

GWANN MAMO

Gwann Mamo (1886–1941), born at Luqa, exploits to the full his immediate environment and falls in love with it even when he criticizes its deficiencies. As a literary writer, however, he succeeds in transcending the limits of direct observation in order to gain wider relevance, and possibly to transform a social enquiry into a parable of the perennial Maltese condition.

It can be said that his only literary work, *Uljed in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerka* (1930), is unique in the whole of Maltese narrative tradition. He has the courage to look at contemporary society in the face, pointing out its serious shortcomings and indicating a positive solution. It was the social condition of his times which made him write the novel, the end-product of long years of critical observation. It stems from a profound anxiety in favour of the workers and from his desire to make them conscious of their basic rights and central role in society.

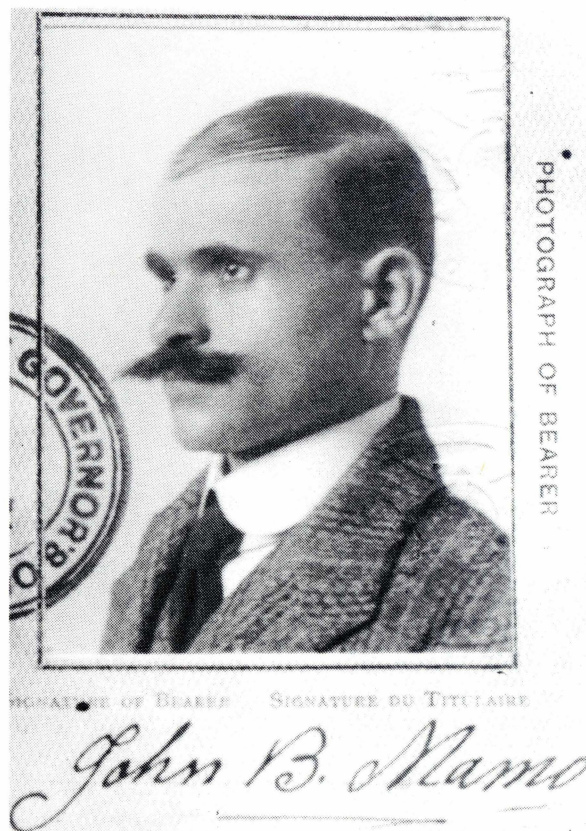
His main ideas, expressed in numerous articles on *Il-Hmar*, *Labour Opinion*, *Il-Kotra* and elsewhere, concern the working class and its plight for social and cultural emancipation. He urges the workers to unite and to form a mature consciousness of themselves and of their environment. As the most efficient strategy for a radical change he proposes the adequate use of the Maltese language. Mamo's esteem for the speech of the common people is amply exemplified in the novel, where he makes full use of the most typical idiomatic phraseology and syntactic patterns. Through collective organization, social awareness and educational diffusion Mamo foresees a fruitful future for the members of a unified labour front. He is largely motivated by his experience in foreign countries and frequently proposes the models observed in Paris, London and Rome.

The novel combines an educational intention with a secure literary ability. His knowledge of the Maltese language is sound and thoroughly effective. He defines his work as "satirical and descriptive, semi-political and contemporary". As opposed to his literary predecessors, for whom, however, he showed great esteem, Mamo dwells on immediate experience and gives a detailed view of the common, seemingly unobserved anecdotes which form daily routine. His plan of organizing simple, crude facts constitutes the essential narrative structure of the novel.

His characters are unwittingly stupid, innocent and unaware of the perils they go through owing to their lack of maturity. The whole plot is actually made up of the various adventures of his numerous individuals.

None of them is built up into a hero or a protagonist. The "children of grandma" are all identifiable, anonymous representatives of the majority of the Maltese people; their identity, diction and behaviour are samples of the general condition of the people in his own days. Consequently Mamo looks at the ideal man as an international animal, rather than as a citizen of a particular nation.

The novel is also based on a traditional social necessity: emigration. Mamo chooses to send his characters to America, since this enables him to prolong the narrative and to arouse intense curiosity about their future in a distant continent. Up to 1885 only a few Maltese chose to start a different life there. The number increased considerably in the last decades of the nineteenth century and in the early decades of the twentieth; the hardships brought about by the First World War caused a much wider exodus. In the period 1925–30 the Maltese in America amounted to 15,000. In Michigan, especially in Detroit, there were 6,000 and in New York there were 4,000. In San Francisco there was a Maltese colony which was always growing, whereas there



Gwann Mamo in 1930

(Photo credit: Oliver Friggieri)



The front cover of *Uljed in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerka* (1930)
(Photo credit: Oliver Friggieri)

were other considerably large groups in Chicago and New Orleans. In the year 1930–31, when Mamo's novel was published, 592 Maltese left for that continent.

Uljed in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerka looks like a *saga*, a narrative work portraying the life and experiences of a whole family. This choice is another indication of the author's faithfulness to the nature of facts, since most Maltese who went abroad chose to do so in a group which retained the previous family ties. Mamo makes ample reference to this feature, not only to gain credibility as a talkative narrator, but also to increase his own possibilities of preserving the Maltese character itself when reconstructing the adventures of his characters abroad.

Most of the novel gives extensive information about what happens to these people in the wide expanse of a foreign country, thus contrasting the insular limitations to the enormous world outside. Through the contrastive method he proposes to the Maltese reader the necessity of preparing himself, socially, culturally and otherwise, for any eventuality which has to be faced in thoroughly different conditions. His characters make a mess of their foreign challenge, and fail to the extent of eventually having to return back home. The story maintains a highly comical tone almost throughout, placing in juxtaposition a tragic content and a farcical form.

Mamo nourishes no other literary claim than that of being a sincere, socially motivated realist, even if parts of his novel tend to poke too much fun at the people involved.

The plot has an extra-literary logic; it seems to lead to the conclusion that the Maltese worker should remain in Malta and reach his own fulfilment in his own natural environment, provided the social changes required are actuated. Perhaps that is why Mamo's preoccupations find their comic relief through a narrative form which stands in dire contrast to his serious articles on the papers. The novel is highly enjoyable in depicting real people and situations, but it is positively instructive since it indicates practical devices which should be adopted if a radical reform is envisaged.

Mamo writes out of commitment, and when he ridicules his pathetic anti-heroes, he only shows his inner sympathy for them and actually ends up with falling in love with their peculiarities. As a novelist he is very much indebted to them; their attractiveness is derived from his ability to observe and to recreate them, through a combination of insight and imagination, without rendering them despicable. He only wants to condemn the political structures which have left them in their primitive shapelessness.

The novel is an illustration of the author's concept of literature. He believes that the writer should be a keen observer, cultivating awareness and leading the people towards a better understanding of themselves as members of the world and as victims of an environment detached from the outer world. Consequently the literary value of *Uljed in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerka* is intimately related to the degree of faithfulness with which he revived what he actually saw. As a literary novel, however, it has to be evaluated as an image which goes beyond the limits of a period. The most obvious impression is that it gives an account of *what* people of five decades ago *did*, but the novel implies a wider conclusion: *who* they were as inhabitants of a small island. It involves the knowledge of a nature which is more indicative of insularity (as a constant), than of a mere historical period (as a variant).

The essentially artistic value is to be sought in this direction. Satire can thus be defined as Mamo's attitude towards being Maltese, rather than as a reaction against a particular condition which in many respects is obsolete. His realism, therefore, is only partially historical, as subsequent Maltese literary works have exemplified in their own different ways.

Oliver Friggieri

FURTHER READING

Friggieri, O. *Il-Kittieb tar-Riforma Soċjali*. Malta, 1984.