

Exposed Women and the Hidden Visibility of Male Bodies

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Abstract

The scope of this chapter is to show that bodily representation in late 20th century Maltese poetry varies along gender lines as poets of both sexes have treated the male and female body differently by hiding the former and exposing the latter. While male writers, more often than not, valued femininity and the female body by conferring to it attributes of beauty and myth, they left the male body (especially their own) concealed in a subconscious effort to protect masculinity and male power. Although their female counterparts adopted a different attitude towards the female body (including their own) by presenting a less constructed and more authentic body, they likewise kept the male body hidden by giving only scant details or projecting it as inaccessible. The invisibility of the male body, however, is betrayed by the male writers' frequent references to the phallus (which becomes a synecdoche for male power and masculinity) and to their sexual avidity. An interesting exception is the representation of the sacred Christian bodies. In this case the writers' attitude is somewhat reversed for it is the Madonna's (female and very feminine) body which escapes depiction, whereas Jesus's body is continuously exposed and portrayed. These observations will be compared and contrasted to examples from visual culture, drawing mainly on gaze theory, with particular reference to the feminist school of thought. The classic theory of male gaze advanced by theorists such as John Berger (art) and Laura Mulvey (cinema) will be revisited in the light of recent social and cultural phenomena, which have started to seriously question the claim of the agency of the male gaze with all its consequences on the representation of the body.

Key Words: Visibility, invisibility, gaze, body representation, sacred body, human body, masculinity, Maltese poetry.

Niva Lorenzini begins her book about the body in Italian literature with the premise that bodies are cultural products reflecting the ideology and values proclaimed by a given society and as such they are always a historical project.¹ This means that every reference to the body, be it textual, visual, or otherwise, is imbued with ideological considerations that reflect the values prevalent in a given historical and cultural context.

Lorenzini's observation follows a series of theories claiming that the artistic reproduction of bodies is in itself laden with ideological constituents, most of which run along gender lines. The classical theories pronounced in the 1970s by Peter Berger and Laura Mulvey hypothesize that the ways bodies are reproduced

are influenced by gender politics, where basically the male gaze objectifies the female body.² This process exposes and frames the female body as an object of desire, and shields the male body, either by covering it or by making it invisible, so that male agency is assured. While Mulvey's theory is widely contested, mostly because it denies the possibility of a female gaze, it remains a point of reference in gaze theory and I shall be revisiting it to analyse the differences in the depiction of the human body in Maltese twentieth century poetry.

As in film and plastic arts Maltese poetry exposes the female far more than the male body. Woman becomes a male construct and a fetish through descriptions of beauty that reveal the scopophilic male gaze. Early twentieth century poetry recommends the plump, dark haired, rosy cheeked country girl as the ideal woman while the later Modernist quintessential body is slender with Nordic features. Despite these differences (which can be easily explained historically and should not be taken simply as matters of taste) a prototype of female beauty emerges: a woman may be considered beautiful if she is young, fertile and heterosexual. All the parts of the female body considered erotogenic are skilfully exposed by the male poet's gaze with frequent references to the hair, eyes, and lips but also breasts, feet, backsides and of course the genitalia. Furthermore women are fetishized even in their mundane activities. Besides the obvious fetishization of strippers, dancers, pin up girls and lovers, the male gaze has the potency to objectify women in other nonsexual activities. For instance in a number of his poems Dun Karm, a priest and Malta's national poet, throws sexually charged looks at country girls walking to their fathers' fields, focusing on the swaying of their full breasts and broad hips. He even fixes his scopophilic gaze on a girl praying in church whose beauty and coyness attract not only the poet himself but all the men around her.

Bodies are therefore judged according to male phallic economy and they may either be approved of or deplored as undesirable and therefore rendered as Other. This otherness however does not demote the discounted body to invisibility, on the contrary ugliness attracts the gaze as much as beauty does. A case in point is the fat female body. Obese women feature frequently in late twentieth century poetry, attracting the scorn and ridicule of the male gaze. Their depiction, which always concentrates on the breasts and the buttocks, is invariably grotesque, confirming Le'A Kent's observation that obese women are ridiculed because they signify degradation and excess.³

Female poets adopt a different attitude towards the female body. To start with, they resist the phallic gaze and rather than presenting the ideal body, which is merely a masculine interpretation, they opt to bring forth an authentic and experienced body especially when they write about their own. Echoing Cixous, female writers reject the 'superhistoricized, museumized, reorganized, overworked' image found in male poetry and instead write about the lived body which is imperfect, aging, and even damaged.⁴ Doreen Micallef, in her poem

'Prophetic,' asks her male viewer to 'see me naked with my bones/ clinking.' Micallef bares her body in a number of poems but instead of the shapely hips and swaying breasts she uncovers, without any hint of inhibition, a skeletal and sickly body. The same goes for Maria Grech Ganado who reveals her aging, wrinkled body full of varicose veins in her bid to present authentic flesh as opposed to that sanctioned by the phallic regime. In her poem 'The Woman You Love,' she even satirizes the female beauty constructed by the male poet:

the woman you love has a face of paper
her eyes are of black ink and her mouth
a slit through which the wind blows⁵

But what of the male body? Following Mulvey's theory one can easily observe that this body is largely invisible. Escaping the gaze the male body is rescued from objectification and its power shielded. A male body is never eroticised, exposed or undressed, and never described as beautiful. One may dismiss any political argument for this by claiming that it is only natural that heterosexual poets express their desire for the opposite sex, but what male poets are most intent on is concealing their own body. Let us compare and contrast two love poems, the first, 'Plaisir d'Amour' written by Maria Grech Ganado, the second 'Oh, This Rain' by Victor Fenech:

You touched me – with your petal fingers and your thorns
you touched me
with the fragrance of a garden locked up inside me you touched me
until my creeping nails clasped your face –
I ruffled your hair, tasted your lips,
I loved your teeth and your hidden eyes –
And I envied my lips that kissed your eyes.

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I caressed your chestnut ear –
And you, my cuddly kitten,
Your cherry lips arched
In a velvet smile.
And I caressed your private parts
And you laughed you cried you moaned
You asked me to stop and to go on.

Both poets record an intimate moment of love making with their partners, but whereas the woman poet writes about her being touched and aroused by her lover

and about how she reacts to his advances, in the second poem the male poet writes only about what he did to his lover who simply reacts passively. In Ganado's poem the woman has an active role, equal to that of her male lover, while Fenech's female lover does nothing to him except show him how good his lovemaking is. This is only one of many examples where the male takes agency; his lover's body is all exposed but his own is virtually invisible. And this is not the case only with love poems. In his poem 'Ballad '69,' Fenech writes of a couple that die in a road accident; he gives a full account of the lifeless female body but fails to mention the body of the young man.

Of course this does not mean that there are no male figures in Maltese poetry and neither does it mean that the reader's attention is never directed towards male bodies. But there is a different type of look, another politics of the gaze reserved to maleness. What readers are enticed to look at when gazing at men is their strength and their control over female objects. Mulvey has theorized that in film the male bodies are shown with the sole purpose to be admired and identified with. For instance, Dun Karm, in his 'Hymn to Workers,' invites his readers (who, again in line with Mulvey's and Berger's theories, are presumed to be males) to admire the manliness of these workers and thus he produces an ideological projection of masculinity. The male reader reading Fenech's love poem identifies himself with the poet as the controlling agent overpowering the female character.

Yet invisibility does not denote absence. Men are not only present when they form part of the poem's diegesis but they appear through the myriad references poets make to the penis. Male poets frequently express their admiration for the penis and its sexual functions. According to phallic economy, the penis is the all powerful weapon which enjoys control over woman. The numerous references to the deflowering of women and to females who succumb to male seduction are only one way how male poets venerate their organ. Penile erection and ejaculation are further examples of how male power is depicted. Humorous poetry often adulates the penis with references to size, virility and masturbation and, less frequently, expresses the fear of castration.

Through their phallic imagery male poets uncover their presence while the rest of their body remains largely transparent. The male body, then, is there, all present in that part which gives men their masculine identity. As Richard Schmitt aptly observes 'man *is* his penis.'⁶

This scenario changes when poets write about holy bodies, namely the body of Mary and Jesus. The former has been the subject of impassioned debate within the feminist school; one thought, spearheaded by De Beauvoir, sees Mary carrying a submissive role, demonstrated by Mary's reply to Archangel Gabriel's announcement of her conceiving God's son: 'I am the Lord's servant,' (Lk 1: 38). According to de Beauvoir the cult of the Virgin 'is the rehabilitation of woman through the accomplishment of her defeat.'⁷ Julia Kristeva adopts an opposing view, claiming that de Beauvoir's interpretation lacks the humanistic sensitivity of

Mary's maternity which puts the God's mother 'closer to 'lived' feminine experience' not to mention that the Madonna is venerated as Queen.⁸

Interestingly enough only the male poets write about Mary, with one female poet making little references to her. Mary's body is very present but at the same time, as Susanne Gruss observes, it is repressed.⁹ She is always defined as beautiful but her beauty is never really described. While poetry depicts ordinary women in great detail it avoids graphic presentations of Mary lest they eroticise the Virgin and her immaculate body. These are two examples illustrating this reserved attitude towards Mary's body. In the poem 'Before an Image of the Madonna,' Dun Karm expresses awe at the beauty of a painted image of Mary. He mentions only her beautiful eyes (without specifying their colour), and her smiling lips (without describing their shape). He also mentions her bosom but only with reference to baby Jesus laying his head on it, thus covering it from the reader's sight. While Dun Karm does see the image and can therefore judge its beauty he shuns the reader from relishing the same gaze. Furthermore the wonder he expresses leads him to conclude that the image transcends physicality by commenting how 'blessed is the hand that painted you!' Another priest poet, Ġużè Delia takes the same attitude in his poem 'Memories!' in which he looks at another portrait of the Madonna and struck by its beauty (again without giving any details) is led to believe that one needs a superhuman talent to depict the Madonna:

Because in that image before me
There was a spell enchanting hearts,
And when mouths attempt to describe it
Words stammer and melt.

It was not a man who drew that image,
For the human mind and hand know not such beauty.
But an angel did,
Wanting to give us a hint of heaven.

This attitude is not typical of priest poets only. Joe Friggieri, in his poem 'What Could be More Beautiful?,' also writes of the captivating beauty of Mary's eyes glimmering like pearls in the moon light, and rhetorically asks if there could ever be a beauty that outshines Mary's. The same male poets who delight themselves gazing at the female body, enticing the reader to enjoy their voyeuristic undertakings, stop short from doing the same when gazing at the Madonna.

Of the female poets it is Mary Meylak who writes most extensively about the Madonna. Meylak writes substantially on the physical beauty of a number of women she knew personally, revealing her homoerotic attraction, but in the case of the Madonna her attitude changes. Rather than giving literal descriptions she uses

floral metaphors in relation to the Madonna's beauty and like her male counterparts she refers only to the face.

When one considers the copious references to Mary's maternity and virginity, it is very significant that one finds no images of her reproductive organs in the poets' texts. Even the womb, mentioned in popular Marian prayers such as the Hail Mary and the Hail Holy Queen, is never referred to. Ammicht-Quinn observes that in literature, while the bodies of Eve and Mary Magdalene are eroticised, the Madonna's is repressed and there is a disposition to concentrate only on her head and face.¹⁰

The reluctance to produce textual descriptions of Mary's body is not a recent phenomenon. Jessica Winston claims that until the early fifteenth century even religious texts omitted such depictions, probably due to the direct influence of Augustinian theology.¹¹ In *De Trinitate*, Augustine argues that not knowing what Mary looked like should not affect faith because believers 'know' she bore the son of God. This principle is echoed in Oliver Friggieri's hymn 'You're the Most Beautiful':

We praise your beauty, o Mary,
Most beautiful of all human race.
Though never did we see you
We know you love us all.

Adopting the Aristotelian principle of mimesis, in his *Summa Theologica* Aquinas not only stresses the importance of the image but also emphasises the duty to worship the divine image. And then in 1563 the Council of Trent declared that holy images 'are to be had and retained particularly in temples, and due honour and veneration are to be given them.'¹² Winston writes that shortly after the Council of Trent textual depictions of the holy body started to emerge, for example Johannes Molanus's *De Historia SS Imaginum*, published in Louvain in 1571 which describes Mary as blonde with a longish, fair face, olive green eyes, dark eyebrows and red lips.¹³

Whatever encouragement the Council of Trent might have given writers to sexualise Mary's beauty poets remained somewhat hesitant. As Mire Rubin argues,¹⁴ despite the frequent representations of Mary's body in figurative art, hymns, theatre and liturgy, poets surrender to the phenomenon she terms as 'the poetic impossible,' expressing instead their incompetence at describing this beauty, following Dante's declaration at the end of Canto XXXI of his *Divina Commedia*:

I saw there, smiling at their sports and songs, a beauty which was
joy in the eyes of all the other saints; and if I were as rich in
speech as in imagining I should not dare attempt the least part of
her delights.¹⁵

Jesus's body attracts more attention among the poets including those writing in the second half of the twentieth century when the Catholic faith, so prevalent with the earlier poets, started being seriously questioned and contested. The image of the crucified Christ, naked and vulnerable, allures male poets, stirring a desire, a fascination and even erotic infatuation. In his poem 'The Head of the Crucifix' Marjanu Vella expresses his desire for the dying Jesus in this manner:

I lift my head
And see him staring fixedly
At me, as if asking me,
With that look in his eyes,
To pluck the thorns from his head,
And wipe the blood from his hands.

Sometimes I feel as if something tells me
To stop next to him and pray,
To give his injured feet
A thousand kisses.

While elsewhere Vella expresses his admiration for Francis of Assisi for suppressing his carnal desire, he worships the body of Christ in such physical manner as shown in this excerpt. Images of the crucifix are abundant in Vella's poetry and rather than imparting a theological message the crucified Christ excites attraction and desire. Vella gazes at Christ's image and conveys his urge to touch his naked and maimed body. This nakedness carries a broader meaning than suffering because Christ's bodily hardship is often twinned to physical beauty. Christ's nakedness on the cross has stirred controversy because on the one hand it emphasises his humanity while on the other it raises questions about modesty and respect. Although all four gospels specify that Christ be stripped of his clothing before being crucified the iconography of the Golgotha has not always followed these accounts faithfully. Leo Steinberg notes it was during the Renaissance that artists began showing Christ naked or with his genital form visible under the loin cloth. There are also many images of the child Christ touching his own genitals or touched by his mother.¹⁶ While Vella's poems make no reference to Jesus's genitals the nakedness he frequently emphasises automatically (even if covertly) refers to the sexual parts. The eroticization of the damaged body of Christ is very evident in poems where it is described as beautiful; for example in 'The Loved One,' Vella gazes at the dying Christ's 'coral red lips'; in 'Fragment 1' he writes about a pair of lips (presumably his own) pressing against 'the bloody wound of Christ crucified' and drinking the water oozing out of it; while in 'Twisted Wood' the crucified Christ becomes 'a virgin body' and 'body of milk.' Christ's tragic end does not, in any way, reduce his body's appeal, so that Anton Buttigieg still looks

at this body in amazement and sees it ‘as beautiful as sunshine.’ Actually, in some poems, such as Dun Karm’s ‘Visiting Jesus’ the physical suffering of the dying Christ heightens the poet’s sensitivity to the beauty of the body in pain.

Femininity and masculinity are ultimately discursive practices and literature, like other artistic disciplines, can be a tool that corroborates these discourses. Through covering and exposing bodies femininity and masculinity get caught in discursive practices, but discourse itself is a complex process characterized by normative but also contradictory endeavours. Whichever body is being depicted the end result is always an ideological project and images reflect – quite faithfully – the culture they are embedded in. For this reason any reference to the body cannot ever be counted as neutral.

Notes

¹ Niva Lorenzini, *Corpo e Poesia del Novecento Italiano* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2009), 1.

² Peter Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972); Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,’ *Visual and Other Pleasures* (New York: Palgrave, 1989).

³ Le’A Kent, ‘Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women,’ *Bodies Out Of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (California: California University Press, 2001), 134.

⁴ Helene Cixous, ‘Coming to Writing,’ *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), 56.

⁵ Translation of all excerpts from poems are mine.

⁶ Richard Schmitt, ‘Large Propagators: Racism and the Domination of Women,’ *Revealing Male Bodies*, eds. Nancy Tuana, *et al* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), 50.

⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 171.

⁸ Julia Kristeva, ‘Stabat Mater,’ *Tales of Love*, tr. S.Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 246.

⁹ Susanne Gruss, *The Pleasure of the Feminist Text: Reading Michèle Roberts and Angela Carter* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi BV, 2009), 93.

¹⁰ Regina Ammicht-Quinn, ‘Cult, Culture and Ambivalence: Images and Imaginations of the Body in Christian Traditions and Contemporary Lifestyles,’ *Fluid Flesh: The Body, Religion and the Visual Arts*, ed. Barbara Baert (Leuven: Leuven University Press 2009), 78.

¹¹ Jessica Winston, ‘Describing the Virgin,’ *Art History* 25.3 (2002): 275.

¹² ‘On the Invocation, Veneration, Relics of Saints, and Sacred Images,’ *Council of Trent*, 4 December 1563, Accessed on 21 January 2014,

<http://saints.sqpn.com/trent25.htm#2>.

¹³ Winston, ‘Describing the Virgin’, 275.

¹⁴ Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (London: Penguin, 2010), 280.

¹⁵ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Paradise*, trans. John D. Sinclair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 453.

¹⁶ Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 135-138.

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