

Portrait

ĠUŻÈ ELLUL MERCER

Ġużè Ellul Mercer (1897–1961), born at Msida, may give the impression that he is only interested in narrating a simple story, whereas the deeper layers of his prose, always lucid and conveniently realistic, betray his search for the hidden truth of his characters. He participates in various ways in the popular trends of Maltese narrative works of the first half of the twentieth century, a period which combined the writer's inner need of self-expression with the historical necessity of rediscovering the old, predominantly unwritten language and remoulding it into a sufficiently respectable literary vehicle.

His works have a place in the vast programme of syntactic and stylistic reconstruction launched by novelists and poets alike in the nineteenth century, but his more valid contribution stems from a profounder preoccupation with a set of problems, social and existential.

Ellul Mercer published a considerable number of short stories in *Il-Hmar*, *Il-Kotra*, *Il-Malti* and elsewhere. *Hrejjeġ ta' Mingħul* (1929) are perhaps the best example of his early experience as a literary writer who combines the exploration of a personal style with the expression of his own vision of life. Although he falls in various respects in the category of the novelists of his age, he goes beyond the more popular limits and suggests different, more modern approaches to the concept, if not to the construction, of the novel. He is very far from departing from the rigid traditional structure of a story understood as a self-explanatory series of causes and effects, and frequently adopts the attitude of the unpretentious story-teller whose primary challenge is to establish an immediate relationship with the average reader.

In spite of this, he reveals an appreciable awareness of some of the themes which came to the fore in the early twentieth century European prose. The realistic and the psychological components of modern narration found a synthesis in his work, even though he did not detach himself to a great extent from the type of literature being written in Maltese by the other significant contemporary authors. His past is recent, not remote, and is given a social, and not a historical, dimension. Man is seen as an individual and not as a member of a nation.

Leli ta' Haż-Żgħir (1938) is an important attempt at moving forward towards the psychological novel. The environment is depicted in clear terms and the author's social consciousness, better developed in his shorter stories like *Mari* and *Mara tad-Dnub*,

occupies a large portion of the narrative; it does not resolve itself, however, into the main aspect of the novel. The story is constructed as a set of events which take place one after the other and the people involved are made to look as if they were only other elements of one whole visible picture, which is actually introspective.

His real concern is for the protagonist, the almost silent, introvert bearer of truth. The environment itself lives within him although Ellul Mercer employs his literary devices to depict it in its colourfulness and monotony. The love-hate relationship between the writer and his object of observation, so typical of Maltese modern prose, is already present in him. Leli forms a unique part of the self-contained "world" of *Haż-Żgħir*, the village where nothing ever happens. In the long run, the village becomes an image of the whole country, perhaps of the whole world, and Leli comes forth as the unidentifiable anti-hero, the conscience which suffers in silence, the mind which cannot be understood. Self-expression and communication are transformed into problems of a sensitive, tormented soul.

Isolation and retirement of the self are the two paths through which Leli faces truth, now that he is enlightened with the knowledge of great philosophers who impose basic questions on his sensibility. Ellul Mercer's quest is to reconcile philosophy with faith, science with religion, empirical data with metaphysics, reason with intuition. The Kantian distinction between science and man's sense of moral duty, positivism and the discussion of God in Dostoyevsky's novels are the cultural point of departure of the writer. He only fails to insert such a detailed discussion in his story, but the background of Leli's profound crisis of knowledge is simply the intellectual deposit he acquired through constant reading.

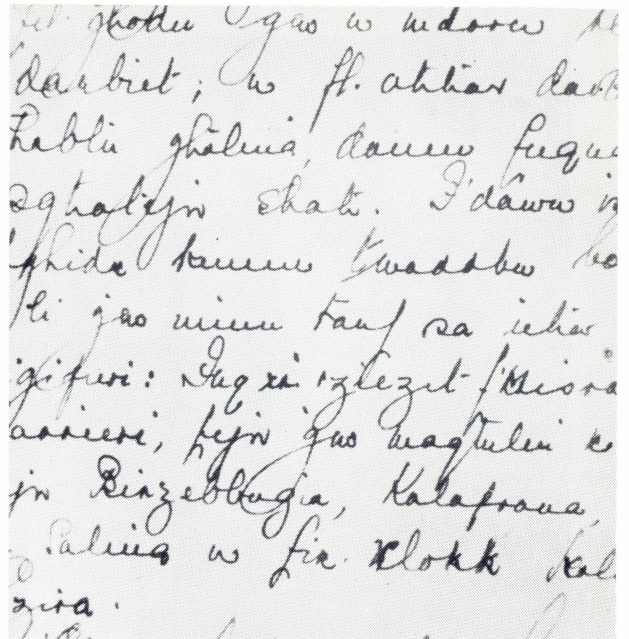
On the other extreme of the whole picture there is the village, simple, ignorant, inactive, removed from the fundamental preoccupations of a thinking man. Consequently Leli may be said to form a unique part of his environment only in so far as he has to live physically there. Spiritually he belongs to somewhere else, and finally to nowhere. His intellectual preparation puts him in an almost self-inflicted exile. The negative forces of the village lead him to a sort of madness subtly understood in the positive sense of superiority. Hence the reference to the identification of genius with madness and particularly to Max Simon Nordau's work.



Ellul Mercer makes all this sufficiently clear through the reference to Plato's allegory of the cave in *The Republic*, Book VII. Plato compares human nature in respect of education and its lack to dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern with a long entrance open to light. Of all the people in the village – Haż-Żghir, and symbolically Malta – one individual succeeds in detecting the light. From this point onwards Leli leads a life of utter detachment and misunderstanding. The author's basic idea is how to develop the inner realm of Leli, the conscience of an enlightened thinker in the midst of a thoughtless community. The didactic excerpts of the novel, almost intervals in which the narrator becomes a sociologist or a moralist, can be partially justified with reference to his intention of making the implications more relevant to a particular historical condition.

Leli's fundamental problem is how to reconcile certain contents of his knowledge with the feeling of the existence of God. The anti-hero is, in fact, called *Leli*, the biblical meaning of which is "God is with us". The novel also reveals the author's devotion towards his mother, a deeply religious woman chosen to close the whole narrative in prayer for her son plunged in meditation and melancholy. In many instances the whole story is overtly autobiographical.

Leli ta' Haż-Żghir is perhaps the most religious novel in Maltese literature. The prominent role given to the main character as a disturbed mind and the distance established throughout between him and the other members of the plot render the novel an



Extract from page 365 of *Taht in-Nar* in manuscript form

important attempt at introducing the psychological approach and at promoting literature's purely intellectual content.

Oliver Friggieri

FURTHER READING

O. Friggieri, *Ellul Mercer f'"Leli ta' Haż-Żghir"* – *Mir-Realtà għall-Kuxjenza*, Department of Education, 1983.



Ellul Mercer in his youth ...
"isolation and retirement of the self"