

FRANCIS EBEJER – HIS NOVELS (Part two)

And yet, though Joseph is a man, it is surely the feminine side of his nature – the Lucija, the Rosie in him – that is trying to come out: this time though, out and back into the old Malta where he can truly find, or recover his identity.

It is a choice that he accepts fully. His tragic end – perhaps tragic to our eyes, but not to him – is also a matter of choice, of self-assertion.

One supposes that had he continued with his medical studies, a true figure of the establishment, a pillar of society, and oblivious of the wreckage around him, he might have turned out to be quite a good doctor, but, as a man on level terms with himself, a walking disaster, a zombie. Are there more or fewer such men about these days?

He seems to me to be the classic schizophrenic who goes out into “a mystical voyage into inner space” without that fear of the unknown labyrinth which is often ignored, or passed unnoticed, by the mass of unaware people – zombies again.

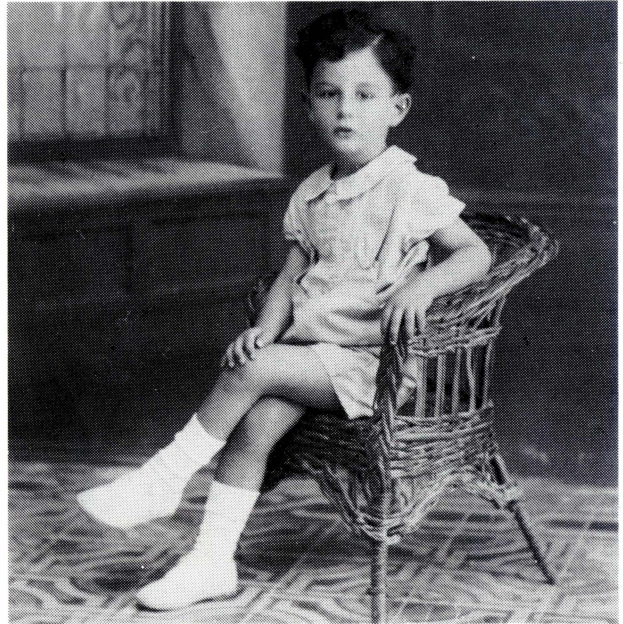
It seemed only natural to me at the time, with that blessed sea restricting one’s movements outside the Island – I am here referring to the psychological wish to break out; the physical can be easily gratified at the price of a single air-fare – that I should turn to other Josephs, or, for that matter, other Lucijas and Rosies, who do make the effort to break out, both physically *and* psychologically.

San Francisco and New Orleans in search of an answer which is at once existentialist and psyche-fulfilling.

Miguel ultimately returns to his country, to Europe, guilt and all, and complete with his and its ghosts, including a few new ones, just as Joseph does in respect of the old Malta, as typified by his Zija Assunta, Earth Goddess, with its fertility and decay, its goodness and its *angst*. Home can take on various shapes and meanings.

The answer, of course, may lie in what I have long come round to believing as a truth: one should not run away, least of all from oneself, but try to accept all one’s contradictions and mixed motives, come to terms with all sides of one’s nature, however unattractive and irksome this exercise may turn out to be, if one is truly aspiring to a full manhood or womanhood, to a full life with all its pains and joys – the whole bag of tricks!

On the socio-political level, the paradox can be



Sitting it out? The author at four years of age

(Photo credit: Francis Ebejer)

extended to colonialism and Independence. While my first four novels had dealt with variations of the “now”, for my fifth novel, *Requiem for a Malta Fascist* (A.C. Aquilina & Co., Valletta, Malta, 1980) I decided to choose the level just mentioned on which to examine the past (using the past as a point of departure) in order to arrive at and examine better the new, which is the *fact* of Independence, the emancipation of a nation.

While Joseph has set out to seek his identity inside the caverns of the old Malta, and Miguel in an alien country, Lorenz in this novel goes back to history in the hope that it might help him to explain himself to himself, as a new Maltese man of his country’s new Independence. By discovering and examining the causes, he hopes to understand the consequences better.

He attempts this analysis, first, by penetrating the mists of the past and reliving his childhood in the 1920s: local life amid the sights and sounds of the British holding manoeuvres, and rising fascist rumblings. That done, he moves on to the Thirties, bedevilled as those years were with imperialist and fascist politics; and on to the siege of the Islands in World War Two. As nowhere else before, the real seeds of Independence were sown then.



Welcome break with cast of "B.B. or Bloody in Bolivia". (The author is seen fourth from left)

Lorenz fights his Orphic battle, intent on keeping his kind and kin intact through the maelstrom of events which might happily produce the right climate for a full identity. He uses what he considers as his best weapons, love and friendship, qualities that can be, indeed have always been, exclusively his – hardly colonially imposed! – and hopes for peace and simplicity at the end of the road. As Pascal has said: "The heart has its reasons which reason itself does not understand." For Lorenz, it is an emotional, rather than a rational, odyssey through spiky reality.

The imponderables are British occupation, and Italian, later too, Nazi, fascism, and the War itself. He is wise enough to choose his way carefully in the interim, as Malta itself has so often done to survive. His choices, and the motives behind them, however, are anything but clear-cut.

The best friend that he chooses for himself is Paul, Maltese but also outright fascist. Lorenz himself is apolitical. The Maltese Ester, another friend, is of Jewish origin. The woman Lorenz has a lustful affair with, the Countess Elena, is a Russian émigrée and crypto-fascist; while her husband, Count Lionel Matveich, is a fascist activist, first pro-Franco, and now pro-Mussolini. Superintendent Cefai is fanatically imperialistic. . . . Foreigners and fellow-travellers galore! How is one to be, and truly understand to be, "independent" in the face of such odds?

"Trust me," I almost cried aloud, "to side with the British, have a fascist for my best friend, a fascist's woman for my mistress, a Jew for a conscience and its own excuse, while I worried over a dear friend and the great evil he was courting, and wanting to know if he wanted to embrace evil – or for that matter, love or passion or jealousy or hate – and why I couldn't share all that, too. I, Lorenz, lonely, hungry, doomed. . . ." (page 152).

If such characters in the novel exemplify the various foreign occupations in Malta's history, the Countess Elena typifies in her person and ideals all that is voluptuous and seductive in the foreigner, from whom Malta is hoping finally to be free: whiffs of *autre* culture and customs from beyond these tight shores: the siren call of the foreigner hailing from larger and more evolved countries than ours; the temptations are great.

The Countess Elena pulls Lorenz one way; his deformed cousin, and very Maltese, Kos the other. Kos is the matrix: does he represent the old Malta with its hardships and perhaps unattractiveness, clamouring for attention and suitable cultivation even in the face of the threat from the beautiful foreigners?

As I said, love and friendship – way beyond politics and ideologies – are what Lorenz invokes in order to find himself and, once having done so, be

the new Maltese man. He fights his own battle, that of the emotions, using them against foreign interference that could play havoc with his love for his fellow-Maltese, Paul and Ester. However, he begins to feel isolated; but then he is an islander; and an island is an island in an island. . . .

Presumably because I myself am an islander, the concept of islands, of islands within islands, seems to recur in my work. There are the physical islands (Malta, Britain, Europe in some ways); emotional islands (Paul, Ester); sex islands (the Countess); psychological islands (Kos); political islands (Cefai's hounding of fascists); islands within islands. Sometimes the circle breaks off at a tangent and into a parabola of wistfulness for unknown horizons, but the "island" soon reclaims its own. All manner of islands go on forming.

In the end, the foreigner does not emerge unscathed. Mussolini's courtship of Malta ends with his defeat in war. The Countess Elena is killed by the Nazis whom she had supported in life. The Maltese-Jew Ester emigrates to Israel, taking the Maltese-Paul's child, half Maltese and half Russian, with her: ironical that a Jewish woman, once Maltese, should be bringing up a fascist child in Israel! Paul, Maltese, but ridden with European influences, is killed, however accidentally, by Lorenz. Cefai himself has had his day with the Empire's twilight.

Consequently, is the idea of Independence about to grow into fact?

The foreign "Mother" is dead, or has simply passed into history. Lorenz finds himself alone with the Mother-Source herself, the Mother-Concept: Malta with its imperfections, its uncouthness, reflecting his own, but also a Malta that is willing to learn from past episodes, adventures and misadventures, and grow in stature. With all obstacles to a full identity removed, however painfully, Lorenz at last discover Kos, who can now "*pronounce his full name and not just half of it!*" Contradictions have been resolved and, for the first time, Lorenz has glimpses of his true destiny, and thus metaphorically, Malta's. Paul Claudel wrote: "All that passes is raised to the dignity of expression; all that happens is raised to the dignity of meaning. Everything is either symbol or parable."

There is hardly any mention of foreigners in my sixth novel, "*Leap of Malta Dolphins*" (Vantage Press, Inc., New York, 1982). Malta is free and independent. Only we can make or break her now, save or besmirch her. We can no longer blame the foreigner.

Professor Arthur Pollard of Hull University, UK., had written: "Ebejer never suggests the merely occasional; he seeks to endow local reality with universal significance." I hope I have lived up to that comment with this novel, too – it is difficult for a



The "Islander" in his First Holy Communion picture (1932)

(Photo credit: Francis Ebejer)

novelist to know exactly what he has achieved, or what he has fallen short of.

It might have been the direct awareness of national independence, and therefore the opening of wider vistas, that made me look on this novel, more so than in the case of any of the others, as belonging not only to Malta, where it is set, but anywhere else where ecology and the land are threatened. However, as I made clear in my Author's Note: "I suppose the Maltese Islands should have been among the last places to choose as a setting for this story. Ecology so far is hardly a problem there. . . ." But a writer must anchor somewhere!

Our country, to revert to the text proper, is suddenly so much more precious, now that it is wholly ours – ours to preserve or to destroy! This is a choice that marks the thematic level of the book.

"*Education and learning,*" (Sarid is speaking) "*the aggregation of scientific data . . . what is all that worth if it is simply confined to the hard streets of cities and to the ways of technological*

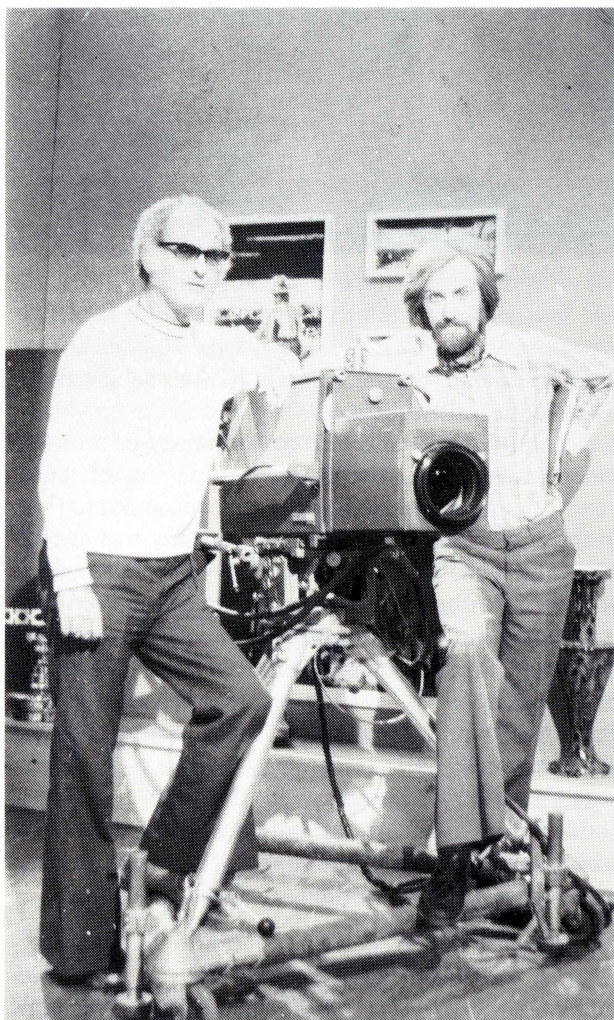
man, and not exquisitely compressed into a particular sensitivity to the needs of the land which, in turn, has been, is, and will continue to be the source of all human knowledge? How tragic to abuse, to poison, the source!” (page 67)

On the personal, or story, level, Marcell is also seeking to sublimate love and friendship to a concern for the land itself. Feeling the urgency, he tries to achieve his aim both inside and together with the community at large, and not, like Joseph and Lorenz, inside himself, though his external and internal lives remain linked – every act being the externalization of the inner self.

The enemy in “*Leap of Malta Dolphins*” is not the foreigner; it is ourselves. Motives and motivations become suspect; how genuinely do most of us love this Island? How should we go about preserving and safeguarding the environment?

Also, the now fully emancipated Maltese woman presents another type of problem: not as specifically herself; more in the near-mythical manner in which Marcell and a few others regard her.

Like Malta, I suppose, Lenarda is as beautiful as



With Mario Philip Azzopardi at TVM for “Id-Dar tas-Soru”

no woman has any right to be. She is also a mystery in many people’s eyes, including Marcell’s. She uses her newly found freedom in ways that would have raised more than one eyebrow in the Maltese male of as recently as the 1950s, but would probably have earned her the applause of Lucija, Rosie and Karla of my first three novels.

That may well be, but has the Maltese male moved up with the sense of independence as understood by his female counterpart? Or has he come to realize that woman, whether as reality, myth or metaphor, is an obstacle to where he wants his *machismo* to lead him?

For the first time in my novels, a woman is murdered, and she is Lenarda. Once she has been done away with – by two homosexuals who have been friends of hers – progress, material progress can follow.

For a very long time, the Islanders had held on to the concept and myth of the Maltese Mother Goddess, its matriarchal sovereignty. In “*Leap of Malta Dolphins*”, Marcell and the other men, Sarid not completely excluded, have come round to surmising that this worship will have to stop if the Islands are to forge ahead technologically – a man’s job. In other words, the allure of the old Malta, with its picturesque valleys, quaint villages, pastoral incantation, has been too great, and has come to seem almost pernicious; too Circe-like. She was holding things up; some of the poetry rooted in the lore of centuries must be cast aside. She, or at least the idea of her as everlastingly protective, and therefore, in terms of progress, debilitating and emasculating, will have to be eliminated.

For the purposes of this novel, she is; and the age-old spell of valleys and hills is broken. They revert to mere masses of inanimate matter, and therefore exploitable. The machines move in.

Her departure from the scene may mean progress, but any complete shutting off of her sustenance can also lead to – and here lies the warning if we are not too careful – the demise of well-tried values, and the dominant emergence of the morally misshapen (Sa Tereza, Kate and Clorinde among others); the flawed idealist (Sarid); the greedy businessman (Sur Bert; Karmenu); the emotionally reprehensible (Ġorġ); the European-corrupted (Fonsu, Clorinde).

Will the new tarmac “*wide and gleaming . . . and set hard*” forever lay her ghost, one wonders? Or is she still up there on the ancient hill, inside the ancient temple, waiting to reclaim at least part of what has always been beneficially hers, and perhaps set about keeping things in proper balance?

Francis Ebejer

(Concluded)