

Portrait

ĠUŻÈ MUSCAT AZZOPARDI



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Ġużè Muscat Azzopardi (1853–1927), born at Ġormi, is one of the more colourful personalities in Maltese literature. His literary activity is rather vast and embraces various genres. Like most writers of his time, he is the author of works both in Italian and in Maltese, but it is mainly his output in Maltese that justifies his fame.

As a versatile journalist he contributed considerably towards the popular and semi-literary rehabilitation of the language. In this respect his contributions to *Il-Habib*, launched in 1912 with the specific aim of providing the people with valid reading material in Maltese, are the most significant. He is closely connected with the foundation of the *Għaqda tal-Kittieba tal-Malti* (1920) and was its first president.

Muscat Azzopardi's literary work may be divided in three sections: poetry, narrative prose, translation. One of his intentions was to educate the masses

through material which could be at the same time pleasant and instructive. For this purpose he translated numerous works into Maltese, including the Gospels and official Catholic literature. As a poet he sought to unify within himself the two opposite extremes of his personality, the popular and the literary. A look at the range of topics, themes and forms included in *Hamsin Poeżija bil-Malti* (1890) confirms this conclusion. His inspiration is directly rooted in the immediate experience of his environment which he observed, analysed and frequently criticized, thus proposing to the new generation of writers the adequate role to be adopted by them as interpreters of society.

His idea of reviving the language and adapting it to the needs of contemporary society stems from his cultural background as a classicist and then as a romantic. The first component of his identity made him look back towards the great models of Italian tradition, whereas the second one motivated him to look ahead and to seek inspiration in what was socially relevant. The older dimension, more evident in his Italian works, and the new one, typically aware of different necessities, particularly the need to discover the concept of a nation in its fullest sense, are two inseparable aspects of one unique personality. The way he handled the language went through various phases and readily modified itself according to themes and moods. It is difficult to forget that the journalist in him always played a determinative role, and perhaps this was one of the advantages which helped him a lot to render his works readable and enjoyable.

He strove to combine within himself the educated journalist and the sophisticated man of letters. Consequently his poetry delves into an extremely wide area of themes, each treated in a manner which befits his own preconceptions of the reading public and the chosen genre. At times he does not hesitate to give secondary importance to the purely aesthetic character of verse and to concentrate exclusively on the educational and didactic content. In such instances his formal devices are immediately popular, taken directly from the language spoken with instinctive spontaneity, and does not in any way depart from the territory consciously occupied by other writers like Ġ.A. Vassallo, R. Taylor, A. Preca, D. Cachia and A. Muscat Fenech.

On the other hand he is also a refined poet who explores the hidden potentialities of the language and



The Committee and Commission of *L-Ghaqda tal-Kittieba tal-Malti* of 1922

who translates his verse into a respectable version of intimate feelings. The most characteristic motives of traditional poetry as well as the more recent ones pertaining to the romantic vision of the nation as the all-embracing world of man the citizen are consequently expressed according to the sufficiently elaborate criteria of contemporary Maltese literature. His sonnets and the poems in which he adopts a semblance of nostalgia and melancholy are perhaps his best contributions. He remains distant from the basic preoccupations of mankind and lacks a world vision of his own, but the content he inherited from tradition and observed in his social milieu is properly conveyed in verse form. In this sense he is more a poet of culture than a poet of experience.

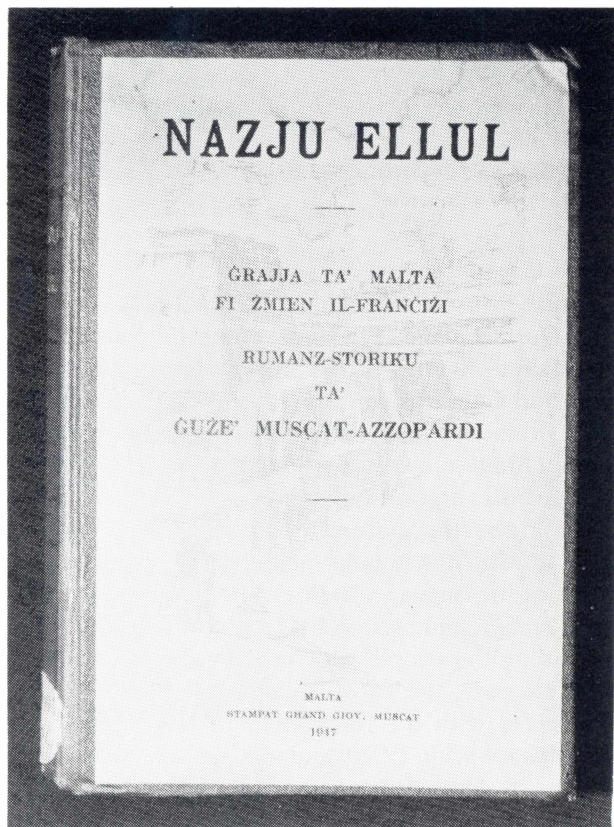
His place in the history of Maltese literature depends much more on his novels. *Toni Bajada* (1878), *Viku Mason* (1881), *Susanna* (1883), *Ċejju Tonna* (1886), *Ċensu Barbara* (1893) and *Nazju Ellul* (1909) present the image of a novelist poetically in love with history. The past is relieved in order to suggest its lasting relevance; periods and heroes are revived in the manner typical of most romantic narrators who evoked the past in order to foresee the future. Muscat Azzopardi's commitment to the restoration of the fundamental nationalistic values is best illustrated through a series of tableaux which at least have two specific aims: the literary diffusion of historical knowledge and the depiction of the lyrical substance of events. Scientifically proved facts are re-elaborated according to the dictates of imagination and sentiment, thus giving room to the formation of a fictional plot alongside the objective point of departure.

Owing to the fact that he researched well the historical content of his novels (in 1903 he published *L-Istorja ta' Malta*, a translation of Paolo Debono's work), it is difficult to distinguish between the popular historian and the imaginative writer in him. *Nazju Ellul*, for example, is enormously loaded with purely historical material, although the whole texture, the language and the methods of construc-

tion are typical of the average historical novel prevalent in the nineteenth century. Characters are depicted more in terms of action than in terms of intuition and insight into their inmost identity. Action-biased plots, minutely built descriptions, passages of exhortation and subtle instruction, and a constant effort to narrate directly and explicitly are his main devices.

Muscat Azzopardi marks a significant stage in the evolution of the novel from its previous popular territory to the literary level. He is one of the more important prose writers who gave a patriotic character to literature and to local mentality at large. It is not difficult to prove that the vision he proposed of the country found ample fortune in the political field later on. His novels are translated into an illustration of values summed up in the belief that the nation and religion form one complete entity. Right and duty, according to Mazzini's dictum, are interrelated; when transformed into a plot, they signify the impact of an ever-relevant past on the consciousness of the present. The discovery of a national identity is at the core of his more important novels. Most of his translations share this sensibility. Actually this is one of the main principles embraced and worked upon by all the significant writers of the period.

Oliver Friggieri



One of Muscat-Azzopardi's famous novels . . . in love with History