

FRANCIS EBEJER – HIS NOVELS

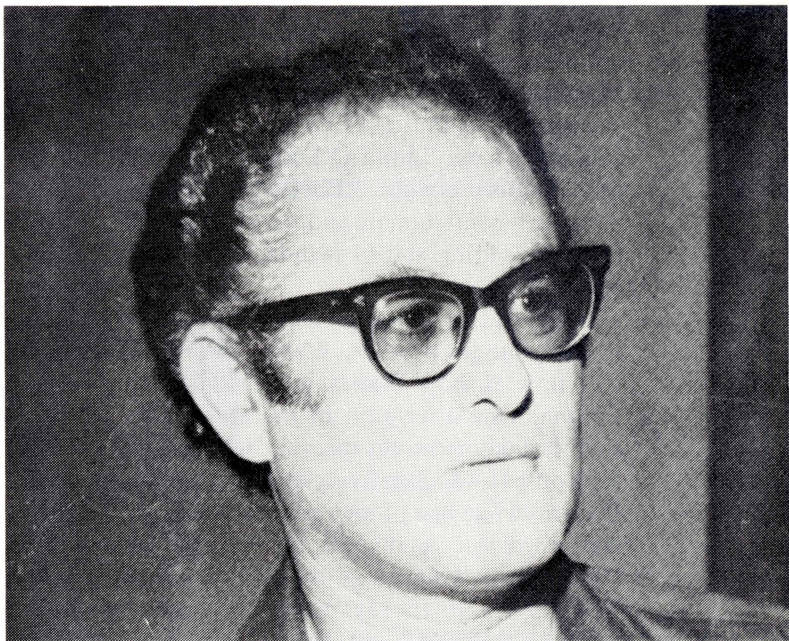
If biculturalism presents problems, I should imagine bilingualism adds a few more to a writer working in two distinct, and disparate, languages: in my case, Maltese and English.

What follows are extracts from a talk which I gave in March 1978, during an international conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS); the talk was later published along with several other papers by various Commonwealth writers in a volume edited by Dr. Daniel Massa of the University of Malta, and entitled “Individual and Community in Commonwealth Literature” (University Press, 1979):

“... *The dichotomy of tradition and folklore on one side and, on the other, the search for new suitable roots from cultures more immediate and amenable to his own is a condition of life for the writer in a bicultural situation. . . . The right blend of cultures should further aid the writer to raise his sights over and beyond the little causalities of the swiftly transient moment and focus on longer-term visions. . . . Some of us, much as we loved our own language, and loved it even more in the new shapes into which it allowed itself to be manipulated by us – each creation a miracle – were being consistently drawn out by the visions of a wider appeal than a small Island could offer, and by means of a far more influential language, and that was English.*”

How had I arrived at such conclusions? If I may quote further from the same article: “*I’m fond of raising the excuse (of not having started earlier to write in Maltese) that, as I seemed to have been more or less better equipped to tackle an older established language (English), the ideas I wanted to express, and which were continuously clamouring for my attention, would not allow me to wait until my own language could be trusted not to break in my hands, and possibly disillusion me for ever, during my first writing attempts.*”

I had in previous articles mentioned my delight at discovering at first hand the literary potential of the Maltese language; that was in 1950, when I wrote my first work in Maltese, namely, the prize-winning radioplay, *Ċpar fix-Xemx*. The rich texture of the language dazzled me almost in inverse proportions to the humiliation. I felt at having held myself back from it for so long, regarding it as a language too brittle to withstand more than a closed range of ideas, or to offer one that wealth of symbolism which is so



Francis Ebejer . . . his novels have all been in English

(Photo Credit: Francis Ebejer)

essential to the unravelling of the knottier bits of reality. How wrong I was!

I had, of course, long before I had come round to trying my hand at writing in Maltese, read and enjoyed such works as Ġużè Aquilina’s *Taht Tliet Saltriet*, Ġużè Bonnici’s *Il-Qawwa ta’ l-Imħabba* and Karmenu Vassallo’s poetry. I am fond of surmising that Dun Karm might have experienced a similar sort of excitement when he finally made the transition from Italian to Maltese.

And yet, although I have written the majority of my plays in Maltese, all my novels so far have been in English. I suspect that, secretly, I wanted, first, to seek a happy compromise between two languages dear to me, without neglecting either, and then, to strike a blow at helping to place Malta more squarely on the international literary map.

Throughout, there have been foreign writers, and not merely those British, paying us flying visits, taking a quick look around – possibly, too, doing some cribbing of native output; my first and second novels have not proved immune – and later emerging with books about Malta. What Malta? Most of us were rather tired of reading books by foreign writers who, with one or two notable exceptions, pretended they had suitably penetrated under

our skins to the point of understanding us perfectly! Foreign readers of such books could not be blamed for taking such *ersatz* accounts of our way of life as the real thing.

As a Maltese, I wanted to show what it meant to be writing in an international language of great repute about the realities in the lives of the Maltese, their problems and aspirations, caught as they were inside the vortex of changing times, and to try to make of the whole effort as genuine a Maltese experience as possible.

Perhaps one of the review quotes I prize most is the following from “John O’London’s Weekly” on my first English novels: “Ebejer reveals a distinctive power of construction and vividness in his description of a setting and of people he knows and understands.”

In actual fact, I owe my first effort at novel-writing to my younger brother, Walter Michael (*Kelinu*, to us), now Bishop Walter in the Brazilian State of Paraná. One afternoon in the mid-1950s, during a brief holiday from his missions in Brazil, he came to my house (I was then living at Anglu Mallia Junction, B’Kara) while one of my radioplays was on: I think it was *Majjistral*. At the end, he turned to me and said: “Why don’t you try your hand at writing novels? You’ll be able to say more.” I remember pooh-poohing the idea right away, largely out of sheer funk – all those pages!

Ebejer’s third novel – “In the Eye of the Sun” . . . going too fast?

I took the plunge in 1957, the day after (a smokeless and perfectly painful) Good Friday! The result was *A Wreath of Maltese Innocents*, which came out the following year in a hardbound edition under the imprint of MacGibbon & Kee of London, and is now extant in paperback format.

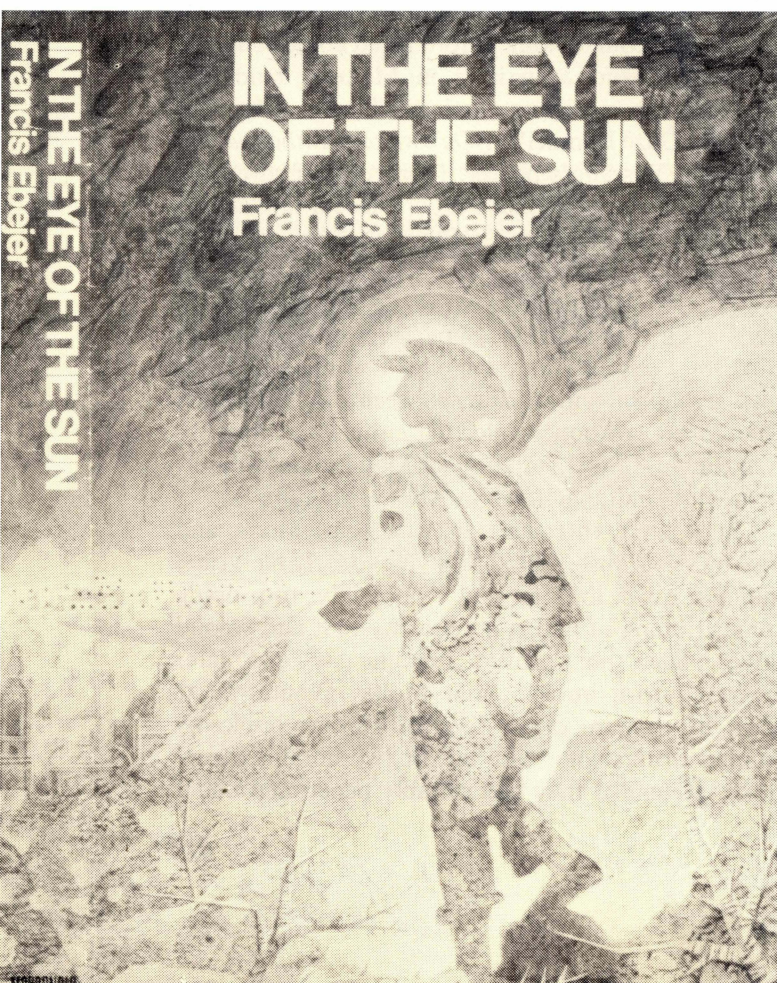
The setting is the Maltese Islands in the 1950s, when a good part of what we now know as modern Malta had begun to emerge and to take shape. It is a love story, dominated and complicated throughout by the socio-political conditions of that period: the terrible Church – Labour Party dispute; a divided clergy; class consciousness; most of Management up in arms against the burgeoning workers’ movement; European-style intrigue versus local unschooled life. All in all, another classic example of conflict in which prudence and passion clash and vie with each other to produce history. As they should literature, too; for it is also a prerequisite of the writer to exhibit prudence and passion, without totally succumbing to either, and thereby aim at the clarification of the *milieu*; in other words, he must try, again with the right mixture of prudence and passion, to crystallize thoughts, feelings and events which may appear vague and hopelessly complex to others.

It is, after all, a widely held view that it is the artist, rather than the man of action or the politician, who is the better equipped, by virtue of the imagination and the creative impulse, to examine symptoms and reopen and diagnose wounds in order to indicate what is right or wrong with the world around him, and consequently helping others to become more aware. It has been said: “A serious novelist prompts one not only to live with his fiction, but also to engage with his thought.” Whether or not I have succeeded in this, is another matter. . . .

For the main character I chose Luċija, a young Maltese working girl whom circumstances turn into a rebel: an unconscious one, to start with. I preferred to use a female rather than a male rebel as it can hardly be denied that the going has always been relatively easier for Mediterranean man, be he rebel without a cause, or just simply *macho*. I wanted a rebel *with* a cause.

Women were having an altogether tougher time. They had just begun to feel their wings, but had not yet learned to fly; it was still too soon. One feels intrigued at the thought of all those hidden and unsung heroines from among our womenfolk who, consciously or not, were in those early days pioneering women’s emancipation in these Islands.

The young lovers of the novel stand for the growing generation, their actions so far only dimly reflecting the future. Pitted against them are people of influence in the male-dominated enclave of the Establishment: among these, thoroughbred Maltese with unbending attitudes, inherited but never



FRANCIS EBEJER

REQUIEM FOR A MALTA FASCIST

A.C. ADUJUMA

FRANCIS EBEJER

HIS NEW
POWERFUL
MALTA
NOVEL OF
FASCIST
LOVE
LUST
AND
INTRIGUE
AND THE
BRUTAL NAZI
SIEGE
OF THE
ISLANDS



'Reading this book is living through it - and never forgetting the experience' — *Ernie Bradford*

"Requiem for a Malta Fascist" ... one of Ebejer's most powerful novels to date

properly examined and regulated to the times; Europeans married into our families; an assortment of Maltese aspiring to be Europeans at the expense of their Maltese roots.

Lućija and her lover, John Xiberras de Balyard, though the latter stems from a family of distinct European antecedence, try to rise above the parochial and stultifying restrictions engineered by their elders and superiors. It is precisely these people who, from inside the ensconcement of the family, the church and most of society at large with its peculiar mentality would, at the time, unhesitatingly describe the fact of a caged-in existence as nothing less than an edifying example of sobriety, morality and propriety. . . .

Lućija manages the first steps outside, but the barriers are pretty formidable. She is forced to turn back, though not without an inverted gesture of release and defiance. This she does by immolating herself to life inside a nuns' convent; an action explainable, as much on the metaphysical as on the physical plane, as an escape beyond the reaches, or shores, of class, snobbery, a semi-politicized church,

day-to-day politics, and a society too ready to judge and condemn, and only just beginning to mature.

In point of fact, the novel traces Lućija's gradual socio-psychological development to the point when, at least, she could say: "No".

Two years later, in 1960, MacGibbon & Kee brought out my second novel *Evil of the King Cockroach* (now in paperback under its new title of *Wild Spell of Summer*).

In it, I presented Rosie, clearly a natural successor to Lućija of the first book. It is still the 1950s, but entrenched society has begun to show serious flaws in its structure. Rosie feels freer, with a mind of her own, and with a newly acquired sense of self-reliance — though she, too, has to work hard at emancipation. Where Lućija has "failed" (*failed* with reservations, for that book's Monsignor Assalon Xiberras himself feels with regard to Lućija that "he is looking at the first of a new breed of Maltese woman") Rosie succeeds, even if just by a hair's breadth.

Through its characters, the book continues to draw a comparison between steadfast tradition and customs — though I myself am the last to condemn

COME AGAIN IN SPRING

Undoubtedly the work of a writer of quality . . . am greatly impressed.

Max Hayward
(Translator of Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, works by Solzhenitsyn, and others.)

FRANCIS EBEJER

"Come Again in Spring" – Joseph reincarnated in Spain?

tradition: only its negative aspects – and our people's efforts in the late Fifties to try and sift the chaff from the grain in the emerging nation.

Thereby hangs a paradox though. While most youngsters in the book want to forge ahead and are chock-a-block with ideals, the elderly, some from among the *nouveaux riches*, wealthy overnight on the strength of money earned, deviously or not, during the War and from fat post-War reconstruction contracts, turn materialistic. The Sun-Blaze Pastry Factory, owned by the elderly Żaren, has suddenly become more important than an historical site! Not so to his student son. Also out of this paradox emerge the first stirrings, again on the part of the young like Rosie, of a wish for a return to nature, to Mother Malta and lasting values: a theme I expounded more fully in my next, and third, novel, *In the Eye of the Sun*, as well as, in larger, even if also cynical, measure, in my sixth, *Leap of Malta Dolphins*.

With her breakaway, as a real individual, from a world (the 1950s) that still looks askance at women trying to be "like men", no longer set tied to home and kitchen, Rosie embodies the new freedom that, for better or worse, is later to erupt into a mass female exodus to office and factory and other careers of responsibility side by side with men.

The new sexual permissiveness that was to shatter open the West in the Sixties was also waiting to claim our women's attention, though, thankfully, never to the extent of Carnaby Street. Ironic here, too, that the seducers in the book are men belonging to the "old order", the men of the old propriety turning out to be hollow men!

With my third novel *In the Eye of the Sun* (Macdonald & Co. London, 1969, though written ten years earlier, in 1959 – in all that intervening time I was busy writing and producing my first Maltese stage plays) I seem to have felt that I was going too fast, and perhaps the new liberation was not, after all, as beneficial as I had supposed.

This novel marks a watershed and my themes and ideas on progress seemed to beg for reappraisal.

I wrote it at a time when I used to drive around and finish up completely shaken at the sight of the New Boom, with the consequent Villa: bits of old Malta raped to make way for constructions, some of which were simply too hideous and uncharacteristic. And that, strangely, was happening when the last colonial rule was on its way out! What a country of paradoxes we are. . . .

For this novel I chose a man, Joseph, as the protagonist. The women, though still having some way to go, were well set on the high, merry road of modern emancipation, as exemplified by Karla, a farmer's daughter studying to become a doctor. The Mediterranean Maltese *macho* is suddenly faced with the rapid disappearance of the world he has known and over which he has lorded it for so long.

The novel traces Joseph's psychological striptease as he gradually retreats from town and university to a lowly job as a nightwatchman at a factory, to the country (Dingli), to his old family farmhouse, to his old room in it, to the cliffs, to a cavern inside these cliffs, when suddenly there is the sea – "a taunting grin" in the sun, beyond which he is psychologically not equipped to venture.

His Jungian search for the archetypal Mother Goddess of these Islands, for the brown earth of their, and his, beginnings, the brown bodies of the peasants – the old, and real, Malta – drags him into concrete events all bearing upon the myth of Mother Earth where he can feel safe against the starkness of modern encroachments which appear so directionless to him.

In my fourth novel, *Come Again in Spring* (Vantage Press, Inc., New York, 1980), I seem to have resuscitated Joseph from his aunt's grave and reincarnated him in Spain. Why Spain? This time I wanted to place my hero a good distance away from Joseph's small, closed-in Island, barriers and all, and consequently with less risk of his changing his mind about leaving Europe; I even put soldiers on Miguel's tail! He simply had to get out of his world, the world



of the “island” of Europe which was becoming more decadent with the passage of time; a Europe which is a mixed bag of *kitsch* ultra-nationalism, guilt and failed hopes, now and then tempered with resonances of past glory: a mirror-image of Miguel himself.

Miguel goes to the United States, hoping for deliverance from the threat of doom in his old country (cf. Joseph vis-à-vis Malta). In other words, he leaves a colonial-conscious Spain, Europe (cf. Malta under colonial rule) for a place where this time it is not, as has been in Joseph’s case, the British Empire that holds sway, but something collateral: an empire built on Anglo-Saxon multinational corporations, as Professor Peter Nazareth, reviewing my work in “World Literature Today”, USA., has pointed out.

Miguel, therefore, not only exchanges, relatively innocently, one colonial syndrome for another, but takes his old skin with him (who ever can shed *that?*) It is precisely in that skin, pocked through with old and new guilt (cf. Malta’s; Europe’s) that he roams.

Francis Ebejer

(to be continued)