Good Evening,

Today’s date, March 8th, really requires a talk about women as a subject – but it seems to have slipped our minds when it came to planning our lectures. However, not all is lost since, after all, I am a woman talking although,, as it turns out, on a very male subject – war.

In the context of a day dedicated to women, whatever that may mean, I can’t help but refer to the writer Virginia Woolf by way of an unlikely introduction to this topic. In *A Room of One’s Own* she commented on her discovery at the British Library that woman is the topic must frequently written about by men. And their sole qualification for doing so, she claimed, was simply that they were not women. In other words, there is a massive literary tradition of writing about women in all manner of styles and genres, from the anthropological study to the fictional, by experts who have no first hand knowledge of what is actually means to be a woman.

In a later work of hers, published as *Three Guineas*, Woolf writes about the manner in which the educational institutions, from schools and colleges to universities and academies, had kept women out. She criticises the system of examinations and the competitive attitude in schools and maintains that there is something very male in these structures. And that these same attitudes, nurtured in male dominated institutions are ultimately responsible for the desire for war. In a few words, Woolf equates war with the male of the species and claims that educational institutions are responsible for its attraction.
These four novelists under our gaze tonight, Thomas Pynchon, Anthony Burgess, Nicholas Monsarrat and Nicholas Rinaldi, are all male authors who have chosen to write about war, its devastation, its acts of bravery and courage, its innocent victims – and one of those victims was our own island of Malta, and in a very specific sense, this city of Valletta.

Valletta, it seems is increasingly becoming attractive again for a number of different reasons and from many points of view. One of the effects of the Second World War was that many of the families that used to live in Valletta moved out to safer areas during the siege, and never returned. Many settling in Sliema instead. However, after sixty years, the houses are again being sold and used as houses and converted to apartments, and not just offices any more. There is something of a pulse beating in the city through the night nowadays and no longer confined to office hours. This focus on Valletta and its many transformations is also at the centre of a forthcoming exhibition by a long standing friend of mine, Madeline Gera. The work in progress, entitled *Eloise Halberd Valletta 1940-1942 2007*, of which the painting *Drinking at Captain Caruana’s on Kingsway*, seemed such an emblematic piece linking this talk with Madeline’s exhibition and mingling memory with the desire to understand the past and bring it into closer focus.

The only means through which this is possible, to some degree, is through art. Various and different forms of art, as different as the novel is to the painting, or the photograph to the essay, all play with perceptions of the real and the deliberately constructed.

I thought I might provide a few references to the visual aspect of memory to accompany this talk. I gathered a collection of postcards from the years 1940-1943, I also included two of Madeline Gera’s paintings-in-progress which feature elements of Valletta in the 40s, and some original contemporary watercolours that accompanied news articles in Italian newspapers during the war, such as the *Cronache della Guerra*
and the *Tribuna Illustrata* from the personal collection of Alfred Zahra de Domenico. These pictures, together with a paper describing the *giornali*, both appear in the book *Malta at War in Cultural Memory*, on which my talk is also based.

The watercolours, which accompany accounts of air attacks on Malta, play around with the truth, providing images of inaccuracies which were to be taken as fact by the readers. These pictures provide an initial focus on the subject of this talk which revolves around the blending of fact and fiction in art, specifically in literature. The line between truth and fiction is also deliberately manipulated in wartime propaganda, the site upon which, as we are well aware, the first to die is truth.

These four fictional narratives based on some of the events from World War II, make use of a common trope. They use the technique of looking back at events some years after they occurred, once the actual horror of the lived experience of war was at a safe distance in time. The notion of re-calling, re-living and re-telling relies on memory as the guiding principle, and the mode of presentation is inevitably the past tense.

In Thomas Pynchon’s *V*, the interweaving of events that precede and follow WWII flow through the whole of the novel. However, one particular chapter, Chapter Eleven entitled ‘Confessions of Fausto Maijestral’, is actually set in Malta and deals with the particular reminiscences of a single character. This Maltese character, Fausto Maijestral, is an aspiring poet before the war breaks out, he works therefore, with words creating, forming, and building poems which, we are told, were strongly influenced by T. S. Eliot. Later, looking back on the events of the bombings in Malta he moves away from using words to create new images, to re-using words to re-create those images of destruction and death that he had witnessed. The chapter opens with a paragraph drawing together the notion of looking back as an act of coming to terms with the events and the actions committed in the past:

> It takes, unhappily, no more than a desk and writing supplies to turn any room into a confessional. This may have nothing to do with the acts we have committed, or the humours we do go in and out of. It may be only the room – a cube – having no persuasive powers of its own. The room simply is. To occupy it, and find a metaphor there for memory, is our own fault. (*V*: 304)
The initial connection between memoir and confession is indicated in the title of the chapter and also implicated within the genre of the memoir and of the autobiography. Illustrious precedents such as the *Confessions* of St Augustine, and Cardinal Newman’s *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, briefly alluded to, set the tone for the blending of the religious, specifically Catholic, aspect of the sacrament of confession with the literary form of a first person narrative.

Fausto comments on this claiming that the life of a person can only be defined as a ‘successive rejection of personalities’, a continuous discontinuity. He is aware that an autobiographical text is not a ‘true’ reflection of a real life as it was lived. He says:

> no apologia is any more than a romance – half a fiction – in which all the successive identities taken on and rejected by the writer as a function of linear time are treated as separate characters. (*V*: 306)

Even as he writes, the character is taking on another role, that of narrator whose life and death coincide with the text itself.

Both the religious and the literary depend on the use of the past tense to tell of acts that have been committed or omitted, and on the memory of the individual to guide the narrative through those past events, to supply the context or the ‘form and order’ of memory, as the philosopher, David Hume described it. The intention of the narrative excursus into the past is ostensibly to obtain pardon or catharsis in the present.

Occupying a prime position in the context of the confessional is the feeling of guilt. The use of confession as a deliberate strategy for remembering while simultaneously coming to terms with one’s guilt is implied equally in the religious associations as well as in the psychological condition of ‘survivor’s guilt’, described in passing in Nicholas Rinaldi’s *A Jukebox Queen of Malta*, published in 1999, when the protagonist, Rocco Raven, believes himself the only survivor of a bomb blast. He awakes:
thinking, with a sinking sensation, that he was still in the house on Strait Street and the others were all dead in there, under the debris, and the knowledge that he was alive, while they were dead, filled him with a sense of guilt, as if he’d been, in some way, responsible. (JQM. 50)

It is not only the confessional which provides a healing process in the act of remembering. Freudian psychoanalysis makes a similar claim that the act of looking back functions as a means of therapy, providing an understanding of the past as a cause of the conscious and unconscious present, and in way coming to terms with those events of the past which are responsible for making us who we are.

There is undoubtedly a fundamental overlap between the individual and the collective acts of recollection. The history of war in the twentieth century has not only shaped, marked and scarred individual lives, but lives of whole communities, and of countries. Like religion and psychoanalysis, literature partakes of this overall act of looking back and dealing with trauma. The literary text, created in solitude, based on fact as much as fiction, especially the fiction of individual lives as they make their way through the historically accurate reconstructions of the past, eventually become part of mass consciousness. As novels are read they come to form part of the reader’s memory, but as an individual and as part of a collective culture.

The parallel Fausto draws comparing his mind to a room occupied by memory forms part of a long tradition. The mind had previously been compared to a room, a space filled with ideas, images or pictures, by Plato, for instance, who describes memory as a ‘storehouse’ in his Theaetetus and St Augustine in Confessions X, 13, as ‘the great cave of memory’ within which images are laid away, to be ‘brought forth when there is need for them.’ For Locke in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding, memory is ‘as it were the storehouse of our ideas,’ in which ideas are, ‘as it were laid out of sight’. Hume, in Treatise of Human Nature, claims that ‘when any impression has been present with the mind, it again makes its appearance there as an idea’. Therefore, Fausto Maijstral’s metaphor of the room compared to the mind full of memories is hardly as innocent or new as he makes it seem, having, as it does, a long philosophical shadow in the debate on the nature of representation of memory and knowledge in that room, that ‘storehouse’ or hothouse, of the mind.
Fausto’s addresses his written confessions to his daughter, Paola, a name she shares, in female version, with St Paul who brought Christianity to the islands in the first century, making them, as Anthony Burgess states, ‘St. Paul’s holy island’ (*EP*:8). Nicholas Monsarrat’s in *The Kapillan of Malta* also draws upon St Paul’s legacy which, in the second ‘Hexameron’ chapter titled, ‘In the Year of Our Lord, 60. An Illustrious Gift from the Sea’, he tells the events of St Paul’s arrival by shipwreck to the shores of Malta. The little detail in the title word ‘Illustrious’ links St Paul’s ship to the aircraft carrier of that name which was involved in liberating Malta from hunger and bringing much needed supplies. This event in 1942 proved not only to be a turning point in the war, but it took on the intensity of a miracle. Culturally it partly supplanted the cult of the male figure of St Paul while firmly installing the maternal figure of Our Lady as liberator of the islands. The tankers and aircraft carriers which made up Operation Pedestal arrived broken and bleeding, on the 15th August, the much celebrated feast of Santa Maria. Appropriately, therefore, the last of Monsarrat’s inserted chapters, is ‘Hexameron!: The Dawning Day of Father Salvatore: 15th August, 1942’, signaling the Madonna as the figure of liberation from hunger, surrender and, ultimately, the bringer of Victory, as in the past.

Monsarrat makes use of the religious patterning firmly embedded within the cultural self-identity of the islands as a structuring device against which to plot the unfolding story of his protagonist, Father Salvatore. The son of a noble family living in a great house in Valletta, whose father had died and whose mother, Baroness Santo-Nobile, was a woman who was highly regarded and influential in society, familiar with Bishops, Governors and politicians.

The main chronological narrative of *The Kappillan of Malta* covers the period from 11th June 1940, the day of the first bombing, to 15th August 1942, with the arrival of what has come to be known as the ‘Santa Maria Convoy’. These years cover the most intense and prolonged bombing ever experienced by a civilian population. The years 1940-1942 also correspond to the major events of the Kappillan’s life which the narrator, whom the reader meets in the first and the last chapters of the novel entitled ‘Memoirs of a Day-Tripper’ 1 and 2 respectively, is interested in.
investigating. The narrator discovers that immediately after the war the Kappillan moved to a monastery in Gozo never to be seen alive again. The reasons were partly guilt, this time of a sexual nature, after he encountered a woman inevitably named Maddelena. But also the guilt associated with the cult of personality that had been constructed around him as the ‘Kappillan of the Catacombs’ in Cospicua, the same town, incidentally, in which Fausto Maijestrals is busy writing his own memoirs in another novel.

Monsarrat makes use of the device of the inserted story at regular intervals, thereby incorporating a different form and time of narrative into the main chronological plot breaking down its steady rhythm. The stories, or textual insertions, are written in a style that contrasts with the main narrative, often in the first person narrative voice of the teller of these tales, who is the educated Kappillan talking to his, mostly illiterate, flock. He speaks to his congregation in the shelters of Malta’s historical and cultural events. They provide a means of imaginative escape from the horrors of bombardments. In this way, the religious sermon comes to be supplanted and transformed into an act of edifying and entertaining storytelling. This provides and an interesting parallel to Pynchon’s novel in which the religious sacrament of confession is transformed into the profane act of autobiography.

In Pynchon’s Chapter Eleven the religious theme is brought into play through the blending of the memoir with the attitude of the confessional, in Burgess and Monsarrat the religious theme is clearly announced in the titles of the novels. Anthony Burgess’ *Earthly Powers*, which begins and ends with chapters set in Malta, uses the island as a frame and a point of departure for a grand, lifelong, autobiographical reminiscence. The protagonist, Kenneth M. Toomey, is given a quest, by none other than the Archbishop of Malta, to investigate and ascertain the saintliness of a recently deceased Pope who happened to related to him through marriage and whom he had known for many years:

Now, having remembered so much, often accurately, but memory as a human faculty is subject to human limitations, we are condemned to invent so much of the past, I must prepare to remember, as accurately as is at all humanly possible the thing I was enjoined by His Grace of Malta to remember. (*EP*: 289)
It is against the personal anguish of the acceptance of the protagonist’s homosexuality and its unacceptance by the Church of Rome, driving a wedge between him and his church, that the long winding recollection from 1917 to 1980 takes place. Through the brilliantly conceived battle between the devil and the Pope, which provides the climax to the quest, Toomey, finally understands that the devil has won through appropriately subversive means, by manipulating an apparent miracle. The two world wars and Toomey’s inability to participate as a soldier in either also feature as an instance of guilt and shame in the novel, whereas the wars themselves seem to be the work of the devil dominating the twentieth century, and getting stronger.

The Devil has his work to do. God permits him to do his work. [...] It is all in your English Bible. In Genesis. The fallen Lucifer was permitted to implant the spirit of evil in the souls of men. Where is evil? Not in God’s creation. There is a great mystery but the mystery sometimes becomes less of a mystery. For the devil brings war, and out of the war comes goodness. (EP: 111)

Or so claims the Monsignor Carlo Campanati some years before he was made Pope.

**Pynchon, Monsarrat, Rinaldi and the Rock**

Pynchon, Monsarrat and Rinaldi, each take their protagonists down into the rock, into the hewn center of inert rock of which the island is composed. Monsarrat’s Kappillan takes his flock into the already cut catacombs. The word ‘catacombs’ immediately brings to mind the underground warrens and burial places in which St Paul preached to the first converts on the Roman island of Melita, and the catacombs of the early Christians in Rome, the first witnesses of the faith, persecuted and martyred for their beliefs.

Incidentally, the Maltese girl Rocco Raven in *The Jukebox Queen* falls in love with and fails to marry, is called Melita. In this way Rinaldi draws a parallel between her and the island attributing many of her characteristics to the island, and vice versa. After meeting Melita, Rocco is never described as entering another shelter. Instead, sometimes with Melita, or at other times with some of the British pilots at the Point de Vue or Ta’ Qali, he would watch the bombs fall, and witness the air attacks and the bravery and courage of the pilots.
Monsarrat plays on the double notion, the contradiction and inversion of the sites of life and death. During aerial bombardments to be above ground was to court death, whereas to be tucked away below the earth in places more suited to burials was to protect life. Observations such as, ‘He had forgotten the enormous vitality of this tomb.’*(KOM*: 405), accentuate this inverted relation. In addition, Monsarrat associates the idea of eternal life through religious faith turning the catacombs, just as St Paul had done, into a surrogate church where ‘mass was said twice a day’ by his Kapillan. The subterranean catacombs are equated with a vital force in both physical and spiritual terms, ‘The nearer he got to the catacombs, the more his spirit revived. He felt that he was last moving towards something real: something which lived, and had refused to die. … In the Cottonera Lines, which he had grown to love, there was still a living faith to be found.’ *(KOM*: 405)*

The rock is central in Thomas Pynchon’s eleventh chapter where it becomes the central metaphor and point of reference. Like Monsarrat, Pynchon also intertwines the apparent opposites of life and death together in phrases such as ‘the womb of rock’ *(V*:320), blending the inert with the life-giving, and as a ultimate survivor ‘the immortality of rock. Plausible. But apostasy.’ *(V*:340). Fausto, the narrator in this chapter draws a picture of Malta in terms of a rock:

Malta, and her inhabitants, stood like an immovable rock in the river Fortune, now at war’s flood. The same motives which cause us to populate a dream-street also cause us to apply to a rock human qualities like ‘invincibility’, ‘tenacity’, ‘perseverance’, etc. More than metaphor, it is delusion. But on the strength of this delusion Malta survived.’ *(V: 325)*

A comparison, in terms of resemblance, is also drawn between the substances of living bone and inert rock in the following passage written as an entry in the diary of Fausto, also blends the apparent opposites of life and death, or rather, life and non-life - the inanimate state of the rock:

Don’t touch them, these walls. They carry the explosions for miles. The rock hears everything, and brings it to the bone, up the fingers and arm, down through the bone-cage and bone-sticks and out again through the bone-webs. Its little passage through you is accident, merely in the nature of rock and bone: but it’s as if you were given a reminder. *(V: 319)*
The decent into the rock, the islands’ natural shelters, is created in terms of a movement away from language for Pynchon’s Fausto, as well as an eventual return through language itself. Fausto, on ‘the day of the 13 Raids’, lost his beloved Elena Xemxi and for some time following her death lives beneath the ground losing all contact with sense and consciousness.

A similar reaction to loss and death is described in Rinaldi’s *The Jukebox* *Queen of Malta*. At the start of the novel a bomb falls on the house in the Gut in which the protagonist, Rocco Raven, is living with some of the prostitutes who worked in the Strait Street bars, and the family who owned the house. His belief after trying to shift the debris with his hands, that all inside the house had perished, creates a numbness of sorrow within him. He walked out of the back onto Old Bakery Street and blindly through other streets of Valletta till he returned to Strait Street and the sirens sounded again, and he descended into a shelter:

The entrance to the shelter was in the rear of a bar, the Inner Sanctum, by a billiard table. A trap door in the floor opened onto a spiral stairwell cut into stone, sinking some forty or fifty feet into a cavern. It was like that all over Valletta, tunnels and cavers chiseled deep in the underground limestone – some of them new, cut with pneumatic drills, but many, like this one, old, dating back to the time of the Knights. (*JQM*: 46-47) […]

The stone steps, wedge-shaped, were narrow and steep, turning round and round, and dimly lit. The old ladies managed well, they were experts at this, but Rocco, groping, had to brace himself, putting his hands against the curved stone walls on either side of him, like descending into another one of his dreams. (*JQM*: 47)

Emotional exhaustion takes over and he sleeps, unawares. On waking we are told,

> His watch showed one, but he didn’t know if it was morning or afternoon, and didn’t care to ask. Another raid was in progress” […] He looked at his watch and still it showed one. It had stopped. He didn’t bother to wind it. It was better that way, out of time, outside of it, not knowing if it was day or night. He was pulled back towards sleep and closed his eyes.” (p.50)

He was “wrenched awake” intermittently, by a sense of guilt common to survivors. Eventually he realized, “That was Friday, and now it was Sunday. Saturday he had
lost completely, in and out of sleep.”(p. 54). Arguably, Rocco Raven’s descent into the rock is somewhat less impressive than Fausto Majjestral’s. There is also a fundamental difference between these two characters: Rocco is an American soldier posted as an Intelligence Officer in Malta, while Fausto is a poet and a writer. The descent and eventual return of the poet, more than the soldier, can be understood against the mythological prototype of Orpheus. The poet, as suggested by the Orphic myth, descends into the depths of life to experience the totality of living and dying, and then to return and through language share his knowledge. The experience of war is that of loss and death, of the brutish and the inhuman. It is also part of life and therefore part of the raw material that the poet must work with. Fausto describes how the poet must face that nightmarish world, as he returns claiming both his soul and language back from the grasp of the Devil, to tell the tale:

But in dream there are two worlds: the street and under the street. One is the kingdom of death and one of life. And how can a poet live without exploring the other kingdom, even if only as a kind of tourist? A poet feeds on dream. If no convoys come what else is there to feed on? (V: 325)

Furthermore, it is in the ‘feeding’ off this world of nightmare and its sub-conscious fears and desires, and their eventual transformation into fictional worlds of words, or lies, that the function of poet resides:

Poets have been at this for centuries. It is the only useful purpose they do serve in society: and if every poet were to vanish tomorrow, society would live no longer than the quick memories and dead books of their poetry.

It is the role of the poet in the 20th Century. To lie. (V: 325-326)

The parallel levels in life is one of the major themes developed in V, it is suggestive of the underlying meaninglessness of brute reality of which our lives are composed but which we must ignore as a strategy for survival. It is only the heroes in the novel who descend into the sewers of New York or the rock shelters of Malta where they fully discover the total lack of meaning and the ‘innate mindlessness’ present in a ‘universe of things’.

The retreat into the rock shelters is an important element in novels that deal specifically with the war in Malta, which also emerges as a central topic in the oral
testimonies of survivors of the war in Malta, many of whom were children or young adults at the time:

The vibration is impossible to talk about. Felt sound. Buzzing. The teeth buzz: Pain, a numb prickling along the jawbone, stifling concussion at the eardrums. Over and over. Mallet-blows as long as the raid, raids as long as the day. You never get used to it. You’d think we’d all have gone mad by now. What keeps me standing erect and away from the walls? And silent. A brute clinging to awareness, nothing else. Pure Maltese. Perhaps it is meant to go on forever. If "forever" still has any meaning. (V: 319-320)

This description, with its detailed evocation of sensory detail, rings so true to the reader’s ears that it could easily have been taken from an testimony of a survivor of the war. In fact, the sensory detail evoked coupled with the writing style of a diary, blurs the distinction between fact and fiction stylistically creating a feeling of the authentic even in imaginative descriptions.

Memory and Betrayal

Towards the end of Earthly Powers, the protagonist Kenneth Toomey considers the writing of his own autobiography. He discusses his proposed title, Confabulations, with his sister, Hortense, who greets it as ‘a wet sort of title’. Toomey defends his choice saying that:

In psychiatry, according to this dictionary here, it means the replacement of the gaps left by a disordered memory with imaginary remembered experiences believed to be true. Not that I see the difference. All memories are disordered. The truth, if not mathematical, is what we think we remember. (EP: 645)

What we think we remember often lies somewhere between truth and fiction, employing aspects of both. Some might call this a betrayal of the truth. Yet, this inevitable constraint applies equally to the writing of novels as to the writing of diaries, giving witness to events, or to the telling of one’s experiences in the form of memoir or testimony. The most ‘truthful’ of accounts are nevertheless caught between the act of remembering and the act of inventing, between memory and
imagination.

In Germany at the start of WWII, the character Concetta in *Earthly Powers* asks Toomey to preserve an account of recent horrors in the diary form she had written her evidence in, specifically she asks, ‘Don’t make a novel of all this.’ His retort that ‘Novels can be more real than -’ is simply met by her with a desperate cry for truth preserved through martyrs and witnesses. ‘These are bad bad times’, she insists:

‘This is the worst century that history has ever known. And we’re only a third of the way through it. There have to be martyrs and witnesses.’

‘They’re the same thing, you know.’

‘You see what I mean,’ she said kindly. ‘A certain tendency to frivolity. I know that *martyr* means witness. You’re too used to dealing with words.’ (*EP* 377)

In other words, she is appealing for ‘real’ testimonies of the atrocities committed during the war. She sees his commitment to words as ‘frivolous’ and dealing with ‘unreality’, and yet, it is within a novel that we read this exchange, it is in words that it is brought to us, and this is true whether it be the words chosen by the writer of ‘real’ testimony or the writer of novels, and finally, their subject is the same.

Perhaps a ‘frivolous’ point that might be mentioned is that since the reading of novels tends to be more enjoyable than the reading of straightforward testimonial accounts, then the novelist probably plays a greater part in providing ‘witness’ to countless readers of those events of the past whether or not he happened to be there, whether or not the writer was an actual eye-witness to events.

The problem of truth in the novel is an interesting one. If the novel does have access to truth, then what kind of truth is it?

A common feature in all written accounts, fictional, historical or testimonial, is the reliance on narrative. Each tells its story or provides its account ordered in terms of the dominant genre, whether it is the populated fiction of direct speech and narrative voice of the novel, or the apparently objective and uninvolved stance of the historian, or the first person narrative account of the oral testimony with its suggestion
of language being transparent and the facts coming through unmediated. The ‘raw material’ made up of ideas, facts or experience, which are not entirely separable, have to have order imposed upon them to make them make sense. That order is provided by the narrative, the means the novelist manipulates most consciously.

The suspicion of the novelist’s art is not altogether unfounded. When the novelist draws attention to his own fiction in terms of the problem of transcribing the real, then he moves beyond self-reflexivity using the very objections to sway the reader. The narrator, who in *Earthly Powers* is the protagonist speaking in the first person, says:

> You will see my problem here. If this were fiction, I should have no trouble imposing on you a suspension of disbelief, but it is not fiction and I require your belief. And if there is a sense in which all reminiscence is fiction, though the creativity of memory is not in the service of the art which is itself in the service of a deeper and factual truth. Memory lies, yet how far we can never be sure. I can do no more than transcribe memory. (*EP*: 276)

A very convincing plea and yet used to introduce a passage in the book, itself therefore a part of the fiction, about exorcism and therefore a difficult, dangerous and for some incredulous, subject. Again reflecting on the freedom of the novelist in the face of fact, Toomey muses that, ‘Being uncommitted to verifiable fact, […] I can indulge in the free fancy that often turns out to be the truth.’ (*EP*: 454) The truth of fiction, as opposed to the factual truth of statistical data, and on the other hand, the truth of personal testimony – all attest to being truth, or having access to truth, while all being different. Different in what way? Different versions of the truth? Or different truths?

Sometimes, the urge to provide the ‘facts’ can be to be stronger than the desire to create with those facts. This can cause problems for the novelist who tries to be ‘true’ in terms of verifiable historical detail rather than trusting in ‘free fancy that often turns out to be the truth’. This seems to be the case in Nicholas Monsarrat’s writing of *The Kappillan of Malta*. There are frequent shifts in style from narrative to a more journalistic type of writing in which the character’s point of view seems forgotten in the author’s immense desire to provide the details and the statistics of, for instance, those crucial convoys, their casualties, their losses, and their ultimate
But on the other side of the account, on the day of the Mother of God, the four ships, and now this last fugitive from the Santa Maria convoy, had brought their cargoes safely in. The tremendous cheering which now broke out again as the ship was nudged towards her berth, the waving of flags and handkerchiefs, hailed the miracle. No convoy in the history of the island siege has ever been more desperately needed, nor more loved when at last it arrived. […]

It might have thought that a convoy of fourteen ships escorted by 2 battleships, 4 carriers, 7 cruisers, 24 destroyers, 8 submarines, 4 corvettes, 4 minesweepers, and a tug – that such a convoy with four escorts for each merchant ship, would have a very fair chance of scoring 100 per cent. But perhaps its enormous size was a fatal flaw; it was far too big for secrecy, and having been spied on by commercial aircraft and venal fishermen it was waylaid, well in advance, by E-boats, bombers, and torpedo-bombers from Sicily, and a whole line of U-boats patrolling between Algiers and Majorca. (KOM: 396-7)

This description goes on with no reference to the characters through whose senses this description is supposed to be coming to us. This sustained documentary style bulletin goes on for pages before the characters are remembered and drawn back into the picture.

The ‘truth’ is under construction. There are different kinds of construction of the same events, and each is not mutually exclusive. That testimonies should prove to be less ‘true’ than might be expected, or that literature can be more ‘true’, that history selects and is organized from a precise point of view thereby excluding other possible explanations, shows each version to be incomplete, shows each to be constructed along the axis of a particular genre, denies each the total vision which could, ideally, make up the truth. What we do have are different versions that produce a mosaic of the past but still the total picture eludes us. The very notion of truth, a complete and total truth, is ultimately only a fiction of our desire. The bringing together of a range of versions of the same events produces a composite view of the past that is both complementary and suggestive. Evoking the emotions of lived experience, coupled with ‘hard’ statistical facts and data, and supported by inert objects in collections and museums, all attest to the complex phenomenology of past lived experience.

Despite all of these means to grasp and understand the past, it is within the
novel that the problematics of truth, language and memory are most honestly and fruitfully discussed. The most interesting aspect of these four novels under discussion here is that this very debate takes place within the pages of the novels. This is not a theoretical discussion about truth and memory applied to these works, but a discussion which takes place within them. The novel is capable of providing the site for self-reflexive discussion about its own kind of authenticity and about the haunting veracity of fiction.

END

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