LUBIEN

ta'
Trevor Żahra

żewġ studji kritiċi

Charles Briffa
Mario Cassar

Malta
1996
Tnedija ta’
**LUBIEN**
ta’ Trevor Żahra
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Kumment ta’ l-Gheluq minn Carmel Azzopardi, President ta’ l-Ghaqda tal-Malti (Università) — preżentazzjoni tal-ktieb:
*“IR-RABTA BEJN L-AWTUR U S-SOĊJETÀ — Il-Letteratura Maltija mis-Snin Sittin Lil Hawn”*

Preżentatriċi: Ninette Micallef
Vjolinista: Sarah Frendo

Wara l-programm ikun hemm riċeviment.
The Design of Trevor Żahra’s Creative Prose in *LUBIEN*

CHARLES BRIFFA

The way I see him

Whenever I find occasion to talk to Trevor Żahra about his works — or with his brother who often imposes his jolly self on a discussion of Żahra the writer — I often gather pieces of information about the backstage activity of his writing. And I have learned so many things about his preparations.

Żahra’s most important characteristic as a writer is that he is very patient, and a contributing factor to his popularity is that he never claims from his reader an effort to understand the meaning and implications of his writing. He writes Maltese with grace and is never obscure. Having a mind equipped with a faculty for precise reflection, he is quite capable of expressing with lucidity subtle observations and thoughts on human nature and he makes pretty sure that his drift does not escape the reader. He takes the trouble to learn all the necessary details relating to the content of his stories and, what is equally important, he has over the years become sufficiently sensitive to the beauty of the Maltese language to write with perspicuity. We do not have to read and re-read his sentences to discover the sense, and neither do we have to guess at it for he evidently says what he intends. He is, therefore, never obscure due to negligence and he is never willfully obscure either. He is very often quite sure of the meaning he wants to convey and of the effects he wants to drag in the undertow of his import. Before he commits his pen to writing he must have a clear impression of what he wants to impart. That is to say, his story is well formulated in his mind as he starts the actual writing of his story. Then the process of composition involves his creative powers (which are never left dormant with him) and his language output becomes natural as he finds a precise expression for an idea. He thinks before and during his writing, and this means that his thoughts would have already originated by the time he puts pen to paper, or shall we say by the time he switches his computer on. But then in the process of his writing the monitor adds to the creativity as
Žahra feels a sort of magic in the visible word. As the idea acquires substance it becomes clearer and dons its particular significance. His working habits do not allow him to set down his impressions in all their original vagueness and uncouth appearance and then hope for an interpreter later. He concentrates on transmitting sense as fully as possible not to reduce his writing to some meaningless verbiage.

Simplicity is the hallmark of his writing and in this case the aphorism *the style is the man* is proved correct. The man in Žahra is to be found in his lively prose. His fiction is imaginative and resourceful. Since he is a patient writer who spares no pains to clear the ground of his path he must have great self-control not to allow his writing become too confused and absurd. His style reveals an enthusiastic spirit that never becomes too extravagant or fantastical, and at the same time his pages have a sprinkling of metaphors and similes in their prose. They come out naturally, as they often do in teaching. The effect of ease is, of course, what the reader meet in his encounter with Žahra. It does not matter what strenuous effort the writer passes through, and it does not matter what unremitting toil his writing costs him, the resultant style shows no sign of effort. It seems a happy accident and to top it all Žahra does not hesitate to use the common language of the day, and this adds to the vividness and actuality of his style. (The translator of a Žahra work must hunt for vividness and actuality in the target language, that is his translation equivalents must contain the common phrases of the day in order to give a taste of Žahra.) Yet despite the local colour of the style the content still has a universal aptness because it is life that Žahra seeks to transmit in his literary efforts.

**Role relationship**

As a form of communication literature presupposes an audience and the foregoing portrait reveals a writer at pains to make his stories perspicuous and effortlessly meaningful as he observes all professional courtesies. He does not expect the reader to refine a shoddy piece of work, but at the same time he invites the reader’s collaboration mainly by the role he assumes and by the tone of voice he adapts — reflective of the speaker-hearer social convention. From what I know of the author’s social and psychological background I feel safe in saying that the role he assumes in his writing is generally not a mask. He opens his inner self to his audience and allows them to search into his personality. That is why the reader does not feel Žahra to be a stranger in print. He
feels he has to respond to the writer’s personality. But what type of writer-reader relationship do we detect in this collection of short stories?

"Anki t-tubu ta’ mas-saqaf kien qed josservani! Anki l-kotba ta’ ġol-vetrina, it-tazza tal-fidda b’par widnejn kbar, iċ-ċertifikati ġol-gwarniċi... ikoll kienu rabbew l-ğhajnejn u kienu qed iħarsu lejja jistennewni niftah fommi. Donnhom kienu jafu li kont qed insibha bi tqila biex nibda nitkellem u minflok ma jagħmluli l-qalb kienu daru f’konoffa kontrija, iħarsu ċass lejja bit-tir li jimbarazzawni. L-agħar wahda minnhom ikoll kienet it-tazza tal-fidda... forsi t-tabib kien rebahha fxi kompetizzjoni tat-tennis; imma lili fakkritni minnufih f’dik l-oħra tixbahha mhux ftit li kont nara friglejn il-Vara l-Kbira. Darba kont staqsejt lil missieri dik x’kienet t’isser u għalfejn iqegħduha hemmhekk.

‘Dik mimlija bid-demm tal-Bambin!’ kien weğiibni.’”

(Vari)

This is typical of Žahra’s style. He is not conducting an argument and neither is he giving instructions or conveying information, in which cases he would have assumed dominance over the reader as he would have appeared in a position of authority. His role here is evidently that of an entertainer, putting himself at the service of the reader and declaring at the outset (even if in an implicit way) that his purpose is to make a hard world look easier through the use of figurative language and the creative use of non-figurative language. Consistent with his personality, his domain is reality (this comes out of the nature of the short story) swollen with imagination (the result of his style). And he appeals to the reader to participate in sharing his experience. The role of the entertainer in Žahra involves, therefore, that of an appellant. He wheedles his audience into partaking of his reflections and impressions, and far from assuming a dominant posture over his reader he tends to slip on the role of an inferior especially when the narrator appears the victim for whom the reader may feel sympathy.

This role of the entertainer is the principal role but it is not the only role.

In a passage like this the writer dominates his reader as he
don's the role of an informant. He becomes the guide directing our
steps into the social history of a past era. His position of authority
the reader accepts, and it complements the other role of enter­
tainer. These different roles are reflected in elements of style and
language. Textural features like the figurative language and the
creation of a humorous disguise are recognised as exponents of
the entertainer's role. Whereas, textual features that relate to de­
pendent constructions are more indicative of an informant role.
Other role-markers that help the writer's posture are: the repeti­
tive use of *kien* that makes the narrative so definite and the sen­
tences so factual; factual short utterances that gradually build up
into a complex structureg; and the resorting to reliable evidence
from contemporary eye-witnesses.

The humour implied in “*imniehr u midfun f’xi ktieb*” and in
“*b’nuċċali donnu ghajnejn ta’ skorfn*” is characteristic of Žahra
the entertainer. It is a masquerade: the readers are well aware that
the nose cannot literally be buried in a book and that the spec­
tacles are no more like the eyes of a scorpion-fish than inanimate
objects (like neon, books, cups, certificates) are like people with
eyes that can see and interpret a situation. But the entertainer
appeals to his audience to accept the incongruity and absurdity as
comedy. The verbal drollery is only tolerable in a piece of entertain­
ing prose.

This passage with roles following in rotation is common in Žahra.
His freewheeling stylistic swoops from the serious to the humor­
ous or burlesque necessitate various role shifts. Very often he has
to play different parts simultaneously and sometimes he even has
to make these parts overlap.

“*Sahibna l-Għarbiel għandu raġun*,” qabżet l-Iskwerra.
“Jien ukoll kont inkun ma’ Mastru Ġann fix-xmux t’Awissu. U
meta jinsewni għax-xemx kont ninkewa u nbaskat id Mastru Ġann
kull meta jaħtafni. Imma kien jghożżni għax kien jaf sewwa xi
In this passage Żahra commits himself to constant shifts of role. His posture changes from sentence to sentence, sometimes even from phrase to phrase. The foregrounded element in the text is the humanisation of the tools so that a spirit of anthropomorphism prevails, declaring itself openly in the personification that gives the power of speech to the mason's set-square. This entertainer's role gradually gives way to that of an informant as the set-square meticulously explains the faults found in the stone ("Kull kantun li jasal mill-barriera kien ikun xi ftit immankat jew bix-xwieki foloz.") Because of the personification the entertainer lurks behind some of the utterances as the set-square elaborates on its function ("Iżda jien arani nsiblu d-difetti u nuri 'l kulhadd fejn jehtieġ jinqata’ jew jintnaġar."") Then the writer dons his instructor's role as the next sentence becomes so assertive ("Għax difett li ma jissewwiex mill-bidu, kantun wara kantun ixattar il-hajt kollu.") In the course of the rest of the paragraph the disputant spirit dominates as the set-square tries to convince the reader of its indispensability. Textual features in this disputant role are: the expressive terms of asserting ("Ma jimpurtax", "ma tkunx waqghet id-dinja") and the grammar of possibility through the use of "jekk..." But even here roles overlap as the use of the imperative ("jehtieġ li dejjem inkun perfetta", "min jiskoġra jrid ikun pur") veers the role in the direction of the instructor.

These constant role shifts are compatible with Żahra's great sense of anthropocentricism. As a matter of fact one notes that even in most of his other writings he regards and interprets the world in terms of human values and experiences. But as one role gradually yields to another the variety expresses the affability of language and relieves the boredom of explanation. Żahra must enjoy himself in the process of his creativity. Furthermore, his anthropomorphic attitude has a distinctive function: it drags the reader's mind away
Level of discourse

The act of writing creates a situation that has to be shared by the writer and the reader. In adapting language to his readers Žahra makes his literary tone a semi-formal mode of address suitable for a style of moderate formality to create rhythms that can be intelligently read with the desired intonation. This overall semi-formal tone complements his roles in writing. The dimension of this tonal variation may be understood better by looking briefly at the degrees of formality available to the writer. Different style of language are used in diverse situations or, to put it in another way, each context of writing has its own variation so that the range of styles that reflects an author’s possible adjustments to his audience is very wide. Writing in an official position requires a different level of discourse to writing to a close friend. Platform speeches are more carefully thought than colloquial material, and distinguishing between the different styles of address helps the reader to recognise the author’s intent in verbal communication. Hence a distinction has to be made between formal and informal tones, with each division marking a broad category that leads to various styles so that the gradation from slang to ceremony would have to be very long.

In The Five Clocks (1961) Martin Joos distinguishes five styles which may be conveniently reduced

FORMAL LEVEL = the style of language may be official, solemn, affected, aloof, ceremonious, reserved, conventional, punctilious, or even frozen (as Joos calls the detached style of printed notices). In formal styles writers/speakers do not as a rule refer to themselves and do not anticipate any immediate participation from the addressees.

SEMI-FORMAL LEVEL = the style of language that does not nod towards the casualness or the punctiliousness as extremes of tone but tries to find a middle way. The semi-formal style is a compromising attempt to combine the careful structures and the strength of abstraction found in formality with the cordiality and explicitness of informality. This stylistic mean includes Joos’ consultative style which supplies all the necessary background information to the reader.

INFORMAL LEVEL = the style of language may be casual, colloquial, easy, familiar, natural, relaxed, simple, unceremonious,
unconstrained, unofficial, or even intimate which (according to Joos) does not require any information as it would be known to the participants.

Language is a product of the producer in relation with the receiver so that these levels of expression are a response to a combination of writer and reader in specific circumstances. Circumstances, like the situation of the language and the appropriateness of the tone, affect the language used and its rhythmic patterns. Žahra goes for the stylistic compromise found at the semi-formal level. In Joos’ terminology, his style is consultative, a mode of communication that is standard exchange between strangers. And that is exactly how Žahra views his readers: strangers who need to be supplied with as complete background information as possible. That is why these short stories are full of descriptive material relating to old customs, traditional behaviour, past local mentality, conventional beliefs, explanations of dying trades and interests, and additional facts that give life to the stories. Rather than calling it consultative it would be better to call it collaborative because by supplying complete information about a situation he appeals to the reader to collaborate with him and participate in the action of the story. At the same time he maintains a pleasant personal relationship with the reader because he wants to take the ‘stranger’ in his confidence.


‘Marjaranaduna rqedt bis-sigarett f’didi!’ beda jghidilhom iħokk rasu, irodd is-slaleb u jiżli l-harqa daqsix ġol-ġenb tal-paraventu.”
(Is-Siġra taż-Żebbug)
At the colloquial level the dialectal features indicate an amount of intimacy and the use of the direct speech makes the idiom more relaxed ("nigri nqerr", "Marjamadunna"). But the writer does not allow his composition to drift into the casual style. He very cleverly organises the cohesion of the text and follows the conventions of literary syntax in his explanations and elaborations. The vocabulary is carefully thought out: "vampi" links up with "dawl ilebleb", "harqa" and "nirien ta' dejjem", and "bramel mimlijin qdusija" fits the context of "kurunelli", "gakulatorji", "talb", "Seminaristi ghassiesa". The entertainer felt he had to include the satirical sentence "Is-Seminaristi ġew jigiġu bil-bramel mimlijin qdusija u ilma tal-vit", which is meant to moralistically diminish the failings of the institution. At the same time he fills up all the necessary cultural gaps ("San Emidju li jehlisna mit-terremoti", "Santa Pelagia li tiskansana mill-mewt soptu", "Seminaristi ghassiesa") which make the utterances comparatively free of context. The collaborative tone maintains a certain amount of warmth and directness but these are balanced by careful organisation, context-free structures, and the impersonal air of abstraction that phrases like "nirien ta' dejjem", "dalma tal-waḥx", "qdusija" have. The writer is aware of his reader and he does not make barriers by being too austere or too intimate. With his collaborative style as part of his idiolect Żahra believes he is the initiator of a receptive experience in his readers who have to be sufficiently assisted towards understanding the message. Adequate tonal qualities control emphasis and boost grammatical meaning, thus creating unambiguous rhythms in his prose design. In Fjuri Bbalzmati he uses a southeasterly dialect for Celestina's speech not only for the freshness it gives to local colour through the rhythmically relevant vocalic variations but also (and primarily) because he is interested in humanity. A geographical dialect defines an intimate social group by place and so Celestina's speech is intimate language, but its intimacy is a group intimacy. And when she uses it with the narrator it is as if she is extending her hand of friendship. Her dialectal expressions are an indication of social acceptance. It takes her a while to enter into an intimate relationship with the narrator, but then when she does her tone reaches a semi-formal level.

Very deftly the vocalic elements representing dialectal phonemes create rhythmic patterns characteristic of the speech of simple folk, and the stress patterns in structures like “Ikunew fid-dlum, iwe”, “Bhal hulma”, and “Riqdejn sabejḥ” (with its sharp unrefined irony) invest the writing with the informality of rustic colloquialism. Even her hypotactic structures (five consecutive sentences start with the conjunction “u”) and the series of sentences built only of nominal groups (a series of nominal phrases elaborate on “tifkire”) are imitations of speech. On the other hand, the repeated abstract term “tifkire” and the technical rural wisdom give the passage an aura of formality. The intimacy (a characteristic of an informal style) of the dialect is combined with the power of abstraction (a characteristic of a formal style) to convey an impression of a semi-formal tone. In addition to all this, the passage provides its own context (through the use of personification and explanation) and may become free of the situation presented by the short story, an element that contributes to the semi-formality of the tone.

Tonal qualities are varied even when the writer uses diary entries (Ir-Ragel tal-Mustačċi, L-Inkwatru) or speech defects (Bizzilla Sewda u Weraq tal-Liedna), but the writing is generally collaborative as Żahra elaborates his stories with the relevant contextual details. These details are subordinate elements because they are not the centre of interest, but they need to be explicitly described. At the same time, fully aware of the absence in writing of the interchange of the speech between speaker and hearer, he cultivates rhythms and connectives that indicate the appropriate emphasis to be given to his text. Hence his style is designed with a balance (supplied by an adequate rhythm that guides the reader) and a continuity (provided by linguistic devices) which combine with careful arrangement of details and elaboration (to qualify facts or items) to make up his collaborative or consultative style.

Tone shifts are a common occurrence in these stories most of which reflect the author’s presence. They produce varying intensities of language that need to be channelled towards the entertainer’s role. Consider the opening few paragraphs of Is-Sigra taż-Żebbuġ where the reader finds a shift of tone from the semi-formal to the
The very first sentence is meant to take the reader into the author's confidence because of the homophoric aspects of the proper nouns. The reader is expected to identify specific people, that is to know who Leli and Dun Pawl are. But the homophoric use does not contain a self-contained reference and the reader has to wait for the flashback to learn who these two are. So the story begins with an informal tone and gradually eases into a collaborative one from which the writer often ventures again into informality.

Fluctuations of tone are foregrounded in *Ir-Raġel tal-Mustaccci*. The part when the narrator's uncle in the video indicates the copybook till the reading of the diary ranges in manner from the informal to the semi-formal to the formal and back again to the semi-formal and informal. The tonal span starts with the casual style of the questions representing Crocifisso's inner speech. Then the passage shifts to an elaboration, proceeding to the formal language of instruction. Then the formality relaxes with more narrative explanations and the language of the diary fluctuates from the semi-formal tone to the highly colloquial (“Oh... Carolina, Carolina... kieku qatt tista’ tifhem!”). Žahra makes the tone follow the impulse of his writing, and these rhythmic swells produce varying densities of language that reflect the attitude of the writer who is primarily concerned with human values. The narrator passes through various emotional stages, represented by the tone shifts, till he arrives at the final realisation that compromise in love is a healthy formula.

The writer’s attitude

One can be serious and intimate with a stranger in whom one confides. The writer must proceed with caution in affecting tonal change because some indices of tone might not be compatible with the theme. The creative writer appearing in the role of entertainer has, of course, a lot of freedom and Žahra’s tone effectively and prudently spans broadly from the semi-formal to the informal most particularly. Tonal indices collectively determine his attitude to the reader and the theme. It is evident from his fluctuations of tone that he respects both very highly. Shifting from the collaborative tone one usually uses with strangers to the casual tone of familiarity is a reflection of a personality that is ready to confide in strangers, and at the same time the theme is often treated with the dignity associated with trust. The general impression of Žahra’s tone in these short stories (apart from the occasional
humour of some utterances) is one of seriousness which rather complements the thematic disillusion and defeatism of some of these stories in the collection.

His collaborative and confiding tone arises from the interplay of grammatical, stylistic, lexical, semantic, and (sometimes even) typographical features that work in company to define an attitude. The use of the first person in the narrative is a powerful tool as a mask for the entertainer. The first person becomes the victim whom the reader must reprove or sympathise with. Żahra uses the first person for subjectivity and it keeps convenient company with the imperative, the direct address, the structure of probability, the exclamation, and the interrogative expressing doubt, uncertainty, hesitation, or a critical attitude in inner speech. Such structures contrive a rather dramatic presentation.


(Riha ta' Qronfol)

The stylistic compatibility between the above syntactic structures and the first and second persons buttress the collaborative-confiding tone as the devices keep the narrator’s thoughts at a suitable proximity to the reader. The dream-reality infusion necessitates the use of these tonal indices for more subjectivity. They reflect the narrator’s self-communings as the rhythm of the sentences expresses warmth and evoke emotion, and they represent the writer’s conspiratorial appeal to the reader to share the narrator’s experience. The same thing happens when he introduces parenthetical elements: "...qallu li għal mument ċkejken ħass xewqa li jikseb (‘jikseb’ u mhux ‘jisraq’) dak il-kalċi sabih... (Is-Sigra taż-Żebbug). Apart from functioning as a focal reinforcement, the parenthesis shows the author’s confidence and willingness to talk directly with his reader.

However, despite the overall collaborative tone he sometimes introduces a device that noticeably cools the manner of address in order to create the right atmosphere. The occasional passive transformation in the narrative — commonly expressed in Maltese by the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth derived forms of the verb or by the use of kienġie + the past participle of the verb ("meta l-akbar
importanza kienet tinghata lit-Taljan" - Ir-Rażeľ tal-Mustaċċī; "l-ghodod l-oħrajn jixxellfu jew jinbarmu kemnxejn" - Deheb) — conveys the impression of careful planning. And it has a tendency of producing a cool thoughtful tone, that is why it is not found often in Żahra’s narrative. Apart from the passive transformation another contributory feature that reduces the tonal warmth of the prose is the postponement of an element to induce narrative tension. The cleft sentence, “Kienet l-unika vara li tinsab kważi ćatta ma’ l-art” (Vari) — which could easily have been L-unika vara kienet tinsab kważi ćatta ma’ l-art — focuses on a transformed subject (“l-unika vara”). The stratagem creates the right psychological condition in the reader’s mind as he puts a lot of weight on the postponed element. Similarly the perspective of an utterance might be changed by fronting a prepositional phrase as in “U fil-ħolm stramb ta’ tfuliti min jaf kemm ġiei dlalt niggerra ġo fih!” (Blokk ta’ Bini Lixx) — cf. U min jaf kemm ġiei dlalt niggerra ġo fih fil-ħolm stramb ta’ tfuliti! Such transpositions are important as indices of tone because they affect the rhythm that has to complement the sense, and sometimes he uses them as cohesive devices. “Mar-riħa tal-kolla kienet tasalli wkoll dik tal-friejh taċ-ципress” (Blokk ta’ Bini Lixx) contains a fronted prepositional phrase that links up with the previous paragraph and a final prepositional phrase that bears an appreciable end-weight that acts as a spring-board for the development of the following paragraph.

Incense at the altar of life

These short stories are prose narratives containing simple plots that borrow from the author’s real life and that is why Żahra cultivates a collaborative-confiding tone. The environment and the atmosphere depicted are endowed with stylistic vigour and magnetism as the author projects on them his own feelings and those of his characters who are recognisably real life people from the past. Hence the stories sketch ordinary people. They are gleanings of the past. But the narrative’s main purpose is to burrow into the dramatic experiences of the writer as a young man, that is why childhood and teenage problems feature so prominently and so interestingly in this collection. Lubien thus, may be viewed as an anthology of short stories that record a young man’s events overflowing with psychological and/or emotional experiences: the author’s reminiscences of his younger days oscillating between humour and tragic lament. It is an anthology about an inner life. If the reader is to take these young experiences as excerpts from the author’s personal life pages (despite their creative gloss), then such a reader
The design of Trevor Žahra’s creative prose in *Lubien* is bound to realise that Žahra is concerned with a central issue in his existence: namely, the marriage of his inner life with the more common fortunes of humanity. Man’s desire for knowledge often leads him to discover the causes of things and being aware of one’s self often leads to self-discovery, a process that must involve the past.

Youth, the great subject of most of Žahra’s works, is predominant in *Lubien*. What he portrays is the time he knew because he lived through it — even if today some things have vanished. By his imagination he revives his teenage years in the sixties and his past childhood almost as myths. The village of his youth lives in his memory. The local setting is a natural expression of Žahra’s involvement in the affairs of man. Short stories and even long short-stories are his forte. He is quite capable of conveying intrinsic human accounts (in the form of confessions, memoirs, impressions, dreams, and adventures) in a short uncomplicated plot. Short is beautiful with him. Childhood and youth seem to run through his adult veins so that he does not let them be forgotten as he sketches the attitudes of former days. Judging from other works of his, one would say he is greatly concerned and preoccupied with the process whereby a young man reaches full maturity. In a nutshell, perhaps, one can say he has a wide grasp of reality.

The implication of the title *Lubien* adds an effective dimension to these gleanings, most particularly to the first person narrative. Lubien means ‘incense’ and thus the title enlarges the range of the collection’s message because it employs an outside reference which adds an unexpected perspective. It therefore builds a larger framework to the anthology with its implication that the author’s past burns at the temple of the present which seeks clear weather — the overall impression of his prose design, remember, is one of warmth. Such an implication makes the characters more representative of all men and of the whole world, for episodes which relate to humanity must have more than purely local interest.

Žahra’s conception of the short story is one of great potential. The genre is a form of literary art that can explore life. It is in the nature of his short prose narrative to be concerned with a specific issue rather than with an abstract idea. Compromise in love, parental negligence, family alienation, love’s perpetuation, man’s appraisal of man, painful clashes of mentality, sexual initiation, childhood disillusionments are but some of his themes. He treats one aspect of reality to depict a problem or portray a character with a problem which he dispatches to the reader with evocative undertones. His collaborative tone is well suited for the narrative which
is concentrated on the one major situation with details working towards that situation. The tone is part of his overall technique of making the short story more dramatic. The short story’s compression gives it great intensity of effect and the final product always conveys an impression of completeness. The reader feels that all that can be said about the situation has in fact been said, even when the end does not seem very conclusive as in Boċċa tal-Hgieġ whose final sentence remains syntactically unfinished implying continuation through repetition of the experience.

A good writer needs great powers of conception to explore the possibilities and limits of the genre for his benefit. A short story like Deheb, with its uncomplicated action, its embellishments of time, and the collaborative-confiding tone can hardly be distinguished from the narrative essay. The tool shed and the tools are real, and the time element is real. But the dialogue issues forth from the author’s anthropocentrism which requires great creative energy. This composition, nodding towards the novella-essej (essay-shortstory), has symbolic value because of its metonymic quality. Thematically it is rather philosophical—people should not judge others especially when they do not know all the facts and boasting about work does not earn any honours because it is work itself which is a priceless treasure. Is-Sigra taż-Żebbug, concentrating as it does upon the conflict between the priest’s traditional narrow-mindedness and the adolescent urge to experience life, is close to a page of local social history in the sixties. Whereas Fjuri Bbalzmati produces its effects primarily by the implications of the dialogue and dialect used — some of the action is reported — and it can easily be rewritten as a dramatic representation for the stage.

The entire collection may be taken as a documentary of personal experiences, but it is still fiction. These short stories have been conceived as novelli, and that is what the author calls them. So they have to be seen against the background of the development of the Maltese novella which grew to maturity side by side the Maltese novel during the twentieth century. The novella, a short prose narrative of indeterminate length, has often been treated as a fictional narrative dealing with a single event, situation, or conflict, or it could deal with an aspect of character or even a contrast of characters. And usually it produces an element of surprise or suspense as it leads to something that is unexpected, a turning point. Thus, the element of surprise generally comes in the conclusion despite the novella’s logical end. The single situation it depicts can be comic or tragic but it is often thrown into strong relief against the dramatic or unexpected issue. The novella’s objects have always
been human actions with an inherent interest, and these actions have to be communicated to the reader in an attractive manner by the art of the prose writer.

**Beckoning shadows**

The real subject of these short stories is the author. The first person technique Žahra adopts in most of these short stories is well suited for his entertaining role as a narrator drawing from his past as he rummages "fil-qieghnett ġol-kexxun ta’ tfuliti" (as he says in *Vari*). His concern with the issue of man’s relationship with external reality sends him probing into regions which are outside the laws of nature. He draws on dream experiences to move between reality and imagination. In the process he creates supernatural stories that convey the sense of the preternatural powers. He has to make use of the concentric strategy. The story-within-a-story convention is a structural device that adds to the dramatic quality of the novella by helping the imagination to open up whole abysses. He sets a story or a series of events within the confines of the novella for the purpose of contrast, elaboration, or even irony. In other words, the thematic relevance of inserting vignettes or impressive incidents inside the larger frame is to deepen exposition or character. Žahra, serious and genuinely imaginative, accomplishes this by means of flashbacks and digressions, and introduces a subjectivity and a forceful economy of construction that seek to unfold and decode aspects of reality.

*Vari* has a very strong horror element because of the fear generated by the man’s imagination in his childhood and by his frequent, vicious dreams — *Atanas* anagrammatically gives *satana*. What lurks beyond the frontiers of consciousness? The narrator tries to understand the significance of the inner life that springs into sinister and menacing activity. The dreamer associates his dreams with esoteric belief crammed into his childhood psychology creating forces in the well of life that contains devastating power over his destiny. Good and evil are often so akin that only specialised knowledge can discern the difference between them. Convention as a repressive censor of feelings is ineffective. The dreamer seeks professional help for the interpretation of his dreams and he draws upon his inner resources as he reveals himself striving towards the paths of light to eradicate dark fear. But he cannot and this is hell located in his mind, part of his state of consciousness also “for where we are is hell”, says Mephistophilis in Marlowe’s Dr Faustus. Mephistophilis’ concept of hell becomes real in this story as horror is piled on horror in ghoulish dreams that make the *novella* a journey
into a subjective, inner hell.

“Imma l-agħar holma minnhom ilkoll waslitli ftit iljieli ilu. It-tkexkixa taghha nhossha fuqi u kienet din li qanqlitni biex nigħi hawnhekk infittex l-għajnuna. Il-holm kollu li semnejtek kont ili xi tliet xhur ma noholmu, izda issa li ġiet din il-holma min jaf x’hemm lest għalija. Min jaf x’varjanti qed jiġu kkompilati... jistennew wahda wara min imissiha biex jiġu jżuruni lejl wara lejl!”

As the frontiers of man’s consciousness shift a psychological hell is created and it is made to accompany the narrator in every stage of his life. His horror dreams experienced in cold sweat are a personal source of terror revealing the chaos in a disturbed and tormented mind. “Se nibqa’ hemmhekk maqbud f’biża’ permanenti u etern.” The nerve-racking visions open up abysses of fear. And the ultimate horror is that the narrator, who has now become a father, transmits (unwillingly, perhaps) his psychological hell to his son as he repeats the imposition of convention’s uncertain vigilance. It is a never-ending story. The end links up with the beginning to start all over again. There is no end to this fear.

The repetition of similar experiences from one generation to another is also a theme in Ir-Ragel tal-Mustaċċi a ghost story of hope. Ziju Kruč unbound by natural law manifests himself in video frames, but his intrusive presence is felt throughout so that the story with its strong sense of the past is an interplay between the living and the dead. As in a primordial environment the supernatural guides the natural, not to depict a state of guilt or fear, but to lead to a fulfilment of a sociopsychological need. Crocifisso Zammit, the narrator, explores his state of consciousness as he examines aspects of the supernatural and reality, and as he investigates the meaning of existence he realises that compromise is a healthy solution to love.

Despite the occasional humorous streak running through their prose, stories like Ir-Ragel tal-Mustaċċi, Vari, L-Inkwatru, Fjuri Bbalzmati, Għabex, Blokki ta’ Bini Lixx, and Riha ta’ Qronfol contain none the less alarming or frightening situations. They are able to shock or frighten the readers and may at times induce a feeling of repulsion, even if some of them only contain inset hideous episodes. Żahra had previously experimented with thrillers and tales of mystery, suspense, and science-fiction (see his adventure stories for children), and explored the literary possibilities of the dream (in Holm tal-Milied? where statues assume life-like roles as they enter the psychological realm of a child) and the supernatural (in
Is-Seba’ Trongiet Mewija). All these elements manure the imagination that tries to make horror the central theme of a story. In the short stories man experiences fear, hysteria, and madness. He walks towards the dark side of the mind and sometimes he even approaches a state of barbarism. Žahra achieves his effects by combining a broad vision of human nature with the accumulation of telling details.

Exploring the limits of people’s capabilities and experiences the writer (interested in the individual, rather than the group, within society) must venture into chaotic, psychological realms. The psychopathic condition of Celestina (Fjuri Bbalzmati) is quite evident in her speech:


Her obsession to capture beauty and let it live forever almost leads her to murder the young Bertu. Her husband’s fatal fall sends her into a psychic trauma and produces an emotional wasteland that can only be sustained by a macabre philosophy of life. Because despite the attraction of immortality, the idea of never being able to die is gruesome as it makes life an eternal trap. Celestina too is living in hell. Her condition is extreme. Her intense grief for the death of her husband overwhelms her. Her feeling of irredeemable loss begets her obsessive nature. “Qatt mhew sewwe li tkewn hej. “Paradoxically this old lady believes that a young death gives eternal life whereas old age drags death with it. And the surprise in the final sentence of the novella hurls a deadly blow to common sense.

There is in Trevor Žahra a pervasive sense of the past. He uses recurrent themes like childhood, adolescence, the return to his village life, and traditional issues to recreate the former days of his life. His characters are not heroic but essentially committed insiders — insiders because they take the reader into their confidence like trusted friends who need to know everything. Their vision of the world is clear once they pass through a trying experience. Žahra’s interest in the past is what gives him his creative stories and he wants to take us into his confidence. His collaborative-confiding tone is therefore essential to guide us in the meanderings of his rummaging. Without this style the novelli would lose much of their subtlety — and they would definitely lose their Žahrean flavour. With that style — and one must remember that Žahra is
fundamentally a realist even when he conducts psychological analysis — he has found the right balance between realism of form and thematic content without lapsing into literary mannerism. This, however, does not preclude him from using cinematic techniques in his prose.

In most of the short stories in *Lubien* Žahra uses the first person narrative which gives a specific, ground-level view of the situation in question. The narrator, with his personality, is as important as the story because he is often very much attached to the experience that he is narrating. It is a case of a confiding voice urgently establishing a relationship with the reader. These narrators are frequently disturbed people or people who have suffered a crisis or passed through a strange experience and are about to lose their hold on life or to lose their identity. Narrating their affairs is their way of regaining their stability, retrieving their hold on life. They are different moods of the author. Those narrators are Trevor Žahra himself in different moments after the death of his wife and the coming of age of his two children (both of whom are married and dedicated to a full time career and marriage). Both experiences left him lonesome but not creatively void — during this period he was also composing *Is-Seba’ Trongiet Mewwija*. His short stories entertain but they also help him to recover. His creativity is therapeutic, full of outpourings of the heart.
Mistoħbija Fuq l-Għatba

MARIO CASSAR

Trust the tale and not the teller
(D.H. Lawrence)

Il-Misterjuż, il-Fantastiku u l-Meraviljuż

M eta ngħidu li b'dawn in-novelli Żahra jaqbad mal-fantastiku, inkunu ftahna argument shih ghax il-fantastiku, 'l hinn mis-semantika tad-dizzjunarju, għandu tifsira specifika bhala ġeneru letterarju. Il-Miklem ta' Erin Serracino Inglett jinterpreta l-fantastiku kif ġej: li hu mibni fuq il-fantasija; li fih il-fantasija; ta' sura jew gost kapriċċuż; mzaħsub u magħmul bi hsieb barra mis-soltu; immaġinattiv; stravaganti; misthajjel u aktarx imbiegħed mir-realità, li hu holqien ta' moħħ xi ftit imberfel; stramb; irreali; eċċentriku; grottesk; li johroġ barra min-normal, mill-użu komuni, speċjalment fl-arti.


Jekk il-liġijiet tan-natura kif nafuha jibqgħu intatti u jippermettu spjegazzjoni naturali ta' kulma jiġri, allura qeghdin fit-territorju tal-misterjuż. Fil-misterjuż għandna premessa jew soluzzjoni razzjonali; dak li jidher jew deher inspjegabbli jiġi spjegat bhala holma (eż. Le Diable Amoureux ta' J.Cazotte) jew ħtija ta’ illużjoni


It-titlu ta’ din l-antologiha hu sinjifikanti. *Lubien* tiisser minghess jew imtaqqal bin-ngħas (drowsy); min hu lubien qiegħed sewwasew fi stat ambigu, bejn rieqed u mqajjem, fuq il-fruntiera bejn il-konxju u l-inkoxju, bejn is-sensibbiltà u l-holm, u allura bejn ir-realtà u l-fantasija. (Ma jistax jonqos, ghalhekk, li din il-kundizzjoni sa ġgorna lejn l-ghalqa tal-psikologiqa). Bhala eżempju nistghu nistħarrgu mill-qrib in-novella *Ir-Raġel ta-Mustaċċi* fejn il-protagonist kien konvint li fuq video kien ra lil zijuh li kien miet ħafna qabel ma ngibed il-film. Jista’ jkun li kollox kien frott ta’ mohh skunċertat, aktar u aktar meta kien għadu kif hassar l-għerusija tiegħu. Żahra jimminna s-sopranatural b’kummenti bhal: *Kienet marret għajni bija meta kważi beda fraxxa/Nahseb li l-kalmanti li tani t-tabib kienu qawwija żżejjed għalija /Xi whud mix-xeni kienu mudlamin ħafna, oħrajn imżellgin u spiss kienu jfiġġu rqajja’ ta’ dawl qawwi../Dawn xi bċejjeċ huma?! Mela l-bieraħ kont
Mistohbija fuq l-Għatba


L-Aspetti Narratologici u Stilistici

L-ambigwità fi hdan il-fantastiku ma toħroġx biss mill-eżitazzjoni fil-binja sintattika tal-ğrajja iżda wkoll minn strateġji purament narratologici u verbal. Nistghu minn ta' l-anqas insimmu erba' aspetti: (a) ir-rakkont fl-ewwel persuna, (b) ir-rakkont fl-imperfett, (ċ) il-modalità tat-ton, u (d) id-diskors poetiku.


(b) Meta awtur jikteb fl-imperfett, aktar u aktar meta jirreferi ghall-passat remot, id-dokumentazzjoni tal-fatt tispiċċa tistreich wisq fuq il-memorja. Mhux biss il-memorja hi notorja biżżejjed kemm kapaci tbiddel u tiddeforma l-imghoddit iżda saħansitra ssir, kif jghid Tennyson, forza kreattiva fiha nnfisha. Il-memorja mhijiex fil-fatt skavazzjoni tal-fatti iżda riinterpretazzjoni fittizja tal-fatti. (Kif qalu xi whud: Memory is a fictionalised past). Il-poeta Georgjan Edward Thomas jghid: The past is the only dead thing that smells sweet. F'Bočća tal-Hgieg Żahra jikteb: Salvinu llum ja' li la l-bitba u lanqas il-ğnien ma jista' jkun li kienu kbar daqskemm għadha
trid tbellaghhielu t-tiżkira. Fi Blokki ta’ Bini Lixx, imbagħad, innarratur jistqarr: Imma t-tiżkriet weħlu miegħi u l-passat taghhom inbidel fi preżent kontinwu.

In-novelli Ir-Ragel tal-Mustaċċi, Vari. L-Inkwatru, Fjuri Bbalzmati, Ghabex u Blokki ta’ Bini Lixx kollha huma miktuba fil-perfett u fl-ewwel persuna u allura jistgħu jiġu skrutinizzati skond il-kriterji msemmija.

(c) L-awtur tal-fantastiku deliberament johloq modalità ambigwa fir-registru tat-tahdit billi ĵuża kemiet u espressjonijiet bhal: milli jidher, aktarx, pjuttost, hsibt, jidhirli, nemmen, donnu,orsi, ghandu mnejn, jista’ jkun, ma nafx żgur, jekk qed niftakar tajjeb, mniex ċert, possibbilment eċċ. Dan ir-registru jittfa’ dell ta’ dubju fuq l-awtentiċità tal-fatti rrakkontati.

Xi ezempji minn Lubien: Ma niftakarx jekk qattx għidnielha... / Subgħajja donnu kien għad fadlilhom riha dghajfa ta’ qronfol / U Kristin donnha tassew kienet qed tisma’ lehinhom / Jista’ jkun li meta nbriet l-iskola, hafna u hafna snin ilu... / Hija Benjamin kien miet ta’ sena, ma nafx sewwasew biex / Ma niftakarx kemm għadda żmien sewwa wara din il-grajja... / Issa skond ommi u skond nies imdahhlin fiż-żmien li kienu jafuh mill-qrib... / Ghamilt żmien kont nemmen li kollox kien htija ta’ kużinuwi Atanas... / Kont minghalija li kienet ilha mejta s-snien.


Ma’ dawn nistgħu nżidu l-pożżijja intensa taz-żiju Kruċ f’Ir-Ragel tal-Mustaċċi u l-passaggi liriċi fid-djarju ta’ Kristin fin-novella L-Inkwatru.
Il-Holma Ripressiva


Il-Kriżi tal-Personalità

Il-psikologi jhobbu jagħżlu bejn il-jien (the self) u l-iehor (the other), żewġ poli utili hafna f'kull diskors dwar il-fantastiku billi l-individwu jista' jkun mhedded minn forzi ġewwiena daqskemm minn forzi barranija. Il-jien jimplika l-iżolament tal-bniedem fid-dinja psikika filwaqt li l-iehor jimplika l-aspetti insidjużi tad-dinja awtonoma.


F’qafas semjologiċi nifhmu għalhekk l-importanza u l-proliferazzjoni bħalma huma mirja, teleskopji, mikroskopji, kannokkjali, nuċċaliżiet, għajnejn, u ċarriżiet. Minn taħt Petitu kien liebes pagama sewwasew bhal tieghu. 

Il-Qilla t’Hemm Barra

Fit-tieni kuntest il-jien jitqabad ma’ xejriet li jemanaw mid-dinja ta’ madwaru. F’dan l-ambitu jabitaw l-ihirsma malevolenti, l-uħux, ix-xjaten, is-shahar, u hlejjaq mostruż jew demonjaċi oħra. 

Dawn hafna drabi għandhom konnotazzjonijiet sesswali. Meta Freud jittellem fuq il-libido jew il-karika sesswali tal-bniedem jagħżel bejn object libido li hu indirizzat ‘il barra mis-sugqett (persuna jew oġgiet li jissostitwixxu persuna) u ego-libido li hu indirizzat lejn is-sugqett innifsu (il-jien narcisistiku). Fil-fantastiku il-konkupixxenza hi preċipizzju djabolikuż is-sess hu marbut mal-prezervazzjoni tal-ħajja bħas-sesswalita u l-prinċipju tal-pjaċir. It-

Il-fantastiku jista’ jipprogetta wkoll il-ġlieda bejn l-eros u t-thanatos. L-eros jissjarrafa f’dawk il-gibdiet istintivi marbuta mal-preservazzjoni tal-hajja bħas-sewwalita u l-prinċipju tal-pjaċir. It-


Ir-RaqaĎ tar-Raġuni


Ta' min jitkellem fuq dak li normalment jissejjah il-motiv ta' Lazzru (the Lazarus motifl, ċioe' r-rizurezzjoni ta' xi ħaġa mejta jew minsija. F'Ir-Raġel tal-Mustaċċi l-omm toħlom biz-ziju Kruċ waxa li kien ilu seba' snin mejjet. Aktar tard 1-istess ziju jitfaċċa misterjożament fil-video bħalllikieku ha l-hajja mill-ġdid. F'Bocċa tal-Hġieg Benjam, it-tewmi l-mejjet, donnu jerġa' jitfaċċa biex
Mistoħbija fuq l-Għatba

jppersegwita lil huh fiļwaqt li F’Riha ta’ Gronfol, Angela tibda tidher lil huha fil-holm meta fil-fatt mietet meta kienet ghadha tarbija. Fi Fjuri Bbalzmati x-xwejha li n-narratur kien ghodda b’mejta terga’ titfaċċa: U lill-imsejkna Celestina mhux biss dfintha imma kont sahansitra bdejt inħassarha għal kollox mill-fakra tieghi bhal stampa ta’ l-akkwarella maqbuda fl-irxiex.


Realizmu Maġiku jew Maġija Realistika?


**L-Antropomorfizmu u l-Akkumulazzjoni tad-Dettalji**

Mistoħbija fuq l-Għatba


X. Riflessjonijiet fuq il-Fantastiku

(a) Il-ġeneru mhuwiex iddeterminat minn elementi tal-plot daqs kemmill mill-attitudni lejn il-plot. Il-fantastiku hu interessat li jfittex l-abnormalita fnofs in-normalita, id-diżordni fnofs l-ordni, u jxettel l-ambivalenza fnofs iċ-certezza. Hu interessanti jekk wieħed ikollu jikkonsidra l-ġeneru f’termiini ta’ sensiela ta’ oppożizzjonijiet bhal nghidu ahna: il-hajja vs il-mewt; is-sekulari vs is-sopranaturali; in-normalità vs l-abnormalità; il-konxju vs l-inkorugu; l-ordni soċjali vs id-diżordni; is-sanità vs il-ġenn; il-kultura vs in-natura; is-sigurtà vs il-paranoja.

(b) Todorov jisħaq fuq kundizzjoni oħra meħtiega biex tippermetti l-fantastiku; u din hi li l-istorja ma tridx tiffunzjona fuq livell allegoriku. Ħafna fabji ma jiġist għax jaħbu tifsira allegorika. Moby Dick ta’ Melville jew Animal Farm ta’ Orwell ghandhom funzjoni simbolika jew poetika; huma illustrazzjoni ta’ idea jew kuncett, ghalhekk fil-parametri ta’ Todorov ma jikkwalifikawx fil-ġeneru tal-fantastiku. Sintendi dan hu kriterju li rridu napplikaw ukoll għax-xogħlijiet ta’ Zahra.


d) Ghandu wkoll funzjoni letterarja: biex isawwar id-dinamika tan-narrativa u fl-istess waqt iżomm il-qarrej fuq iż-xwiek. Hu mahsub biex isawwar intensità drammatika u jinti sens kapriċċjuż ta’ bża’ u stħajjil divertenti. (Todorov isostni li ghal kemmill il-bża’ hu hafna drabj marbut il-fantastiku, mhuwiex kundizzjoni neċessarja tal-ġeneru)

e) Fl-ahħarnett il-fantastiku ghandu funzjoni metafiżika; billi jippermetti l-manifestazzjoni ta’ dak kollu li hu inspjegabbli, kapaċi jqanqal sens ta’ kurżita fis-sopranatural u jxettel dubju dwar l-eżistenza ta’ ħwejjeg l’hinn mill-gharfien immedjat tagħna.
L-Għaqda tal-Malti
(Università)

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