

---

# REBEL IN THE MIND:

## THE POETRY OF MARIO AZZOPARDI

*Grazio Falzon*

---

*qu'il ramasse, recolle  
et veut confondre.*

Alain Bosquet

**M**ario Azzopardi is the *enfant terrible* of contemporary Maltese poetry. A maelstrom of debate surrounds his imaginative and iconoclastic verses. He is fearless in his attempts to mock tradition or push it to the limits of this passion for life and passion for words. His poetry is verbal pyrotechnics sprawling in a phantasmagoria of images of a tortured mind.

In the mid-sixties, the Island of Malta severed ties with the British Crown and achieved independence after 160 years of colonial rule. Political freedom coincided with a period of internal social upheaval; new socio-economic forces traumatized the new-born nation.

Azzopardi was among the most outspoken activists; he was at the time committed to social and cultural change free from rigid traditional systems. He protested vehemently against an alienated silent majority that had been manipulated far too long by opportunistic political regimes and a church he considered backward and hypocritical. He jolted and shocked Maltese consciousness by his manifestos satirizing popular customs and beliefs.

A non-conformist, Azzopardi was at the vanguard of a crusade for innovative literary forms that were free from the archaic influences of the Italian *Risorgimento*. He was largely instrumental in bringing about the most radical changes in poetic thinking and composition in modern Maltese literature.

Azzopardi's poetic success, though largely the result of a unique talent, reflects cross-cultural forces and influences. He was exposed and sensitized to contemporary overseas literary trends. He felt a special affinity with American poets; he consciously aligned himself with the American ideogrammic stream of poetry, instigated primarily by the Projectivist and Beat poets. He considered the American influence vital for his own experimental mode in poetry.

The Beats erupted into the American literary scene in the late

fifties. They rebelled against “square” society and rejected its unimaginative and restrictive modes and ideas.

About a decade later, Azzopardi burst on the island scene in impetuous, rebellious verses. A sort of “drop-out” himself, he readily identified himself with the Beat poets. He was equally intolerant of inhibited social behaviour; he denounced bourgeois society and the establishment it represented and helped perpetuate.

In true “beat” fashion, Azzopardi adopted improvised style and syncopated jazz beat in his poetry. Like jazz players, he favoured spontaneity and strident, discordant juxtaposition of subjects.

mitt ħolma li ħlomt – elf demgħa li ġbart fi kwies  
 fondi bla qiegħi irfist fuq dell l-imghoddi  
 u qsamt għarqubi ma’ kull pass li tajt  
 noħlom eternità  
 fil-bogħod – fil-bogħod  
 jixgħel neon gumi yam yam  
 u nerġa’ nibki dmugħi lumija  
 (“Gumi Yam Yam”)

Azzopardi also transplanted the “field-approach” of projective verse to Maltese literature. He followed the method expounded in the fifties by Charles Olson, chief exponent of the Black Mountain poets.

Projective verse is “composition by field”. The finished poem corresponds to the natural situation of things and happenings as perceived by the poet. The principle at work behind the process is that, to use Creeley’s phrase: “form is never more than an extension of content.” Olson describes the poem “kinetically” as “a transference of power”. Such composition, he says, involves feeling the poem as “at all points a high-energy construct.”

Following Olson’s “open form”, Azzopardi discarded metre and verse forms in favour of a free placement of lines and phrases over the page. Through this arrangement, the poet conveyed rhythms of thinking and breathing. Working primarily by ear, he suggested the spacing of movements and silence, sweeps of breath and their pauses. The poem became an intellectual and emotional complex held together by a magnetic tension of diverse components.

An azzopardian poem is analogous to a piece of music by Schönberg where jazz rhythms, folk melodies and atonal phrases are abruptly juxtaposed:

pala tas-shab titratieni  
 xemx impotenti bajja tixraq fir-ramel  
 qamar krexxent nofs qalb  
 sakemm int  
 tibda tobġħod dix-xemx dal-qamar  
 dit-temperatura perversa

tal-karta tas-sema  
 l-ilma jofrogħ f'sorm il-blat  
 jofrogħ bis-selha ta' l-obwe bħal ġġant  
 bħal ċentawr fis-sodda ma' qahba  
 ("Tliet Movimenti għal Sinfonija")

The particulars are inter-related not simply by their proximity but also by the imagination, which can form relationships between the most heterogeneous elements if placed together. Azzopardi wove a poetic tapestry which the reader sees jumbled from behind. But to the conscious poet it is a private algebra of words and symbols.

The meaning of the poem resulted from the co-inherence of the particulars in their mutual interpenetration. This technique is not unlike Cezanne's structuring of one colour against another, which the viewer's inward eye harmonizes with the sensations of experience.

This juxtapositional mode or ideogrammic method (to use the name given to it by its inventor Ezra Pound) appears as gratuitous heaping of incongruous elements. Indeed, reality itself appears chaotic.

Pound built his poetic theory from Chinese script which is mimetic of nature itself. From this juxtaposition of unconnected things, the Chinese written language can draw more pictures and can thus imply further symbols, concepts, and immaterial relationships.

This "heaping of pictures" is especially important in the case of a language like Maltese, which has very few terms for abstract or intellectual concepts.

Azzopardian poetry is essentially an enactment of process and structure of nature's own chaotic juxtapositions fused into compactness by the poet's perception. Behind the shocking contours of Azzopardi's forms there loom primitive shapes and patterns. His "poiesis" reveals the oneness of nature, its all-togetherness, its "jewelled net of interconnectedness" to use Gary Snyder's description.

Azzopardi the poet is a "savage" not according to the meaning given by a pseudo-civilized society, but in a simple primitive sense. The jungle of modern reality serves this untamed poet as nature did his ancestral neolithic man. His poetry reflects the rugged beauty of cliffs and dark blue water below his hideaway in the north of the island. His visions are interplays of mediterranean lights and shadows; his sounds are harsh-edged, like rock-music.

The conceptual basis of Azzopardi's work does not differ markedly from that of French surrealism.

Azzopardi's "*tama konċentrika*" and "*dirghajha cimiteru*" are reminiscent of Eluard's "*nuit hermaphrodite*" and Breton's "*revolver à cheveux blancs*".

Azzopardi is akin to Breton in his agenda: subversion of the

existing order and restoration of the rights of the imagination. Both poets aimed at destroying the social man in the individual by liberating imagination, desire, and expression. They believed that truly creative forces are to be looked for in the depth of the irrational self. In his first manifesto of 1924, Breton wrote that surrealism's intention was to expose the inner experience of the self free from established criteria be they rational, esthetic, or moral.

Azzopardi liberated the self from outside reality by demolishing normal and logical relationships between objects, words, and images; in doing this he also created a surreality of fresh images and associations:

u l-eteru nqasam b'hoss ta' gallettina:  
 kemm hu isfar il-qamar il-lejla!  
 hares 'il fuq u lemħu aħdar  
 bħal ħalq l-armla  
 tigreż il-gawwi mejjet  
 ("Għaxar Varjazzjonijiet fuq l-Imħabba")

He reaches a sphere of universal correspondence where, in Eluard's terms: "*tout est comparable à tout.*" A surreal serendipity floats between the arbitrary and the determined:

qtar-gharaq ixoqq zibeg f'nofs deżert afrikan  
 u l-metafizika t'arloggi mdendlin  
 mal-blat minutieri bla saħħa mitluqa  
 jittewbu  
 elf holma ta' sogħba  
 elf ħsieb mhux imwettaq  
 u trapjantat  
 l-gharaq mibdul stallattiti w stalagħimi  
 ("Passività")

In Azzopardi, objects, memories, associations, projections erupt in counterpoint against a reflective structure. An undercurrent of rhetoric makes his poems cohere densely as reasoned objects of thought. His poetry is a vortex of energies revolving around a calculated centre; it is a torrent of images that people itself in the free manner of a fugue.

Azzopardi can be compared to Aimé Césaire for whom surrealism embodied an esthetic and political "engagement". It was a medium with which to smash all forms of foreign domination. Césaire struggled to liberate Martinique "*cette île désespérément obturée à tous les bouts*" from French control; Azzopardi dreamed "*il-helsien*" from Britain of a "*gens miskin imghattan*".

Both poets attacked the official language that sanctified bourgeois ideas and values in politics and literature. They each considered their respective linguistic hypocrisy as symptomatic of a schizophrenic

society, where stated values were poles apart from "actual" values.

Azzopardi is equally disillusioned and sceptic of political systems. He seems all but lost in an island-world hopelessly manipulated by political forces. He inveighs against the pervasive power of the regime that oppresses and exploits the spirit of its citizens.

The psyche of the poet is inseparable from its intuitions of the nation's psyche. The political conflicts and absurdities are internalized by the poet. The poems register the personal implications of the predatory drives of political leaders, the face-saving ruses, the sufferings and ignorance of the little people at the expense of smug upper classes.

The socio-political poetry of Azzopardi is part diatribe, part satire, part dream-vision. He rebukes his country: "*j'art parassita li nishet u nhobb*" :

O l-bandli ppridkalkom  
kull min kewwes biex jixtrikom  
fit-turtiera tat-tpartit  
f'isem Kristu tal-krucjati  
jew il-ligi tal-padrunk.  
(“Maltija”)

The poet was ready to: "*nissallab biex nifdi ġens miskin/imgħattan*" but the reaction of his own people crushed his spirit. His people looked down on him and:

bnew fitan trasparenti bejniethom u bejni  
u għaddewni b'miġnun  
(“Għanja ta’ Settembru”)

The poet's angry political lines of the turbulent sixties have lost their timeliness; but they did rock Maltese consciousness at the time. Azzopardi dismissed the country's historic heritage as irrelevant against the poverty and ignorance of the people. He crusaded for a creative patriotic love of mother country.

fuq kull kampnar il-landi mtaqqba  
tat-tradizzjoni jqanpnu  
l-assedju tal-elfdisamija  
minn żaqq il-kitarri  
minn madwar roulettes amerikani  
mit-tabernakli tal-pilloli  
tan-nervi n-nies ixxenraq  
it-tmiem  
ta’ l-assedju modern –  
fl-arena  
l-allu tal-biera jew hemm alla gdid?  
(“Assedju – stil 1967”)

Azzopardi's revolt and its stylistic correlatives also parallel those

of the “*novissimi*” literary movement in sixties’ Italy. Azzopardi echoes Antonio Porta’s criteria of shock and provocation. Both poets break up language patterns and use violent images and discontinuous syntax to produce intensely personal compositions.

Azzopardi’s world is a maze of mirrors that reflects, magnifies, and fragments his image. His poems are uncompromisingly narcissistic.

The poet strips away a palimpsest of externally imposed selves in order to uncover a self which turns out to be not the real self but his idealized self. Echoes of secret dimensions trail his poems:

jien  
 il-battista bla ras fuq lajlo tal-lastku  
 jew san pietru *għarwien imġebbed rasu 'l isfel*  
 johlom imqajjem iżżejjix fuq xmara  
 jew naġgar ibaqqan il-blat tal-enimmi  
 (“Mirage x”)

Like a spider, the poet spins from his own life and his work glimmers with the tension between disclosure and concealment. He writes candidly but elliptically. The gap between poet and reader becomes a space in which familiarity, awkwardness, estrangement, timidity, honesty, and duplicity all co-exist.

His language is both hermetic and transparent, exposing and shrouding him simultaneously. His shadows enhance his art. Rent by shafts of light, all his poetry seems lit from within by the tension between the visible and invisible, presence and absence, proximity and distance.

Hemm orizzont incert.  
 Hemm raha l-jistenna.  
 Hemm l-eklissi tax-xemx  
 Iħaffru għandotti rotob fl-ilbies skur tan-nisa.

Dan-naħat hawn il-ksieħ.

Ir-riħa tiegħek għandha riħa vjolenti;  
 donnok mara taf tirbaħ kolloks u tidħaq.  
 Hemm raha l-jistenni  
 naqsam pont jistrieh  
 fuq saqajn aghsafar spulpjati.

Jekk tasal s'hawn ir-riħa tagħha  
 tgħidulhiex b'das-suwigidju.  
 Lanqas m'għandkom tgħidulha bil-pont.  
 (“Il-Pont”)

There are silences in Azzopardi’s poetry. The syntax breaks down, the sentence is suspended. A single word reverberates in the surrounding muteness. The unsaid intrudes in the said. Yet the poet, ever mobile, makes his lines move with a manic intensity.

The subtlety of syntax often articulates the curve of a perception or the morphology of an emotion. Unable to confide in the official language, he contorts and twists what is given; he coins and borrows words at will. His contrivances are intended to outwit language and impress the establishment.

Serene sights or pleasurable sounds rarely disturb the sombre mood of the poet; he prefers his poetry to be etched in pain:

Issummat  
l-ugħiġ interżjat  
fil-lirika tiegħi  
(“Fl-Għabex”)

The sun rarely if ever illuminates Azzopardi’s landscape. Rather, a haunting moon casts a melancholy glow over his mindscapes. Images of dark and night palpitate with enduring pathos:

... il-qamar  
bħalma nesa jixgħel  
il-pjaga tiegħi mohbja  
(“Nisa taż-Żerniq”)

Azzopardi’s “*ugħiġi*” comes close to the pain experienced by American Confessional poets that flourished in the early and mid-sixties. Although Azzopardi’s suffering verges on paranoia, it does not reach the extremes of Lowell, Plath, or Sexton.

In one of his latest “confessional” poems, Azzopardi, is overwhelmed by an unbearable depression:

Ruħ tiegħi qabar tan-niket;  
x’qed jistona fil-vers notturnali  
f’dal-habs tiegħi assedjat?  
(“Lunatorju”)

His anguished poetry has roots in his sensitivity to the human predicament. It leads to a sharp sense of the pain of existence under even “normal” conditions. “Where but to think is to be full of sorrow”: this line of Keats reflects Azzopardi’s sensitivity.

The poet tries to transcend his “*purgatorju twil*” and exorcise the “*blat tal-lava jiddewbu*” from his head; but he knows that his poetry “*miftuqa . . . dejjem tnixxi*” from a heart that “*ma fieqet qatt*”.

Azzopardi’s sorrow is that of a lyrical existentialist. He is intensely concerned with the condition of the self, its limits, its freedom, its choices, its responsibility, its enduring angst. He is trapped in his “*ħabs assedjat*”. He is a man in despair clinging to nothing. He has no nostalgia either collective or personal; neither is he hopeful of the future. Hope, “*tama bla riflessi*”, he dismisses as a lie:

U jien il-gejjien jistenna l-korp  
 ta' karba mmensa  
 jew  
 id-daghwa tremenda  
 fl-irrelevanza tax-xita.  
 Fil-vojt.  
 Fin-nuqqas.  
 Fl-indifferenza ta' l-univers  
 it-tiffsira tal-genju tiegħi  
 trasluċenti bħall-genn.  
 ("Nawsja")

The poet stands aloof from his world, lost in his freedom. He asks his son to remember: "*Int innifsek u waħdek*", a truth the father has lived and is deeply conscious of:

... tarmi hwejgek  
 u timxi ħiemed u wieqaf,  
 għarwien.  
 lest tingazza fil-kesha  
 ta' min jagħzel li jkun waħdu  
 ("Bħall-Poežija")

The poet suffered a Götterdämmerung, a twilight of man-made idols. He has lost faith in the gods of his childhood. Now he does not fit in anywhere. He is exiled from the sacred world of fixed values; he has been cast out of paradise and cannot return.

He must choose for himself. He must invent for himself his own meaning. There is no one to provide him with values; he must create them or else he is helpless and forlorn.

In his anger, he tries to shock. He "sins" in public. He tries to horrify. He strives to be the "*poète maudit*"; as such, he can possess a character that is fixed and sacred:

Hemm riġment isus warajh  
 bil-kanni sserrati bil-fanali  
 bin-nerfijiet u l-vaguni tal-ħabs.  
 Hadd ma jintebah bl-immunità tiegħu.  
 L-iskratač ma jinfdux.  
 U l-gebel ma jferix.  
 ("Il-Poeta")

The poet wants to shape his life freely; but at the same time he is tormented as he apprehends his freedom and the awesome responsibilities it entails. He sees his life as suspended; in his predicament between a past he is bitter about and a future he dreads. The present is "*ezistenza għamja u truxa*" made up of "*mumenti spissi/tal-mewt tiegħi bla konsum*"; the future reduces itself to "*il-mewt dgħajsa bla qlugħ/ticċajpar fl-orizzont*".

The way to flee the anguish is to deny the freedom and adopt some form of psychological determinism. One symbol that the poet adopts is that of stone, “*ħagar*”. Azzopardi is fascinated by stone and rock. Rimbaud was too.

Stone symbolizes the sartrean “*en-soi*”, the in-itself. Stone is solid, impenetrable, consistent, and simply there. “*L-ħajar nibqgħu maqfulin fil-ġebla*” dreams the poet. He longs for the interiority and the restfulness of stone. He longs to identify himself with the “*rassa samma*” and the “*dewmien etern*” of “*ħagar*”. It is a vain desire. The “*en-soi-pour-soi*”, the in-itself-for-itself is the perfect being, both consciousness and substance. The poet is obsessed by an ideal which is a contradiction. As such, he is condemned to suffer an impossible dream.

For Azzopardi, life is a self-deceiving existence “*imtertra bil-mewt*”. Life “*tfur bil-mewt*” and draws oppressively toward an inescapable end. The poet is haunted by the tragic absurdity of death, the nothing that is, “*ix-xejn tax-xejn assolut*”.

Il-Bnidem l-ibgħad pjaneta  
torbita  
fl-ispazju tal-mewt.  
 (“Zodjak”)

In his thanatological poems, Azzopardi comes closest to the tragic vision of life. The dark breeze of death lurks behind many an azzopardian composition. Death is an ever-watching presence, implacable, both fascinating and horrifying. It is rarely peaceful. Images of death resemble the ghoulish imaginings of Bosch:

u mill-ibgħad eghrien nagħraf  
iż-żegħir ta' żwiemel morda  
gejjin ikarkru wrajhom id-dell tal-mewt  
 (“Situwazzjoni 32”)

And in “*Il-Lejla l-Qamar qed jitwerreċċ*” the poet, impersonating a living-corpse in a glass coffin, is traumatized by:

... l-qamar, qed jingħi dmugħ id-demm  
u d-dwiefer ta' zkuk is-sigħar qed iċartru  
mbiċċer il-firmament  
u l-weraq isfar qed jingħasar  
u l-wirdien sajfi selah ġwinhajh  
inhabbat mal-ġħatu fuq wiċċi

Faced with the sudden death of a friend after a heart attack, Azzopardi is stunned:

il-margini qadima  
iżda rqiqha bħall-ostji  
bejn il-lum u l-bierah;

bejn mument u iehor  
l-eternità.  
(“Sepulkru”)

Religion cannot provide comfort to Azzopardi. It is, for him, an ambivalent demon. His attitude is particularly scathing against structured religion, against values dictated by self-righteous ecclesiastics, and against pious superstitions of the common people “*mohħhom għar tas-santi*” and “*saqajha mniġġsin*”.

Azzopardi rails against the forces of organized religion that have forged him:

araw ħuti dak ħruq li hemm fl-inferr  
ma nitqanqalx  
b’qalb(i)na safja ma’ l-angli tas-sema (sejjer  
ground –  
viva maria  
x’gisem għandha  
l-andress –) magħħom nittewbu taħt in-navi  
jnemmsilna hemm alla tal-kartapesta msammar  
b’imsieme  
finta ram illustrat – mhux hekk mhux hekk –  
sallbu(ni): b’idejja mitfu . . . ħ . . . a  
bejn żewġ kampnari  
w-aħarqu mohħi jdaħħan sagrifikkju f’incensier  
erħuni nissawwab bejn il-kustilji ta’ kurċifiss  
kontemporanju.  
(“*Maz-żliegħ tax-xemgħa tinharaq*”)

On the occasion of his 24th birthday, the poet blows out symbolic candles of church indoctrination:

dawn huma x-xemgħat li bellgħuli oppju niexef  
u saddevli ħalqi bil-biża’ tal-mistroċċija  
din ix-xema’ fiha riha ta’ mikrofni  
fuq il-pulptu jgħajtu mitologija mistika  
mingħajr konvinzjoni  
.  
din bassitli żwiemel ikarkru mewt spirtwali  
.  
u din qiegħda tteptep alla-trianglu jmeslaħ sikkina  
u jxammem fuq mohħi żibeg tal-gharaq  
(“*24 xema’ f’gieh il-poeta f’egħluq sninu*”)

In “Orbita 12” the poet longs to take off in outer space and drift faraway from cupolas erected “*f’gieh il-vangeli morda*”.

He refuses to compromise with “*allat imniġġsin*” or “*allat bla fattizzi*”. He is sceptical about a priest-fabricated god that “*ilahħam u jgħaddam*” and “*imeri l-ġjometrija*”. This same god:

. . . hu l-assenza tal-ward  
meta int tixtieqhom l-aktar.

Ma jkellmikx  
 lanqas meta ddeffislu  
 l-isbah fjura fil-kustat miftuh.  
 ("Mewta taqta' l-fjuri")

He views Christ and His redemption in an equally stinging imagery:

... il-kurċifiss ta' fuq is-sodda jittewweb  
 in-nghas u n-noia ta' redenzjoni bla siwi.  
 ("Meta jitbaxxa d-dawl")

After losing two of his children within a three-week period, the poet, in a moment of utter grief, rejects the offer of grace:

u mill-ghanqbuta ta' smewwiet ghajjiena  
 alla mejjet-haj inewwel idu  
 'l isfel 'l isfel  
 jilgħab l-ego sum  
 u jien ma naħtafhiex  
 ("Sa l-ghanja tinxef żbiba mummja")

Some of Azzopardi's lines are blasphemous. On closer study, one senses his interior crisis of an essentially God-haunted mind in search of lucidity, meaning, and innocence. Behind the poet's tantrums against priests, dogmas, and God, there lurks a prodigious complex of a childhood obsessed with sin and guilt.

Hounded by inner voices, the poet wavers between blasphemy and prayer, agnosticism and penitence. He longs to unburden his conscience from the "piż tad-dnub" and heal the "weġgħat antiki" that throb inside his brain. Deeply conscious of "reżonanzi mwahħlin/ mal-kuxjenza" he feels he is "l-iskerz indemonjat" and indeed "l-espansjoni tal-infern".

In "Preghiera", in a contrite mood, he turns to God:

ddewwibli mohhi  
 meta s-sigra tas-supprejja  
 tkun riflessa f'għajnejja  
 ċċajparli d-dinjità  
 ta' min jaf jitbikkem waħdu.

Characteristically torn in his spiritual neurosis, the poet enters "il-lejl oskur" of the soul, evoking the "noche oscura de l'alma" of San Juan de la Cruz in his search for a mystical union with God. The mediaeval saint experienced the dark night of the soul caused by the painful consciousness of human limitations and the apparent absence of God. The poet goes looking for God in a cathedral where "navi t'umdu/kaverni tremendi jaħbu 'l Alla". And on the verge of disbelief, he is saved from utter faithlessness by an inner voice of conscience:

Ridt nikkommetti gest anjostku  
 b'ghajnejja blalen tas-sadid  
 u l-kuxjenza ma hallitnix.  
 (“Askesis”)

Azzopardi appreciates the symbolic visuals of church liturgy that have punctuated his impressionable young years. Cross, chalice, rosary, nails, fire, blood, heaven and countless other religious images and references recur throughout the poet's oeuvre; they enrich significantly the dynamics of azzopardian vision and art.

Azzopardi cannot altogether forgo a belief in a supreme being, a principle of universal cohesiveness. In his latest works he turns increasingly to symbols and images from oriental philosophies and religions. He is eclectic in his interests; he will experiment with any idea with which he identifies or which responds to his present mood.

Azzopardi is fascinated by contours and edges. This sense of physical configuration reflects his consciousness of an object or event that is most truly revealed only at the border of its outline or form.

The circular form, “*it-tond*”, appeals intensely to Azzopardi; deep psychological motivations are at the root of his attraction to “*is-simmetrija tac-ċirku*”. The circle is the symbol of the self; it expresses the totality of the psyche in all its aspects. The circle symbolizes the ultimate wholeness of life, whether it appears in primitive sun worship, or modern religions, in myths, in Aztec art, in mandala drawn by Tibetan monks.

The mandala is the magic circle symbolic of the transcendent self, encompassing all sides of man's nature and forging opposing forces into a unity. In the poem by the same name of “*Mandala*”, Azzopardi communes not with an anthropomorphic deity, but with “*il-milja tal-vojt tond*”, the void of inexhaustible contents, the flow of a timeless cosmic configuration. In a fusion of Christian and Buddhist imagery, the poet is drawn as if by a spell to a “*sagament tal-ħolm*”:

U kien hemm wesħha tonda  
 lesta tilqa'  
 dal-kwadranku  
 minn gos-shab.

But after the celestial spectacle, he is disenchanted; he cannot believe wholeheartedly and typically, spurns the oriental ritual:

Miljun sena u sebħha l-istess holma.  
 L-istess spazji l-istess tond frustrat.

Looking at the spectrum of Azzopardi's thematic preoccupations, one is struck by the frequency and importance of female figures in the poet's field of vision.

Females dominate the azzopardian cosmos in myriad and subtle ways.

Azzopardi's heroines are akin to his own existence devoid of absolute values: they exemplify the poet's ethic of fullness of life. They are victims, outsiders, outcasts, sinners. Yet they are at the same time innocent and free, exuding mystery and fascination.

Azzopardi is irresistibly drawn to these females. He is on their trail throughout his wanderings; he seeks them out in the hope of companionship, a love relationship. The meetings turn out to be apparent chances; they are doomed to failure. The female he craves is generally unresponsive, elusive, unattainable. Love, like God, remains a mirage beyond his grasp.

The poet's unfulfilled love with its exasperation of desire recalls Goethe in "Xenien", extolling "*das Gift der unbefriedigten Liebe*" which burns and cools.

After an encounter on a train across Italy, the poet finds himself alone that night:

mank nista' niftakar ghajnejk  
f'dal-limbu kjarskurat  
fejn hlomt li sibtek  
(“Fuq ferrovija”)

Females in Azzopardi's poetry are like apparitions that flash and soon vanish but that shimmer on long after in the inward eye. All that lingers on the page is a sensual image of a mysterious absence. The passage of a female is transmuted into reverberations of dream and desolation, reminiscent of René Char's "*le silence de celle qui laisse rêver*".

Azzopardi's torment of the unattainable loved-one echoes Pablo Neruda's own despair in "Poésia XV":

y me oyes desde lejos y mi voz no te toca  
y me oyes desde lejos y mi voz no te alcanza  
(“Veinte poemas de amor”)

In Azzopardi's situation, the male-female space is hardly ever a bridge of exchange, or "*un espace translucide*" to use Paul Eluard's terms. Reciprocal "*visibilité*" is inextricably bound-up with eluardian love. The act of seeing across a transparent *milieu* is the means par excellence to communicate and share love. In the case of Azzopardi, the male-female space remains an infertile chasm. Is Azzopardi's experience a metaphor for the difficulty of being with an another person and the impossibility of love?

A woman he noticed one evening remains a twilight image, an erotic thought:

il-mara krepuskolata f'għajnejh  
u f'rasu sidirha  
("Les Images")

Elsewhere, the poet is bewitched at the sight of a female undressing and about to swim nude under cover of night. The poet falls in love with the vision, but:

. . . taħt il-harsa 'nfinite tar-raqel li ħabbha  
it-tfajla ta' l-adrijatiku  
dabat f'dell bla ġometrija.  
("Għaxar Varjazzjonijiet fuq l-Imħabba")

Many a poem tinged with pathos evokes a loved-one in an inaccessible beyond, forever distant. In "It-Tfajla tal-Muntanja", the poet remembers a tender encounter. The bliss was short-lived; the poet abandoned the stranger and promised her he would love her, characteristically, from a distance: "*Se nibqa' nħobbok kif naf jien mill-bogħod*". After another encounter with another female, he finds himself alone, in love with an absent loved-one: ". . . *nibqa' waħdi/ nisma' leħnek*".

Erotic images of female hair, eyes, breasts, thighs, link these nameless and enshrined loved-ones with night, sea, moon, heaven:

Kienet safja malli rajtha tholl xuxitha  
tinza' nuda fuq il-blat.  
U saret lejli u saret bahar xtaqt nintreħa  
mmut f'għisimha.  
("Trinoctium Castitas")

Through temporal and spatial separation the females he loves meld sensuously with images of earth. The persistence of his doomed loves echoes the eluardian "*harmonie de l'absence*" in which loss fashions images more intense than physical presence:

illum għandli lura xufftejja u ruhi  
tiegħi biss  
u nara kemm hu sabiħ li niftakrek biss  
bla rridek wisq.  
("Bahrija")

The sensuous lyric "kannizzata" unveils another nameless female but leaves her all her mystery and intangibility. The *voyeur* eyes of the poet net their prey through a latticed space:

Minn għos-slaleb tal-kannizzata  
nizlet mara mneżżgħha bħall-ilma

Transfigured in marine transparency, the female enlarges the contours of the poet's imagination. Nevertheless:

. . . f'ruħna mera  
lmaħt, kull ġenna t'art li tlift

kull ciklu solitudni  
li għażiit minflok minn habbni

The encounter reduces itself to a one-sided gaze. The vision fades out and the poem trails off in silence.

Besides considering a female as potential love-mate, the poet is conscious of woman as the yin force, symbolizing warmth, fertility, darkness, mystery.

The poet associates the females element with elemental matter and natural phenomena. Water and land become feminoid: “... *u saret lejl u saret bahar*”. Twilight, clouds, seasons, time, life revolve subtly around the female: “*fl-ghabex t'għajnejk*” and “*il-ħarifa ta' qalbek*”.

Fire, a prime transformative element is associated with feminine inwardness; it is also related to the capacity for *rêverie* which is implicit in most of Azzopardi's women.

The moon symbolizes a heavenly earth, a female presence. Women's reality is akin to cyclical metamorphosis and movements of a changing moon:

... u tiftakar kemm-il lejl  
ghax hi kienet saret il-lejl  
u l-lejl kien jafha sewwa  
("Lapida")

On one occasion, the moon is transformed into a fantasy of a male in the night and a female “*ħalliet il-qamar xitwi jħobbha*”.

The principle of nature inherent in the female ties to the pain of becoming and dying. The female principle stands for sorrow, but also the peace of the grave, “*diragħajha cimiteru*”.

The plethora of images and symbols emanating from nature distill the essence of woman and transform it into a myth of femininity. This acts like a deep reservoir of creative mystery for the poet.

According to Jungian psychology, the “*anima*”, which is the feminine constituent of the male psyche, suggests an interiorizing movement toward private sensibility. In this introspective role, the feminine orientation is at the basis of Azzopardi's artistic approach; it becomes the cornerstone of his consciousness. The “*anima*” feminizes the poet's experience of reality and his interpretation of it.

The focus of Azzopardi's femininity is anarchistic, liberating, imaginative. His art revolves upon an unceasing unwillingness to allow ossification of a fixed centre or rigid boundaries. The poet's very surrealism and juxtapositional style point to a feminine orientation, a mind unshackled by absolutes and systems. The poet creates personal stories. The non-sacred aspects of such tales is also closer to

the poet's feminine bent than the religious or ideological nature of collective myths.

The act of composition itself becomes a kind of epiphany. For Azzopardi the writing of a poem becomes a means of empathetically experiencing an alternate mode of consciousness. The poem becomes a sublimation of Baudelaire's "*femme fatalement suggestive*": an esthetic female counterpart and her lover, the poet who desires her, are enclosed vicariously together within the space of the written poem. This perhaps accounts for the unique passion and intensity that characterize Azzopardi's work.

A host of other figures recur with an unusual psychic resonance throughout Azzopardi's poetry. Among the most frequent figures are: moon, night, sky, sea, and bird.

The moon dominates azzopardian cosmology; it communicates a variety of images and associations.

The moon's presence adds a surreal, mysterious, or sensual dimension to the drama enacted in the poem. In "Għanja ta' Settembru":

hekk ghajtu t-trombi  
meta l-qamar kien ghoddu sar kankru demm  
ghajtu l-helsien.

In "Suite 345", one finds the villagers waiting and waiting for the fullness of chance "*taħt qamar żlugat*". In "Kemm hi wiesgħa din ix-xtajta" the moon "*tgħatta bl-istrixxa tal-vistu*". The epic poem "Unfinished Suite 869" opens under a moon "*zverġnat bla protesta*".

In the poem "Wara nofs inhar fil-bajja" a nocturnal ritual will unfold under an eerie full moon:

il-lejla jmissu jitla' qamar kwinta  
taħt il-harsa hamra tiegħu  
ha toħroġ l-armla magħluba  
b'uliedha suddjakni  
jsawtu l-ilma bil-qasab tal-ġnejna  
  
taħt dal-qamar  
hallu l-mara tintelaq għat-traxxix  
forsi tindaf  
bla tixtieq iehor  
iħabbilha

In the nightmarish poem "Il-lejla l-qamar qed jitwerreċ", a cross-eyed moon catches the poet lying in a glass-coffin:

u l-qamar qed jingħi dmugħ id-demm  
u d-dwiefer ta' zkuk is-siġar qed iċarrtu  
mbiċċer il-firmament  
u l-weraq isfar qed jingħasar

u l-wirdien sajfi selah gwinħajh  
iħabbat mal-ħħatu fuq wiċċi

When the moon disappears, darkness conspires with night. In “Legġenda”, a young woman “*b’kawtiela skura trid tisfida l-lejl*” ends up surrendering her body to a wintry night. The woman in “Lapida” recalls many a night for “*hi kienet saret il-lejl/u l-lejl kien jafha sewwa*”. And in an erotic sequence of “Għaxar Varjazzjonijiet fuq l-Imħabba”, a nameless woman:

niżlet ghall-ilma  
sabiha daqs il-lejl  
u l-lampi tal-genna ntfew sabiex tghum nuda.

The sky is mostly an awesome “*sema*” where a “*temperatura perversa*” is charted; where there is “*maħzuża s-sentenza ta’ ħajti*” and where clouds drift “*jisfolja mewt war’ohra*”.

The sky is “*bahh ta’ wesgħat*” recalling the “*espaces infinis*” of Pascal. The immensity of space “*bla ħjiel ta’ dijameltru*” intensifies the immense solitude of the mind, and dwarfs the ego to “*ix-xejn tax-xejn assolut*”.

On rare occasions the sky can be an exhilarating sensation as in the opening lines of “Vjaġġ”:

f’imnifsejja ħlewwiet is-sagħtar  
hekk kif il-lożor tal-ħarir jithallew  
jaqghu jitmewġu pezzeż mahlula  
mis-sema

For Azzopardi, seawater is a plurivalent metaphor in which varied facets and moods merge. The sea is an image of the flowing unity of the cosmos; it is a symbol of the unconscious life of the self. The sea connotes sensual images; it is alive with spirits. It is an ever-receding horizon; it is the infinite, timeless beyond. The sea is the primal source, the womb of life. But it can also be a tragic tomb.

In “Marinara”, a nameless fisherman died on the water, unwept, unremembered. And:

il-gawwi sallab karba mal-lejl  
l-istilel għattew wiċċhom  
u l-ilma kellu l-ħatx  
u l-bahar ħassu jegħreq

The poet wonders in “Epifanija” how many oarsmen “*issallbu mas-siġar taħt l-ilma*”, or where their people rowed “*meta stadu l-qamar tar-rizurrezzjoni*”. In the poem “Għoddhom waslu l-angli” water nymphs collected the bones of “*kull xebba li salpat weħiedha*”.

The bird is a haunting image in Azzopardi’s universe. In “Nikta”

a blind pigeon is found shot dead. A cry of a bereaved mate rends the sky:

romol il-leħen tat-tajra  
maqbud fuq l-iħab  
afflittat  
leħen bla vuci.

Elsewhere, a sick dove “*tferfer gwinħajha misluha/tokrob l-en-nwi tagħha*”. Seagulls “*sallab karba mal-lejl*” mourning a nameless fisherman who died forsaken on the water. In the poem “*Talba ta’ fil-ġħaxija*” the author identifies with the nightingale:

ikanta għalxejn  
għas-silġ  
bla tama.

In the memorable poem “*Paesagg 2*”, birds caught in a wire trap shatter the night sky with their shrieks:

il-lejl imtedd minn tulu fuq l-egħlieqi  
u maqbudin mill-gwienah  
l-agħasafar xaffru d-dlam ighajtu  
mill-ingassa tal-wajar.

The heart-rending cry of the bird in Azzopardi’s poetry desecrates the rilkean “*rond cri d’oiseau*” in which “*tout vient docilement se ranger*”.

Is then the shriek of the bird an intimation of the horror of the void, the “*xejn tax-xejn*”, the nothingness that threatens to submerge the human? Or is it emblematic of Azzopardi’s existential predicament, his freedom, with its preciousness and its ineffable anguish?

As an inhabitant of a small island, Azzopardi is extremely conscious of the surrounding sea that isolates him and confines him inexorably. Consequently the thematic motif of “*évasion*” is inherent in his work. Wandering beyond the shores of the island expands the poet’s world; nevertheless, the “elsewhere” becomes only another experience of loneliness and sadness. Wherever he escapes, he drags his “*mal*” with him.

Paris, the city of life becomes a soulless wasteland:

Jien l-aridità li qed tnixxef dil-belt:  
l-id ingazzata tal-lejl  
mingħajr is-sider tax-xebba  
(“*Notre Dame*”)

Venice is for the poet nothing but “*cimiteru ta’ gondli*”; Prague is a city that “*nixxet tibki*”; it is a “*belt tad-dmugħ*” and “*pjazzi*

where “*xemx tal-bronž/irħiet mewt divina*”. In Berlin, the poet is distressed by:

wiċċha abjad in-nies  
ftit tintebah bid-differenzi ta' bejnietna  
... jien ukoll wiċċi abjad bhalhom.  
("Bahnhofstrasse")

After wandering across the capitals of Europe, the poet confesses his sense of disenchantment and interior desolation:

gbart hafna frak  
u ruhi saret katalgu ta' nies bla fattizzi.  
("Tao Te Cing")

The poet escapes from his insular microcosm ever seeking to free his self “*prigunier tal-verità*” and his conscience “*fgata fl-alka*”. His quest is futile; it is vitiated by an enduring “*malinkonija tragika*”.

Ultimately, the creation of the poem itself seems to provide a cathartic release for the poet’s neurosis. Poetry affords access to the interior faraway of the unconscious where the poet is reborn as his instinctive and passionate self.

The poems presented here are moments of Azzopardi’s artistic itinerary from his initial self-conscious studies to his later more mature sublimations.

Encounter with Azzopardi’s rebellious mind may be troubling, but it accomplishes what it aims to do: to subvert our commonsense and complacencies, to challenge our imagination, to remind us that life begins, in the words of Sartre, “*de l’autre côté du désespoir*”.

\* \* \*

In my translations I have tried to approximate the original poems as faithfully as possible. I have aimed to convey a sense of the poet’s emotion and style and to achieve a final composition that would stand on its own as poetry.

Translation is a difficult and risky task. I am aware of the danger of transmuting poetry into another tongue. A poetic translation can never reproduce the original poem. Each language has its own particular structure, sounds, images, and allusions.

Azzopardi’s poems present unique problems for a translator. As with all poets, Azzopardi’s art is inseparable from his language and style.

The earthly sounds inherent in the original Maltese language are lost in English. Furthermore, Azzopardi’s syntax is particularly difficult to translate because of its distorted patterns of word-order, ambiguous juxtapositions, and personal usage of words.

A translator must grapple with his own sense of the structure and inner voices of a poem. The experience of a poem resides in its totality not only in each of its words and their sounds, but also in the relations among those words, the connotations, the images, the pauses, the interior immensity of words.

I should like to thank my wife Judith for her invaluable assistance in the final version of the translations.