

CONTEMPORARY MALTESE LITERATURE – AN INTERIM REPORT

by DANIEL MASSA

IN discussing immigrant ethnic groups, Geoff Dench finds evidence that among Maltese in London there is 'widespread complicity in electing a non-Maltese identity.'¹ This reflected itself particularly in non-performance of previously sacrosanct religious duties such as hearing mass and going to confession. This is particularly true of Maltese in the red light district of Soho round Frith and Greek Street, where the dominant dialect happens to be Maltese expressed primarily in four-letter words.

Yet the swear-words and blasphemies against what the emigrants had previously held to be sacred are, paradoxically, significant links to their island home. It is reaction and over-reaction to up-bringing, and I have seen the most hardened dissidents from our monolithic theocracy prepare with awe and longing for a christening or wedding, and watched them later caught up unavoidably in the long-remembered rituals of religious ceremony.

And later when you visit home, the dissidents proudly display photos of the overdecorated churches back home, and their village patron saint, and when they come to Malta to visit relatives many would have their visit coincide with their village festa – a feast of colour, sound, procession and ritual. Theirs is almost a pilgrimage. The 'been-to's' still are drawn by ritual.²

This Maltese love for ritual is not unnoticed by foreigners. V.S. Naipaul, the Trinidadian writer, makes his hero (Ralph Singh) recall the christening of the Maltese baby with the eminently English name:

Through his godfather John Cedric renounced the devil and his works. Lieni [the Maltese girl who pimped for Singh] grew grave towards the end. She was almost in tears when she went to the priest ... No longer the smart London girl; and for the first

time that afternoon I remembered that she was an unmarried mother. It was left to the tiny [Maltese] godfather to revive our spirits in the taxi, and even Elsa, his wife, passionately anti-clerical, agreed that it had been a beautiful ceremony of forgiveness.³

This bears out what the seasoned traveller Adolphus Slade wrote as far back as 1837. He pointed out that though the towns of the Barbary states teemed with Maltese this had no effect in reducing Malta's population which had then assumed alarming proportions. The Maltese did not colonise and settle. Having realised a little money as tailors, joiners or boatmen they returned 'to their beloved rock to marry and multiply. The love of country, so strong in a Maltese, is owing, in great measure to religious zeal, Nowhere else does he see the rites of his church officiated so really and so earnestly, or such a general acquiescence in its dogmas.'⁴

Since that time we have had our mutations, acquiescence to dogmas is not so universal, but the attachment to ritual remains strong in both rural and industrialized areas. Despite the tolling of new secular bells, the Church still remains central in town and village. Even architecturally, the female structure of the church predominates over the male 'cubist' house-blocks laid out in concentric circles around it.⁵ The dominant position of the church spells out in stone its social, educational and religious role as leader. The homogeneity of Maltese villages which, as J. Boissevain notes, is mainly due to the 'unifying influence of the church in a small isolated island society'⁶ has in turn been up to the early sixties reflected in the literature of Malta – religious poetry of statement and prayer, drama and novel that like a litany sought to make sense of life and generally (like Milton's) justify the ways of God to man. This essentially homogenous stand with regard to religion and social reality is e.g. amply illustrated in Gużè Aquilina's first and second editions of *Il-Muża Maltija* (1948; 1964), where both matter and manner were orthodox and homogenous.

In the mid-fifties, this essential homogeneity was being dented as Malta started on a career of secularization that is gathering pace today. When the newly-reconstituted Malta Labour Party came to power in 1955 church/state relations were never at ease; after the April 28, 1958 riots, and the open war that followed the ecclesiastical interdicts, the Malta Labour Party could not fit within the hierarchical system of metaphoric concentric circles within the traditional life of the community.⁷ The long and bitter politico-religious controversy resulted in a withdrawal of MLP sympathizers from religious societies such as ZHN, Catholic Action etc. Men

stayed away from Sunday mass, or protested by not contributing the odd penny for the upkeep of the Church. In return die-hards and MLP candidates were at times refused absolution, could not act as godfathers, were married privately in the sacristy, and sometimes even refused the traditional rites of Christian burial.

The unavoidable corrosion of socio-religious structures was linked also to the incipient and widespread industrialization in the three years of Labour power (infrastructure, road-building, tourism, improved bus-services, factories). This is important for literature and the arts because forms of artistic creation often undergo radical changes in industrial habitats, due not simply to the emergence of new techniques for communication, but as the direct result of the fact that industrial production itself provokes fundamental changes.⁸

Industrialization and secularization increased even during the Nationalist Administrations decade. If anything, secularization seemed to be strongest in the Sliema areas, not exactly Labour catchment areas.

A further impulse for change was independence in 1964 – that ought to have led to a national revival. This happened partially in the case of language, but following the conflicting realities of Independence many poets and writers felt then, and still do, that there was not enough cause for celebration. Even the growth of tourism was being interpreted as confirming us ‘a nation of waiters’, substituting traditional hospitality for ‘service’.

However, independence as a political fact was with us and it urged change, possibly a strengthening of nationalistic fervour by a reevocation of the great epic past – the 1565 Great Siege and all that. But writers felt that our past was one of DEPENDENCE rather, and we could derive no consolation from it. In '64, the young writers meeting every Saturday at Caffé Premier in Valletta connected with the *Kwartett-Antenni* series and *Moviment Qawmien Letterarju* (V. Fenech, L. Spiteri, M. Azzopardi, F. Ebejer, O. Frigieri, T. Preca, F. Sammut, C. Vella, J.J. Camilleri, Ph. Sciberras, A. Sant, A. Marshall) seemed to reject the sclerosis of aging institutions, and in an attempt at renewal threatened withdrawal from ‘the older cultures’.

This can perhaps be illustrated by recalling the ethics-cum-literature controversy that broke towards the end of 1968. The Establishment had tried to censor 5 items in a musical-literary evening because members of the group had dealt with (a) sex outside marriage [L. Spiteri] (b) humbug and patriotism [V. Fenech and

M. Azzopardi] (c) hypocrisy of the establishment [J.J. Camilleri] (d) religious doubt [myself]. The Establishment not surprisingly thought that in form and matter the *Kwartett-Antenni* group showed manifest contempt of accepted mores, and one member of the Manoel Theatre Management Committee described them as 'rebellious, unscrupulous, Law-shattering boobies.'⁹

Be that as it may, this well-knit group registered the disenchantment that there was in the air, in the lengthy controversy that followed recording that institutions of the past must be experienced as abandoned if Malta were ever to renounce a philosophy of mediocrity that clung to the mythical security of the past. The writers were 'no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation.'

Yet this lack of security and/or homogeneity as well as the alleged decay in religious faith and performance may itself have been an impulse in the birth of our new literature. Why?

So long as the villagers believed that one brought rain unto the parched fields through episcopal circulars urging collective prayer, that the blessing of animals and farm implements brought a plentiful harvest come Pentecost, that the liturgy of Ash Wednesday and Good Friday was a collective ritual of repentance and atonement for Carnival, so long would the symbolic act/drama/procession/ritual be performed with a devotion and enthusiasm that is itself a source of vitality. But once doubt and scepticism crept in, once men were drawn by experience rather than by custom, by new ideologies rather than traditional mores, the collective invigoration would weaken – and many drift, have drifted away, become outsiders, mere lookers-on of a rite established through centuries by custom. The rite itself may vanish, at best remain a feast to draw the crowds like *Lapsi* in Xghira or San Girgor in Marsaxlokk, or 'just for luck' like the blessing of luzzi and boats at the start of the *lampuki* season. It stops being religion. Religion moves away from folk drama and ritual towards dogma and ethics; but the ritual mould, the shell that had possessed the inhabitants for so long, remains and is left ready for a new content.¹⁰ There is a transfer.

That is one reason why some of the best modern Maltese poetry still evokes the rhythm of religious rites, one reason why symbolic action and ritual mould is pervasive in what is the best play ever written in Malta, *Boulevard*,¹¹ why Francis Ebejer holds on to it in his plays *Menz* and *Hadd fuq il-Bejt*, as well as in his best novel *In the Eye of the Sun*; why symbol and ritual reoccur in Trevor Zahra's *Weraq tal-Palm*, in Frans Sammut's novels, *Gagga* and *Samuraj*.

Yet linked as they are to the old ritual, the new poetry, drama,

fiction (now also supported by cultural/ideological material from abroad) rejected the assurance inherent in Christian tradition that freedom could only be found in the old context of changeless spiritual law. Under their new dispensation, God is not ruled out of court, if anything he's as omnipresent, but is asked embarrassing questions. Thus the poet-writer puts forward characters/personae/voices who are lost and uncertain in an island where notions of hierarchy are being challenged. We have e.g. not poetry of orthodoxy and statement, but of search, doubt, questioning and outright dissent. This is also true of the best novels and plays.

It is difficult in the time available adequately to discuss the whole range of contemporary Maltese literature. I shall therefore concentrate mainly on the novel, as a genre possessing an eminently 'societal role', known to express, perhaps even more than poetry and drama, a close connection between sociology and psycho-analysis, and especially in countries recently independent expressing ideas of national renaissance.

I shall deal mainly with post-independence novelists Francis Ebejer and Frans Sammut, focussing on recurrent concepts such as (a) retreat from the community (b) impotence/sterility syndrome (c) descent into psychopathology (d) regression and polarization and (e) immaturity of the protagonists.

I shall try to describe, extract meaning and signpost direction, much in the same way that the novel as a genre is at times supposed to do.

I start by stating that 12 years after Independence, now that we're proclaimed a Republic, I see no signs that our novel can now, or in the immediate future, express ideas of national renaissance except at a very superficial level.¹² Our most skilled writers are really not concerned with celebration or the epic narrative adopted by their predecessors [A.E. Caruana, *Inez Farruġ* (1891); Ġużè Muscat Azzopardi, *Nazju Ellul* (1909); Ġużè Aquilina, *Taħt Tlett Saltmiet* (1938); Ġużè Galea, *Żmien l-Ispanjoli* (1938)] who situated the action in bygone epochs and read 'the past as a parable of the present.'

Rather than that, the novel now rejects the 'epic' past with almost a shudder, and does not accept the present, whereas the future seems to offer regression rather than resurrection. The articulating ethos, the community impulse seems to be negative, similar to that of dissident elements in London's Frith Street – a rejection of religiously grounded community life that does not generate roles and relations capable of supporting an alternative social order.¹³ But this rejection has up to now proved to be at

least culturally positive.

The novels we have had are biographical (with traces of autobiography) tracing the career of a character who is problematic, an outsider whose unknown quantity is manifest through his deviation, which in turn is rooted in his immaturity and 'abnormality' vis-a-vis his social habitat. We thus have a curious mixture of psychoanalysis and sociology.

Joseph (*In the Eye of the Sun*), Raymond (*Weraq tal-Bajtar*), Fredu and Samwel (*Gagġa and Samuraj*), the protagonists of perhaps the best novels written in the last six years, are the diametrical opposites of our traditional heroes. Their only real Maltese ancestor is G. Ellul Mercer's *Leli ta' Haż-Żgħir* (1938). All are very young, often still students, weak and seeking to escape from what they define as a corrupt society. In Lukacs/Goldmann terms, they are not only lost and hesitant, but also potentially diseased. Their disease becomes incurable and they 'seek' to contaminate others, usually the ones they love – Karla, Zabbett.

As dissenters, they seek to dismantle the social framework to promote a subjective reality, and this in turn leads to psychological traumas. In the eyes of the performing community they therefore become malevolent atoms defying and subverting order and institutions much in the same way that these 'rebellious, unscrupulous, law-shattering boobies' of the *Kwartett-Antemi* group were doing in late 1968.

It is not coincidence that the 'first' successful novel about the 'diseased' hero was born in late 1969. *In the Eye of the Sun* Joseph, a medical student with great potential, is alienated by the existence that he sees the performing majority leading in the sun of holiday villas. As the plot unfolds, Joseph retreats from town and university, first to the job of a night watchman in a candle factory, then barefooted to his old village, Dingli. Cutting himself off, he evokes the past to express his contempt for the present, but the past for Ebejer is not the 'epic' but the traumatic past of his hero's personality, and Joseph retreats from the eye of the sun to the old farmhouse of his childhood and ultimately, just before tragedy, within a cave in the cliffs. His 'standing still in the centre' of the cave,¹⁴ personified for Ebejer not simply an existence in the sun but, more important, an escape from what the sun stood for in Malta's development – the materialistic enclosure of the land and sea-scape by tourist development. That 'standing still' records the essentially passive nature of the heroes' claim for survival.

Now coming close on Alfred Sant's *Weraq tal-Bajtar*,¹⁵ Francis

Ebejer's *In the Eye of the Sun* inaugurated a pattern in Maltese fiction. With the exception of G. Ellul Mercer, novelists had shied away from psychological traumas – but since then, we have had a spate of such novels; Trevor Zahra's *Weraq tal-Palm* and *Hdejn in-Nixxieġha* and Frans Sammut's *Gagġa* and *Samuraj*. In all these, we have young people in search of self and identity by overthrowing legacies of religious and social restraints. This leads to a decline in moral certainties, a sense of guilt and a psychological crisis. Their solution is to retreat from society. Joseph, perhaps the most radically escapist, does not simply refuse the Maltese society he lives in, but also the advances created by modern mechanization and technology. This is also basically true of Samuel in *Samuraj*. In both novels, the most modern farm implement that the heroes use is a rake. They are people who have stopped performing. Joseph, for example, would play on a stone whistle. The will towards the structuring of a new order is weak or lacking, because they are people in retreat.

Their tragedy lies in the fact that while they are disgusted by what they know is a community of convenience, they are not mature enough even to think of moving towards a community of conviction. Joseph and Samuel seek weakly to build a world for Karla and Zabbett, they are drawn to the fields for a time conjuring the 'promised sea of ripe corn growing' [Brecht], but their vision is short-lived and positive action in terms of harvest is 'hard and bitter agony' for them. It has to be if they use nothing more sophisticated than a rake. Striving for some kind of centre, some kind of meaning, 'standing still in the centre', they derive not self-possession but self-loss. Their glimpses of paradise¹⁶ are illusory, attempts to inhabit them lead to disappointment and emptiness. This is Joseph in Ebejer's *In the Eye of the Sun*:

He thought of Karla and others without interest – they were something altogether separate from him. There was nothing left in him. He told himself: let me feel love; and he felt nothing. Let me feel anger, and he was not angry ... he found there was nothing to look for, nothing he was interested in ... Joseph walked like a stranger in the very land he loved.¹⁷

The vision of ripe corn growing is overtaken by barrenness, and the heroes are drawn into the impotence-cum-sterility syndrome. On an island where Aneurin Bevan once noted that 'people bred like rabbits', it is significant to find that sterility should feature so prominently in the literature of the late Sixties and early Seventies. See e.g. Alfred Sant's *Kjaroskur* and *Weraq*; Mercer's *Leli ta'*

Haž-Žgħir; Ebejer's *Hadd fuq il-Bejt*; Zahra's *Weraq tal-Palm*; L. Spiteri's *Hala taž-Žoghžija*; Sammut's *Gagğa* and *Samuraj* [See also Achille Mizzi's *Kastità*].

In *Samuraj*, impotence is anticipated symbolically by Samuel's castrating the pigs with a pen-knife on the very first page of the novel. It is a recurring image that recapitulates, resolves and anticipates.

And yet as G. Lukacs wrote, in another context, 'impotence is not thought of so much as a physical failure.'¹⁸ It is rather an emotional failure to make significant and lasting contact, because the characters Leli, Joseph, Fredu and Samwel do not possess healthy normality. Disengaging themselves from the social apparatus, they have nurtured a subjective reality and their actions, even when well intentioned, are in the long run reducible to a nervous tic.

Even love, because it is so inhibited by sexual frustration and guilt, unmans them; even after they have gained some 'self-possession' by positive action in the fields. Joseph e.g. thinks that Karla can redeem him: 'he hoped by one act to obliterate from his mind the disquieting thoughts...hoping for exorcism,'¹⁹ and yet when he comes to the crunch he can't do it. Facing a naked body, he regresses into the traumatic past of his personality. The same is true of Samwel in *Samuraj*. When Samwel has Zabbett all to himself on his farm, he acts 'like a scared schoolboy' and he hardly dares undo her zip.²⁰

Having lost the opportunity healthily to love, both protagonists yearn in fantasy for a return to the matriarchal hold.²¹

In Ebejer's *In the Eye of the Sun*, the regression into infantilism is marked symbolically in stages. We have first Joseph's inability to make love to Karla:

He got into the bed, touched her, discovered she was naked. Her arms went around him and she was pressing him to her, murmuring his name. Her face reminded him of fever, dark red, burning... He held his arms rigidly to his sides. She kept pressing to him. Lie still,' he told her; he realized, with shock, that he was sobbing: 'For God's sake lie still.' Then she was quiet and for a moment they both lay side by side, untouching, unspeaking. At last he said, 'I must go.' 'Why, Joseph, Why?' 'I can't... I wish you were old and fat,' he cried angrily at last.²²

Soon we have a dramatic symbolic development of this wish when Joseph returns in a fever and in his delirium is seduced by the fat farmer woman, Karla's mother:

And when after his deep restlessness began again, she raised him a little to her and with a hand directed his hands to her breasts. He strained with pouted lips, searching blindly, sobbing aloud in his searching. She lifted one of her breasts and placed its thick dark point between his lips. His sigh was such as a child would make.²³

Finally we have the symbolic return to the womb in Joseph's retreat in the cave:

Joseph tumbles into the brush, raises himself again, thrusts his body through; he is inside the sheltering place. Joseph climbs into the inner cave and stands still in the centre. He lifts his arms and laughs to the cave-ceiling, its walls ... A shout repeated, over and over again, from close-by to distant, and the baying rises: outside this cave, this sheltering place, a world of dogs. His body jerks up in a ball, head touching knees, as the noise rises, far, near, men, dogs, the remorseless hunt for him.²⁴

This process of inwardness followed by paranoia is brought about and later itself identified with abstract subjectivity,²⁵ because the protagonist has shut himself away from communication, resorted to fantasy, and aspired towards primordial unity within the womb, the sheltering place.

This aspiration is basically a death wish,²⁶ a refusal to acknowledge that the world is at odds with the construct of his imagination. But whereas e.g. in Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock* this is a necessary step to a new life-wish that is directed towards acceptance of various cultures and freedom,²⁷ in Ebejer, Sammut, Sant, Zahra and Spiteri it is directed inwards, becomes almost narcissistic,²⁸ and fantasy and regression become ends in themselves.

There is no escape but flight or death.

Johnny in L. Spiteri's *Hala taż-Żoghħżija*, Raymond in Sant's *Weraq tal-Bajtar*, and Fredu in Sammut's *Gaġġa* flee, seeking to drown their alienation in the amorphous mass of the city. Fleeing from institutions of bondage, their separation is sour, leading to nausea.

The others commit suicide – Ebejer's Joseph in *In the Eye of the Sun*, Zahra's Robbie in *Weraq tal-Palm*, Sammut's Samwel in *Samuraj*, the most recent suicide in the Maltese novel. Their sepa-

ration from their society means the inability to discover a meaning either in the performing community or in the construct of their fantasy. Suicide is absolute polarization, a separation that affords neither reconciliation nor redemption.

This is what happens in Zahra and Ebejer. This is what happens in Sammut's *Samuraj*, a clever novel uniting disparate viewpoints skilfully, proleptic in method, using the anticipatory image inherent in the title to imply Kermode's 'sense of an ending'.

Samwel takes the pen-knife he had used earlier to castrate the pigs, raises it aloft and brings it down repeatedly till his

entrails hang loose and the hard and bitter
agony had begun. Above him, high high above,
the sky was not sad. He saw a boy picking flowers
for his mother and waited expectantly for the kiss
on his face.²⁹

The ending of a Samurai? Not really! Rather the image that sums up tragic situation and answering gesture, typifying perhaps the case of the present Maltese writer's social identity being marked by a withdrawal from social convention that has resulted in a negative condition, a sense of deprivation, and the lack of a dimension essential to the continuing creative effort.

This, it seems to me, will sooner rather than later lead to a cul-de-sac. We must signpost new directions. Our writers now have to provide more mature protagonists, capable of working even within 'self-imposed limitation', assuming what Lukacs and Goldmann would term 'virile maturity'.

The poet-novelist-dramatist will do this not by escaping into fantasy, non-identity or suicide but by choosing to live in a world constructed from what he knows to be human, by not choosing to abolish reality. Therapy may be found in trying to establish a sufficiently deep and concrete relationship with present reality, by directing endeavour outwards, by attempting to link different people's imaginations [See *Samuraj's* method], by looking for a worthwhile purpose to follow clashes with entrenched authority. Having rejected so much, we must now define what can be accepted, and such acceptance must come through a critical but not denunciatory, a sympathetic but not gushily patriotic, possibly parodic, assessment of our people and our land. By doing this, the writer might renew his being, his habitat and, more humbly, his claim to relevance.

The legend of the 'diseased' community and the necessity to overthrow legacies of repression and superstition have till now

wrought fundamental changes into our insights into a body of tradition that appears, and is, vulnerable. And yet this culture might still possess the capacity to release a variety of culturally regenerative blood.

So that our solutions might not come pat – flight abroad or suicide, facile and easy as the traditional remorse cliché at the foot of the cross. We might explore critical realism, resisting the temptation to indulge in socio-political simplifications. We might examine the models of other newly-independent nations – Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock*, Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*, Armah's *The Beautiful Ones*. There is no easy walk to freedom, but there are directions out of the rut of dissent and empty gesture. When new directions are signposted we shall have started the long and painful transition towards a new medium of consciousness and an alternative social order. I shall be keeping my ears close to the ground. This is a very interim report.

NOTES:

¹ *The Maltese in London* (1975), p. 44.

² Cf. Laurent Ropa's *Chant de la Noria* (1932).

³ *The Mimic Men* (1967), p. 13.

⁴ *Turkey, Greece and Malta* (1837), I, p. 117.

⁵ See Richard England, 'Dossier' *Illum*, October, 1975.

⁶ *Hal-Farrug* (1969), pp. 99-100.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 67.

⁸ J. Duvignaud, *The Sociology of Art* trans. T. Wilson (1972), p. 124.

⁹ *Malta News*, 16 January 1969.

¹⁰ Jane Harrison, 'From Ritual to Art', *Ancient Art in Ritual*, ed. Williams and Norgate (1948), pp. 138-9.

¹¹ Peter Serracino Inglott, 'Mill-Ewwel ghat-Tieni Ebejer', *Il-Polz* 17 (March 1971), pp. 12-13.

¹² Cf. Manwel Haber's allegorical play *Iben il-Maghtuba* (1975) 'translated' into a novel by Charles Micallef (1976).

¹³ Geoff Dench, *The Maltese in London*, pp. 45-6.

¹⁴ *In the Eye of the Sun* (1969), p. 146.

¹⁵ This novel was first serialized in *It-Torca*, 2 June 1968 to 30 March 1969.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 101-102; Frans Sammut, *Samuraj* (1975), pp. 70-73.

¹⁷*In the Eye of the Sun*, p. 109.

¹⁸*The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1972), p. 74.

¹⁹*In the Eye of the Sun*, pp. 106-107.

²⁰*Samuraj*, p. 139.

²¹*ibid.*, p. 161; *In the Eye of the Sun*, p. 107.

²²*In the Eye of the Sun*, p. 107. Cf. his early love-making to the professor's daughter Yvonne where Joseph again 'can't' till he resorts to the deviation of plastering her body with soil.

²³*ibid.*, p. 139.

²⁴*ibid.*, pp. 146-155. Having established the symbolism, Ebejer then spells out the movement by referring directly to Joseph 'an educated man, going back, going back to the blind, savage cavern of your mother's womb,' p. 156.

²⁵G. Lukacs, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

²⁶*In the Eye of the Sun*, p. 107, Joseph 'thought of death' as he starts his regression towards infantilism.

²⁷Jean-Pierre Durix, 'A Reading of Paling of Ancestors,' *Commonwealth Newsletter* (1976), p. 37.

²⁸Cf. Alfred Sant's 'mirror scene', *L-Euwel Weraq tal-Bajtar* (1968), pp. 151-3.

²⁹*Samuraj*, p. 163.