

## MALTA IN CONTEXT

A Survey of Language and Literature

"Infinite riches in a little room"

Marlowe: *Doctor Faustus*

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Situated 60 miles to the South of ~~Sicily~~, 200 to the North of North Africa, measuring a mere 117 square miles in all, and for 200 years a British Colony, Malta is an island museum at the ~~crossroads of the Mediterranean~~, a treasure-house of tradition, culture, history and prehistory. Excluding migrants, the present population exceeds 300,000 and the population density is among the highest anywhere.

Semitic in their origins, European through their apprenticeship, the Maltese were converted to Christianity by St. Paul in A.D. 60. The faith has been to the inhabitants of these islands the unifying power which, like a rod of Moses, has made of three barren rocks a nation with a character. Sufficiently isolated from their European and Semitic neighbours, and taking a pride in their Crusoe-like isolation, the Maltese have always had to rely on their own resources, and have even developed autonomous language.

It has, of course, been impossible for Maltese not to import much specialized, modern, and not-so-modern jargon, and before Homer wrote, I suppose, Greek was probably a poorer language than Maltese is nowadays.

What does it sound like? That part of the vocabulary which the Maltese regard as pure Maltese is of Semitic origin, and sounds Semitic, while that part of the vocabulary which the Maltese regard to be imported, has come from the Romance languages, Spanish, French, mostly Italian, and some English terms, and either sounds Latinate, or English. For 'visit' for instance, we have two versions: 'vižta' pronounced 'veesta', which sounds latin, and 'zjara' pronounced 'zjaara', which is semitic. Similarly, for *mother*, *father*, we have two versions: one is 'mama', 'papa', where the root is latin, the other is 'omm', which looks easy to pronounce, and 'missier', pronounced 'misseer', with the double "ee" as in free. The last pair of words are of Semitic etymology.

However Semitic the root, the alphabet used by the Maltese is, again, the Roman alphabet: Maltese is, indeed, a very eclectic hybrid, rather difficult for foreigners. The sound of the Semitic root, however, may be described a little colourfully as close to that of quotations from the Bible in the original Hebrew.

But although the language is old, there never was any national spirit in Malta before the turn of the century. No more than traffic-centre, now as always, and yet, for over 2,000 years, a traffic-centre the operation of which was essential to the peace of mind of the Roman Empire, the Moors, the Arabs,

the French, the English, and to all Christendom itself, when the Knights of Malta defeated the forces of Islam in 1565, Malta has always been handed around from power to power. Itself powerless, it has always played the most unwilling part of power politics in the Mediterranean, and always, the Maltese have had a marked and pitiful colonial cringe mentality. They can hardly be blamed, though, for inviting the Romans over peacefully, and literally asking them to take over, when Rome could have done so uninvited. This characteristic move of the Maltese was, once again, their policy when, threatened by Napoleon's forces, Malta asked the British over.

Taking full shape with the turn of this century, a romantic revival, inspired by the ideals of the Italian Risorgimento 50 years after, took place in Malta. Interest in the Maltese language, and in Maltese music, folklore, history and poetry was, for the first time, exhibited in high-serious earnest. This national revival, while championed by the political party who represented the rights of the Maltese, the Nationalist Party, was rather frowned upon by the colonial rule, the more so as the Nationalists were themselves very much too partial to Italian culture, a bias which, to the British, in those days of international unease and warfare, seemed as little questionable and subversive. This spirit of Maltese nationalism has indeed produced some of the island's bitterest internal hostilities, on the political, cultural, and religious levels.

I see in Malta a unique metaphor for the sham and military ambition of the global village, whose thoughts are likewise small, whose schemes are likewise little. But in spite of the bogus pretensions which persist today, in spite of much exaggerated, pretentious humbug, such as that woven round the question of linguistic purism, the new revival produced a deep sense of new-found identity, some genuine feeling, some genuine poetry, and at least one poet of a considerable and definite merit. This was Dun Karm Psaila who, at first writing in Italian, was carried away by the new spirit, and switching over to the Maltese as his artistic medium, was immediately, and by common consent, hailed as the young, new nation's natural voice and unacknowledged romantic legislator.

Priest-poet, Psaila is now the National Poet of these islands. His genius is profoundly Maltese. It is influenced by the Maltese flora and fauna. It is deeply stirred by the very intimate family life of Malta. It reflects the intense religious and devotional life, and the staunch Catholicism of the Maltese, to its best advantage.

His most sustained literary effort, *Il-Jien u lilhinn minnu*, (*The I and Beyond it*), is as lovely a short epic as Wordsworth's *Michael*: its blank verse, and the romantic character of its rhetoric and sentiment, remind me, all things considered, of that far greater poet, and would by no means have been unworthy of Wordsworth. Psaila's best poetry, and in this he again resembles Wordsworth, is autobiographical in nature. I might mention, to illustrate my

point, *Il-Jien u lilhinn Minnu; Żjara lil Ġesù*, (*Visit to Jesus*), which reads like a most interesting analogy to Wordsworth's *Tintern abbey: revisited*, with the difference that Psaila had not strayed too far away at any time: *Non Omnis Moriar*; and *Il-ġerreġja u jien*, (*The racing Boat and I*)., The quality of heightened prose, which distinguishes the dignified simplicity of his rhetoric, is another aspect of his work which, to my mind, makes him a worthy companion to that great poet of the Lake District. It is of relevance that Wordsworth defined poetry as heightened prose. In his unified sensibility, however, his pious domesticity, and the entirely orthodox romanticism of his sentiment, Psaila was Wordsworth's superior, even if he does not have that greater poet's abundance and complete competence.

Psaila's best work is also of a deeply religious nature. To put him into another English perspective for the English reader, I could say that a comparison with most of the highly respectable devotional poets who practised in the 17th Century, namely poets such as Herbert, Crashaw, Vaughan and Traherne, and even Donne, would be a comparison from which he will certainly emerge with credit. Though my opinion must necessarily be coloured by the fact that, to me, he is nearer home, I think that, to compare his *Żjara lil Ġesù* with that period's best remembered lyric to the Blessed Sacrament, Herbert's *love*, would be a little unfair to Herbert. Why? The Maltese poem is far superior: it is longer than the English poem; it is equally well-sustained; it incorporates a wider sensibility.

The central experience, of a memorable visit to a nearby Church in the countryside, is woven, in this poem, not only with the poet's sweeping autobiographical recollections, but also with Time, Autumn, and Place, Malta. The poetic setting is beautifully redolent of the Maltese autumn countryside. Before I pass Psaila over, I would like to illustrate my thesis, that he wrote from a stance of Wordsworthian "emotion recollected in tranquillity", with some quotation from this poem. To substantiate my evaluation of Psaila as a very *Maltese* author is also well worth quoting a few word pictures:

It was the season

When vines undress and to the lord yield up  
 The very last bunches, and the pleasant breeze  
 Carries the yellow leaves and a thick, low pallor  
 Of cloud strains heaven and the very first drizzle  
 Of rain begins in due season: the hour drew near  
 When birds upon the trees would congregate  
 And, countless, rouse the air with endless chirping;  
 Alone, all by my soul, a little book-weary,  
 I took the road that parts the fields and sea.  
 --Sweet was your voice upon the day, O Sea.  
 And quiet the wave which rippling foamlessly

Lapped on the dented shore! And sweet your voices,  
 O trees for ever blessed with evergreen,  
 Only blossoming when I, myself an infant  
 Climber, would hang upon another's knee  
 To totter on my legs!--Down to his cottage,  
 Shouldering his tools, some ancient peasant  
 Was lonesomely descending, whilst in the distance  
 The very last song of some shepherd would softly mingle  
 With the voices and the tinkle of tiny bells;  
 And sheathed in the glancing, silver sea  
 There could be seen the reddish shine of moist oars  
 Dipping out of some *Dghajsa*, heavily laden  
 With snares and nets.

“The road that parts the fields and sea”, and “the dented shore”--both are very characteristic features of the islands. Again, with regards to shepherds, there are, even nowadays, still a few shepherds in Malta, but they are being rapidly swept off their fields by the almost complete industrialization. In the days of the poet there were many more than there are now.

The chapel folded up among the trees  
 Stood open: I went in and on tip-toe  
 Stole to the Altar. No one else save I  
 Alone was there, and all alone I stood  
 In the serenity of God's house. The splendour  
 Of blushing sunset, casting a long soft finger  
 Through a little window, played in the lattic'd chapel,  
 And facing the lattice, on the sunlit wall,  
 Swinging in silence to and fro, the shadow  
 Of leafy bowers could be seen obeying  
 The sweet sea-breeze. Deep in that blushing splendour  
 The blessed Crucifix upon the Altar  
 Stood all attired. Oh how stricken, dumb  
 And wan the figure of Jesus seemed to lie upon  
 The head suspended and in the desolate eyes  
 Of that silent Keeper!

However romantic and idealized these passages may sound to the contemporary foreigner, these scenes will be found to be amazingly real, concrete and actual upon a visit to the islands. In the poet's day especially, industrialization was still in its infancy and there was nothing romantic at all about them... “things more real than living man”, and “the chapel folded up among the trees” is still a local feature. The poem, as I have already said, reads like a most interesting parallel to Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey: Revisted*. Conscious, deliberate and faithful though my translation into a Wordsworthian idiom is, I had no other choice. I would otherwise have distorted the original.

Psaila was heavily influenced by Italian Literature. For the sake of the English reader, I have nonetheless done my best to put him in an English perspective. He was an acknowledged Romantic, inspired by the ideals of the Risorgimento and the new Maltese Nationalism, and writing in the first half of this century. He had a large following, as well as many pitiful imitators. Among his contemporaries the more illustrious were *Rużar Briffa*, *Gorġ Pisani* and *Gino Muscat Azzopardi*. Rużar Briffa too was himself a highly original poet of great significance to the Maltese.

This era was a romantic era, the first and only one of its kind within the new and only upsurge of national identity, but, with Psaila's death, and with the political maturity of the new movement, Maltese politics, literature, music and everything were suddenly invaded by the twentieth century. These two periods, Romantic and 20th century, are the only two in the history of Maltese Literature.

Any analysis which I may give of why Malta's development should have been so retarded will essentially repeat what I have said already. The great English writers, among them Milton himself, wrote books or poems in Latin, and even in Italian, and this was in England, and England at the height of its political power. By comparison a barren rock, Malta has always, since the times of the Phoenicians, been occupied by foreign powers, and its affairs have always been conducted in the languages of its lords and overseers.

Among other voices in the literature, the most important among the poets are *Oliver Friggieri*, *Mario Azzopardi*, *Achille Mizzi*, *Joe Friggieri* and *Daniel Massa*, who besides publishing single and joint collections in Maltese, have also been published in translation. Of this new wave poetry, *Paul Xuereb*, a leading local critic, wrote the following, highly revealing words, in *The Times*, London:

“The wave of literary activity which political independence set in motion has still not spent itself. Some writers are entering on a period of consolidation while a few others are going on to a new themes and styles. The lead remains mostly with the younger writers, some of whose works have achieved a wide readership. Poetry has always been the richest genre in Maltese Literature. Psaila and Rużar Briffa, some of whose lyrics may be read in English translation in A.J. Arberry's *A Maltese Anthology*, (C.U.P. 1960), for instance, are probably the greatest writers we have had hitherto. The new wave of Maltese poets, however, has been reacting strongly against Psaila, in whom nineteenth-century romanticism was ennobled by superb craftsmanship and a keen perception of the external world, but whose influence had been the cause of much bad poetry. The poets of the sixties, like the English poets of the twenties and thirties, have thrown overboard traditional diction, imagery and versification, and more important still have rejected the traditional word-picture which formed the essential background of their predecessors' work.”

Interesting though the leading contemporary voices may be, and long-awaited though modernism may have been, the arrival of modernism was not without its drawbacks. Obscurantism, perversity and a poetry which is a species of psychological instability, extremity and derangement, are among its nastier features. Apart from the fact that, in a place as small as Malta, it is very difficult to extricate some of these poets from purely political intrigue.

I find *Ġorġ Borg*, however, another contemporary of considerable significance, remarkable for the manner in which he has, in this period, successfully retained traditional views through the incredibly compressed simplicity, and the extreme concision, in which he excels:

We are the snails of Ocean,  
beautiful, solitary,  
building the shells  
that conceal us.  
Eternal the question  
which coils  
and coils  
within us...  
Who can tell whether the waves of Ocean  
caress us  
or do no more than tease us?

(My translation of "Bebbux", ("Snails"), collected in *Solitudni fir-Ramla*, (*Solitude on the Sandy Shore*), an original collection of poetry by Ġorġ Borg. Malta, 1978).

The skeptical and modern questioning of Divine Providence at the end of the poem is refreshing, and this poet's awareness of the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age, as well as of the best in its theories of psychology and the soul, are completely delightful. *Snails*, for instance, is a fine metaphor for humanity, treated with restraint, simplicity, and pathos, and perfectly modern. This poet's handling of religious faith, and of devotional material and a philosophy of life and love as intense and moving as Psaila's, are no less modern, and his gems of simplicity and grace are a profound literary experience.

*Francis Ebejer*, whom I mentioned above as introducing *Malta, The New Poetry*, is himself a very successful playwright and popular novelist, the recipient of several prestigious prizes, who translates his work into English, and who also has original work in English to his credit. Another well-known author, *Frans Sammut*, has written at least one very successful and popular novel in Maltese, *Samuraj*.

*Oliver Friggieri* is a skilled, mature, accomplished, and extremely original poet in Maltese, re-invigorating the language with fresh and living metaphors, intense, unusual, packed and—quite often—moving:

Your love, darling, is like a timid dove,  
Starving and desperate and scared—alas!—  
To peck the wheat out of my open palm.

(My translation of Stanza one of “Tal-Biża’ Din l-Imhabba”,—(“Terrible is this Love”)—anthologized in *Malta, The New Poetry*, published by the *Klabb Kotba Maltin*, 1971).

Besides enjoying success as a popular novelist and short story writer as well as a poet, Friggieri is also, and by far, the most important authority on the literature, and its leading critic. He has published much important criticism in Maltese, English and Italian. He has exhausted research into the influence of Italian Culture upon the romantic pioneers of Maltese Literature, and is the author of a definitive and comprehensive *History of Maltese Literature*, in Maltese, which has also been published in its original Italian version. His work in the field has been authoritatively acclaimed as definitive by the leading Italian Universities and academic institutions, by whom he has been awarded several prestigious prizes. He presently lectures at the University of Malta, where he heads the Department of Maltese.

The common question, not necessarily a good one, is whether the Maltese writer should write in his own, or in another language. Always, whenever the Maltese author submits work abroad, normally in English, the question comes up, and the regularity with which it comes up is dismaying. It is the kind of choice which the individual artist makes, and must—*emphatically!*—be allowed to make for himself. I have no right to criticize, for instance, any of the above authors for a choice which no one else could make for them, which it seems they freely made, the kind of decision which, *as long as one has all the freedom to make it freely*, is the individual’s privilege and no one else’s.

Agreed, you may say, but the choice has interesting implications for the sensibility then expressed. The poems I translate seem alien to the contemporary English experience, and the critic analyses the effects of such choices on the nature of the work. He does not make moral judgements about which choice is best. Right, and it seems to me that, to illustrate the consequences of such a choice, a better precedent than Conrad’s may not be cited. Conrad might possibly be accused of being great, but not a great patriot, true, but then, how seriously ought this to be taken? On the literary level, it does not stop enjoyment and profitable appreciation; and on the human level, nobody is bound to take him as a model.

And even so, writing in English, and not Polish, Conrad produced a great new model for the artist, and opened up entirely new vistas of cross-fertilization which, once done, have greatly enriched English Literature, and to the reader of English, even, no less than to the English reader, Conrad may also be a breath of fresh air. And no less than that of the poems I translate, though written in English, Conrad’s is not the English experience, which is precisely

the point that I have been making. The foreign texture of the inspiration, in a case such as Conrad's, was a major advantage. Nor did his decision to write in English of itself stop him from being a patriot.

To resume where I started, the possibilities of cross-fertilization present to the Maltese author who decides to write in English, though he may suffer a sense of uprooting, are not present to the one who writes in Maltese, who may equally well suffer from a sense of intense, indeed unbearable solitude, and isolation greater than the natural share of the artist. It seems that, in the case of the Maltese author who decides to write in English, the possibilities of cross-fertilization which are opened up for him may well be sufficient recompense for any uprooting which he may suffer; while the solitude, the unbearable isolation, of the Maltese author who writes in Maltese, may well be far greater than any which Conrad might have had to suffer, had he written in Polish.

I feel very strongly that one trait which distinguishes Malta from the greater nations is its cosmopolitan character. Malta is to the Mediterranean what the bus-terminus at Valletta is to Malta: in other words, though to itself it is a nation, still, to the world around it, it is hardly anything more than a traffic-centre, and at that a traffic-centre in the Suburbs of Europe. I think it is ridiculous that a Maltese poet, much more than the poets of the greater nations, whose character is far less cosmopolitan than Malta's, should write, and *be made to feel*, for political purposes, that he should write in no other language but Maltese. the more so as the more serious and educated among his Maltese audience are more likely to enjoy his output in, let us say, English than Englishmen are likely to appreciate his output in Maltese. In short, while it would be a shameful thing for the Maltese reader not to love the beautiful originals written in Maltese, I am sure that that Maltese artist who writes of his country in a much vaster, cross-fertilized context, no less than the honest artist who writes in Maltese, is also ministering to the greater good of the Nation.

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