition, is the passport to total liberation from the 'sharpest pain' which could be experienced on this earth. This seems to be Scicluna's ultimate message in *A Book of Verse*. And this message is strongly reaffirmed in *Fifty Sonnets*, where the religious

theme is undoubtedly the dominating factor of the sonnets. Religious imagery is directly referred to in no less than twenty-one of the fifty sonnets,²⁵ and this goes to show that ultimately all things on earth, including humanity and nature itself, would become meaningless if not subject to, and a reflection of, the divine power that governs us all. *In praise of God* (Scicluna 1938: 1), the opening sonnet of Scicluna's second collection, fully synthesises Scicluna's *weltanschauung*, which is to be assimilated with what is the traditional catholic outlook:

In Praise of God

How mad are they without belief in God –
Father and King divine of earth and sky!
All those who follow Him shall never die
In life, in death, though clod return to clod.
I place my hope in Him who is the Light
Alike of Heaven and this dim world below,
Where all who trust and follow Him shall know
A radiance gilding even death's dark night.
Though in my heart sorrow for sin lies deep,
Yet will I praise my God with grateful sighs
And join my prayer with those in Paradise
Who rest not day nor night, but ever keep
Continuous praise and worship at His Feet;
I bow, with them, before God's Holy Seat.

Concluding reflection

Görg Pisani and Roger Scicluna's production fits in perfectly within the mainstream of Maltese romantic poetry. Indeed, the recurrent themes of nature, death, religion and life beyond death are not only part and parcel of Maltese romantic poetry but constitute veritable *topoi* of European romantic poetry. However, the clearly localized features of the natural elements as portrayed by both Pisani and Scicluna, the strong attachment of the former to all that recalls the innocence of early times (pagan legends and myths, episodes from the life of Christ, local feasts and traditions, the local dialect) and Scicluna's deep-rooted respect for Catholicism and the ritual pertaining to it, all contribute to give their poetry a particular and distinctive imprint.

The prevailing mythology, whether Christian or pagan, with its related imagery, goes back to the Neolithic or Roman world and to the Roman Catholic tradition. Thus, it is typically Mediterranean. Moreover, in Pisani and Scicluna's works this Mediterranean 'animus' is highlighted by the poets' deep-rooted attachment to their birthplace, an intense attachment verging on the morbid, which only islanders can understand. Luigi Pirandello once stated that every man is an island, but that a Sicilian is doubly so, being physically cut off from the mainland. If one were to apply Pirandello's statement to Malta and Gozo, it would stand to reason that the grade of psychological 'insularity' of the Maltese, and even more so of the Gozitans, would be even higher.

This condition of insularity is at the same time a blessing and a form of perpetual damnation: the limited size and peripheral location of Gozo (and of any other small island!) protect it from the 'civilizing' but destructive elements associated with progress, thus preserving the intrinsic 'innocence' and 'purity' inherent in primitive cultures; on the other hand, these same spatial limitations tend to produce a 'claustr-

phobic' *forma mentis*, which appears totally disjointed from mainstream currents of thought. This physical, and mainly psychological, isolation provokes in the Mediterranean islander, typified by Ulysses, unending brooding over the idea of life, death and life beyond death, a brooding pervaded by a high degree of existentialist *angoisse*.

Pisani's yearning for the *temps perdu* (= primitive infancy) and Scicluna's quest for a future without any existential doubts (= his 'Father and King divine of earth and sky!') are the two contrasting facets inherent in the average Gozitan, attached as he is to his Mediterranean island culture by an unseverable umbilical cord which, at the same time, constitutes a severe limitation to his freedom of movement and thought.

Notes

1. On the cultural identity of Malta, cf. the proceedings of a conference held between 13–15 April 1989, published in Cortis 1989, and Cassola 1992b.
2. Malta was reabsorbed into the Latin world in 1091 A.D., when Roger of Normandy defeated its Arab masters and annexed the island administratively to Sicily.
3. On the linguistic history of Malta, cf. Cassola 1992a and Brincat 1992.
4. The earliest known Maltese authors, 'Abû 'al-Qâsim 'ibn Ramadân 'al Mâlitî, 'Abd Allah 'Ibn 'as Samantî, 'al Mâlitî and 'Utmân 'ibn ar-Rahmân, nicknamed 'Ibn as-Sûsi, actually wrote their poetry in Arabic in Roger II's Court in Palermo. Cf. Amari 1880: 240–242, Amari 1939: 703; 772–774; 784–785 and Cassola 1991: 57–59.
5. Cf. Friggieri 1978 and Friggieri 1986.
6. Cf., e.g., Friggieri 1983 and Friggieri 1989.
7. The exact figures given in the 1985 census of the Maltese islands are: Gozo 25,682 inhabitants; Malta 319,736 inhabitants.
8. Another exponent of the Gozitan school of poetry is the self-taught poetess, Mary Mejlaq (1905–1975).
9. Cf. Scicluna 1937 and Scicluna 1938.
10. The carnival in Nadur, e.g., with its witches and other spirits clad in black, is reminiscent of old pagan propitiary rites which favour fertility.
11. All English translations are mine.
12. Naturally, the victory is only apparent: when a goal is not attained consciously and wilfully, it is no achievement at all!
13. *U kollha f'daqqa dawk iż-żgħażaġħ reġġġu/għall-oqbra tagħhom minn kulhadd minsija* ['And all together these youths returned /To their tombs forgotten by all'].
14. Cf. e.g., the Scandinavian/English saga of *Beowulf*, where the vicious dragon can only be placated by the offering of a virgin a day or the Ovidian legend in Book XII of the *Metamorphoses*, where Iphigenia offers herself in sacrifice to the virgin goddess Diana, whose wrath can only be appeased by the blood of an untainted virgin.
15. Gozo itself is considered to be the mythical island of the goddess Calypso, who used her charm on Ulysses and kept him for seven years on the island.
16. The Knights of the Order of St. John had to take the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.
17. Cf., e.g., the renowned folk-song (*għanja*) known as *L-għanja ta' l-Awditur*, where the woman who accepts the Knight's gifts and praises finds her death at the hands of the betrayed husband. This theme has also been quite popular with other Maltese romantic poets. Cf. e.g., R. Briffa's *Ballata [Ballad]* (Briffa 1983: 47–48).
18. *Ma' nofs il-lejl, il-ħin tal-kbar konfoffi, /M'għadekx tħarrab mill-ħabs xbejbiet u żgħażaġħ* ['Around midnight, the hour of great plots, /No longer do you free from jail damsels and youths'].
19. In olden times, these races were also held on other specific feast days in various other villages in Gozo: in Xewkija, on the *fešta ta' San Ġwann* (24th June); in Sannat, on the feast day

- of *Santa Margarita* (20th July); in Xaghra, on *Jum il-Vitorja* (8th September); in Nadur, on the feast of *San Pietru u San Pawl* (29th June) (Castagna 1865: 329).
20. There are nine poems in Pisani 1963 and eight sonnets in Pisani 1951, which owe their inspiration to Gozitan toponomastics.
 21. 'Scicluna Roger (XXth century), Gozitan poet. In 1937 he published 'A Book of Verse', pages XII–80 and a year later, in 1938, he published '50 Sonnets', pp. XIV–50. Copies of these books are to be found at the Royal Library of Malta. *Vide* R.M.L.'s Catalogue' (my translation).
 22. This and other biographical details have been provided by Anton F. Attard in his lecture on Roger Scicluna, which was given at the *Mill-Room Studio*, Rabat, Gozo, on 25th February 1991. I am indebted to Saviour Tabone, at that time an undergraduate at the University of Malta, who passed on this information to me.
 23. Information given by A. F. Attard, in the aforementioned lecture.
 24. Cf. *The Gozo Shepherd, Twilight on a Gozo Village, Sonnet to Marsalforn Bay – (Gozo), Dawn on Ramla Bay in Gozo, Sonnet to Xlendi Bay–Gozo, Twilight on the Gozo Hills, Lines Written at Eventide Upon a High Reef in Gozo, 1936, A Landscape in Gozo*, all in Scicluna 1937 at, respectively, pp. 23, 37, 42, 47, 57, 45, 53 and 73.
 25. The titles and contents of the first twenty-one sonnets of this volume make explicit reference to 'God', the 'Cross', 'Christ', 'Crucifixion', 'Christmas', 'Mother of Sorrows', 'Friar', 'Abbess', 'Nun', 'Church', 'Sinner', 'Monastery', 'Sanctuary', etc.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: BOUNDARIES, MEMORY AND DESIRE – MEDITERRANEAN ISLAND LITERATURE

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No man is an island, goes the saying. But is this maxim totally acceptable to one and all? Apparently not. Nobel prize winner Luigi Pirandello, a native of Sicily, the largest island in the Mediterranean, had something totally contradictory to say about the topic, with regard to humanity in general, and to his fellow islanders (himself included!) in particular: 'Every man is an island; whilst Sicilians are doubly so since the place they live in is an island, totally cut off from the nearest mainland'. To paraphrase Pirandello, every person is an isolated being whilst islanders would be an island within an island!

The impression one gets on reading this volume is that the *signifiant* 'island' actually gives rise to a bi-semantic *signifié*: the inhabitant of Mediterranean islands would normally seem to consider his freedom to be a limited one, restricted as it is within the narrow boundaries of his island home; on the other hand, the islander who is living away from his birth-place looks up to his homeland as the idealized object of his fantasy. Basically, the 'physical' island is considered by the islander to be a veritable prison (how many small islands have actually served as places of exile or even prison compounds in the course of history?) while the island of our fantasy, the 'imaginary' island, becomes the object of desire, our ideal and utopic garden of Eden. To put it in Jina Politi's words: '... paradoxically, if desire finds its fulfilment the Motherland seems *other* than the lost, loved one as if psychic representation and not the physical place was the desired destination of the nostalgic'.

Franco Musarra's article on Giuseppe Bonaviri argues strongly in favour of the 'idealistic' dimension of *the* island. Bonaviri, a Sicilian who now lives on the mainland, considers himself to be an 'exile' from his home island. By delving deep into his memory, Bonaviri manages to recapture his ancestral roots and in turn goes on to mythicise his native land. Andreas Tietze's note, instead, brings out the 'negative' connotations tied up to the notion of being an islander: 'Aloofness, marginality, lack of communication, identity crisis, secretiveness, isolation — could these characteristics perhaps be subsumed under the notion of 'islandishness'? Oliver Friggieri takes it upon himself to reconcile these two opposing viewpoints. For Friggieri there is absolutely no doubt as regards the negativity of the islander's solitary condition. However, this 'negative' solitude is given a positive function since it becomes an essential and indispensable requisite for the production of poetry: Sicilian, Sardinian or Maltese contemporary poets would lose their source of inspiration if they were not solitary and isolated islanders.

Islands are totally surrounded by the sea. Seemingly, the sea should cut off the

islander from the rest of humankind. For islanders, it seems to be a question of “so near, and yet so far”. Yet, at least in the Mediterranean, history has proved that this is not always so: on the one hand, the blue waters of the Middle Sea have acted as a barrier to the islander wanting to escape from the restricted boundaries of his homeland; on the other hand, those same blue waters have provided a reasonably comfortable passageway for all those foreign mainland invaders who occupied so many of the Mediterranean islands in the course of time.

Such invasions have left their mark on most Mediterranean island literatures. So much so, that bilingualism or multilingualism have become a predominant feature of the literature of these islands: Italian and Greek in the Ionian islands under Venetian rule (Tziovas); Catalan and Castilian in the Balearic Isles (Garau Amengual-Fernández); Italian and Sicilian in Sicily (Alfieri-Spampinato Beretta); Italian, French and Corsican in Corsica (Nesi) and Italian, English and Maltese in Malta . . . and Gozo (Cassola).

Islanders might be relatively cut off from the rest of the world because of the physical conformation of their homeland. Writers, however, tend to use their pen as a weapon against this physical isolation. In Mediterranean islands, this weapon has become even more forceful and efficacious through the use of multiple languages: by writing in more than one language, Mediterranean island authors have demonstrated their willingness to shrug off the limits imposed upon them by nature and to communicate their views to the rest of humanity in the most forceful and fruitful of ways. Literature, expressed through various linguistic media, becomes synonymous with ‘unlimited freedom’.