

# IN SEARCH OF A PERSONAL AND NATIONAL IDENTITY : THE ENGLISH POEMS OF VICTOR FENECH

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*Abstract - This article examines the English poems that the Maltese contemporary writer Victor Fenech (1935-) published during the 1970s. Fenech considers the Maltese language to be quite limited since it keeps the Maltese people "locked out of the mainstream of international literature". English thus becomes the international medium that has the power to liberate the author from the restrictions imposed upon him by the national Maltese language. This article highlights the fact that Fenech feels a deep sense of sorrow at the way human beings act. The writer therefore decides to distance himself in solitude from a valueless society. Solitude, however, does not necessarily coincide with contemplative life. So much so, that the poet even indulges in 'political' poetry. The key elements that surface in Fenech's poetry seem to be : lack of faith in human beings; lack of faith in politics; even of faith in God. However, the author does find some consolation in his ideal female figure and in the way of life in little centres : happiness, if this is ever found, lies far away from the hustle and bustle of the big metropolis. The author of this article reaches the conclusion that Fenech's poetry should not be seen exclusively as a transcription of the poet's feelings : it is also, and more especially so, the faithful chronicle of the epic story of a people who are always "licking wounds sustained for others" and who continuously search for a proper fixed identity.*

## Introduction

The Maltese archipelago is situated in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea and has a population of around 380,000 inhabitants who speak Maltese, a language that is basically Semitic with a strong Italo-Romance element and a sprinkling of Anglo-Saxon. Despite the limited size of the archipelago (the size of Malta is 246 sq. km; that of Gozo 67 sq. km; that of Comino 2.6 sq. km), Maltese literature has been written throughout the ages in at least six languages : Arabic, Latin, Sicilian, Tuscan, Maltese and English.

## Literature in Malta

The first known Maltese writers of the 'modern period', that is after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, are 'Abd Allah 'ibn 'as Samantî 'al Mâlitî, 'Utmân 'ibn 'Abd ar-Rahmân, nicknamed 'Ibn as-Sûsî and 'Abû 'al-Qâsim 'ibn Râmadân 'al Mâlitî. The Sicilian historian Michele Amari, who reproduced their poetry in the Italian translation, classifies these Maltese poets in the same category as their Sicilian contemporaries, since they were all active in the Court of Roger II (around 1150 A.D.) in Palermo and they all wrote their verses in Arabic (Cassola 1991 : 57-59). In 1973, Michele Papa came up with another suggestion that the Maltese 'Utmân was the real author of the first part of a love letter, which Amari had considered to be the work of others (Wettinger-Fsadni 1983 : 38).

When the Normans put an end to the Arab conquest of Malta in 1091 AD they re-introduced Latin as the language of the administration. Later on, Sicilian was to become the second language of administration. These administrative decisions were to have an effect on the Maltese literary circles of the time. It is a known fact that at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Maltese notary public Giacomo Bondin used to write epigrams in Latin (Wettinger-Fsadni 1968 : 28). Moreover, in 1565 Luca da Armenia, another Maltese writer, dedicated his *O Melita Infelix* to the important military event of that year (Cassar 1981). These works are evident proof of a flourishing literary activity in Latin amongst cultured people of the time.

As regards the use of Sicilian as a literary language, not many examples have survived to our day. However, it is presumed that the *Vita di San Cono*, a lost work written in 1371 by Giovanni Aragona, considered by some to be Maltese, by others Sicilian and by others of unknown homeland (Cassola 1991 : 59), must have been written in Sicilian. Later on, one comes across *Parenti certu sî di tali pasta*, a sonnet written entirely in Sicilian and included in Marcello Attardo de Vagnoli's unpublished *Canzoniere* (Cassola 1991 : 62-65; Attardo de Vagnoli 1994).

However, the real literary language of Malta in early times up to quite recently was Tuscan Italian. When the Knights of St John of Jerusalem took possession of Malta in 1530 they adopted the Tuscan variant of Italian as the language of administration, and this decision is reflected on the literary language, since Italian became the language of any literary genre : from poetry to historiography, from pastoral poetry to travel memoirs,

from the picaresque novel to the theatre. This state of affairs was to last until, more or less, the early twentieth century.

Against the background of this literary-linguistic panorama of the origins, the Maltese language only made an appearance a couple of times. The first document written in Maltese, P. Caxaro's *Cantilena*, is actually a twenty-line poem. It goes back to the last decades of the fifteenth century, even though the copy that has come down to us is an early sixteenth century one. Apart from its undoubted historical and linguistic value, the reference to the Maltese language (*quam lingua melitea hic subicio*) confirms that the Maltese people of the period were already conscious of the autonomy of their own linguistic medium, which deserved the appellation of *lingua*. This notwithstanding, one had to wait for about two hundred years for the second literary text in the Maltese language, G. F. Bonamico's *Sonetto*.

As for literature written in the English language, the foundations were laid last century, after Malta became part of the British Empire (1800). Basically, during the early decades of the 19th century literary production in English was tied to journalistic activity. In this context, the English missionary James Richardson (1806-1851) is to be considered an important precursor since, between 1838 and 1841, he founded various newspapers, amongst which *Harlequin*, *The Malta Penny Magazine* and *The Clown* (Cassola 1992 : 151-152). During the early decades of the twentieth century, English became an official language of Malta and consequently the number of Maltese writing in English increased. Maltese became the national and official language when Malta became independent in 1964.

### **The English works of Victor Fenech**

Victor Fenech, who was born in Malta in 1935, during the sixties was one of the younger poets in open conflict with the traditional poets who were still taken up by the ideals of religion and motherland in their Maltese verse. These themes were considered to be *depassé* in post-Independence Malta by the young generation of poets, and thus they tried to liven up the stagnant cultural scene on the island with new ideas. Victor Fenech in particular tried to experiment with new forms of expression. This frantic search for a new means of poetic expression led to his coming up with what he terms *poeproža* in his 1979 collection of Maltese poems, *F'Altamira* (Fenech 1979). As one can gather from the author's words in

the introduction to the book (Fenech 1979 : 5), his concept of *poeproza* has been influenced by his English readings.

His mastery of the English language not only provides Fenech with unlimited access to all that is written in the Anglo-American world but also gives him the possibility to violate the limit that is imposed upon him by the restrictions of the Maltese linguistic-literary code. Thus, he is able to let himself communicate on an international scale by writing in English. In fact, though Fenech does write in Maltese, he acknowledges the fact that there are, relatively speaking, few speakers of Maltese and that his linguistic barrier can only be overcome through the use of an international language :

*I am not exactly a lover of the language (Maltese). I accept it because it is there and it is our language and there is nothing I can do about it (I think I am realistic here), but the way I see it is that national pride and national identity apart, the Maltese language only keeps us locked out of the mainstream of international literature (Fenech 1976 : 6).*

Ironically, the Maltese language causes identity problems to the Maltese people. Fortunately, for Fenech, English is the international language that has the power to liberate the author from the restrictions imposed upon him by the Maltese language.

Fenech's collection of poems, *London Pictures and Other Poems* which was published in 1976 is actually the revelation and unfolding of Fenech's 'English' soul. The poems in this volume were written in 1967, during the year that Fenech spent in London for study purposes. What strikes the reader in these poems is the intensity with which he presents the outside world. The London of the sixties was the *swinging London* of the Beatles and other pop groups but, with its student, pacifist and hippie movements, it was also a busy hive of cultural and political activity, and a prelude to what was to be the 1968 season of world protest. Fenech's poems participate fully in the fervent activity, which was so characteristic of London during that period.

The stylistic technique which Fenech adopts in order to reproduce in writing the bubbling activity of the English metropolis is the intermingling of descriptive impressionistic passages together with direct speech, thus reproducing the daily language of myriads of people who come from completely different social, cultural and racial backgrounds. This heterogeneity of linguistic registers perceived *en passant* livens up the page,

which thus reflects in all its minute details the multifarious activities of the English capital city.

Religious terminology and imagery certainly could not be lacking in the works of an author like Fenech, who was brought up in an environment, such as the Maltese one, which is strongly conditioned by the presence of the Catholic Church. In contemporary Maltese poetry, many authors contest the multi-secular hegemony of the Roman Church, but in doing so they continue to make use of terminology and imagery pertaining to the Catholic liturgy, even though their intentions are irreverent. Basically, the end result is a type of inverted liturgy (Cassola and Mariano 1985). Fenech's Maltese poetry fully subscribes to this rule. Expressions like *Fis-saltna tas-smewwiet* ['In the Kingdom of Heaven'], *Ave Maria* and *Sursum Corda, Ejjew ejjew o Angli* ['Come, come, O you angels'] and imagery such as *Xwejjah qassis* ['An old priest'], *gismu jitbandal qanpiena* ['his body see-sawing like a bell'], *griehi r-Redentur sidru spulpjat* ['the wounds of the Redeemer with skinny chest'] are to be found throughout his Maltese works. On the other hand, in his English poems there is hardly any sign of the various allegorical, symbolic and even ironic references that the 'religious' reading of the Maltese texts might lead to. The international audience Fenech is addressing by means of his English poetry just could not understand certain references which would be easily accessible to a more restricted Maltese audience. Thus, in the English texts the 'religious' register does not have the same pre-eminence as in the Maltese poems : it just becomes a faithful means of registering what is being said around, but it remains on the same footing as all the other linguistic phenomena captured by the author in his careful observation of the world around him.

*London Picture n. 5* is a perfect example of the mixture of languages that appear in Fenech's poetry. The poem describes a typical London afternoon :

Saturday afternoon at Highbury.  
Want a ticket sir?  
The day of the tartan at Wembley  
The day of the touts.

The ritual of after-match queues :  
Game chatter. Cockney chuckle.  
Roasted peanuts tanner a bag.  
Salvation marchers — 'Repent,  
Brethren, the end of the world...'

The end of the world

Is a long way from London (Fenech 1976).

In the short space of eleven lines there are at least four different linguistic registers. The main scene is taken up by two football stadia : Highbury Stadium, the home ground of Arsenal, a London football club of noble traditions and Wembley Stadium, where the English national team plays its home matches. What stands out then is a mundane environment where two teams fight it out in sporting combat for a slice of glory, that is easily translated into money and material gain. However, the two social *milieus* are quite different from one another. Highbury is a middle class area in London, even though the Arsenal fans generally belong to the working class. The undescribed and undefined tout selling tickets outside the stadium adapts his way of speaking to that of the inhabitants of Highbury, and thus comes up with a well mannered “*Want a ticket sir?*” At Wembley stadium, things work out differently. Here, it is the Scottish National team (“*tartan*”) that is in action and therefore the coarse Highland dialect is to be heard all over the place. In such a sociolinguistic context, the ‘touts’ are called by what they really are, with all the negative connotations that such a term implies.

The after-match atmosphere is the same in any part of the world. The fans talk about the missed chance with an open goal, the penalty that was not awarded, the unfair referee. It is a “*ritual*” of “*game chatter*” that always repeats itself. However, in London these after-match discussions must be held in the local dialect. Therefore, in this poem the “*game chatter*” is actually equated - even in a structural way - to “*Cockney chuckle*”, the famous dialect most East End Londoners speak.

This mixture of different linguistic registers (middle class; Scottish; Cockney) is brusquely interrupted by a sombre religious warning, verging on the apocalyptic : “*Repent, Brethren, the end of the world ...*”. Fenech places these words in the mouths of Salvation Army activists, who are the total antithesis of the football fans. It is the voice of one’s conscience that is trying to put back on the right road those common mortals who have been led astray by the attractions of frivolous and materialistic goods. On a linguistic level, it is the high and archaic register that is trying to resist the dialects and slang that are normally in use in everyday life; it is the ‘high’ tone that is trying to suffocate the ‘humble’ one. But Fenech’s conclusion (“*The end of the world is a long way from London*”) accepts the state of things as they are. The world has

changed completely and the traditional picture of London is no more : the old white-collar workers of the City, wearing a bowler hat and an umbrella, have been replaced by T-shirt clad youngsters, with long hair and unshaven beard. Consequently, the family, moral and other traditional values have been superseded by the exigency of immediate wealth. The human kind does no longer live for a future transcendent world; the only real value is the concrete present material wealth. Basically, this is the era of *everything and quickly!* Therefore, this general transformation, which the city of London fully embodies, is represented by Fenech on a linguistic level through the total absorption of the ‘high’ language by the ‘humble’ one.

### **The solitary poet as opposed to a valueless society**

The fact that Fenech recognizes things for what they actually are does not necessarily imply his acceptance of the new realities of life. On the contrary, in his poetry one can detect a deep sense of sorrow for the way man is going against nature. This progressive sense of degradation can be perceived by the poet one Sunday afternoon at Hyde Park. The idea of humanity transforming itself into an animal deprived of any rational faculties is rendered by the lines “*This forest of humanity/ Now trampling the park*”, where the nexus between humanity and the wild forest - where the most ferocious beasts live - is further strengthened by the use of the verb “trampling”, which is normally associated with imagery of ferocious beasts or enraged elephants, but is here dependent on the subject *humanity*. The syllogism could not be any clearer : if man is associated with the forest, and the forest is the usual dwelling place of wild beasts, therefore humanity is equivalent to wild beasts!

The transformation of man into a being deprived of any sense of values happens in the famous *Speakers’ Corner*. For Fenech the speakers’ language is totally revealing of the degeneration in which humanity finds itself. And all varieties of language are perceived by the author as an indication of humanity’s profound state of abjection; from the leftist jargon which the anti-capitalist makes use of (“*Down, I say/ With all capitalist pigs*”) to the nonsensical blabber of the religious fanatic (“... *but madam I am God!*”), where the italicization of *am* renders perfectly the idea of the hysterical tone, verging on madness, with which this mad truth is asserted. Therefore, the author is left with no other choice but to escape from the masses that are destroying the world and to search for inner peace in the

refuge of a solitary place : “*Alone/ Seeking the seclusion of the/ Deckchairs/ By the sleepy Serpentine*”.

For Fenech, however, solitude does not always coincide with contemplatory life. *No sad songs for Martine* (Fenech 1976 : 11-12) raises the bitter question of how people who in the public eye might seem to be leading a glamorous life, can actually be really lonely. Martine Carol, a well known actress in the fifties and sixties, having been “*The first undressed lady of France*” (here the author is resorting to the use of journal-ese), was found dead at home, following a heart attack. The obsessive insistence of the writer on the dragging velar vowels in the sentence “*Alone, alone, all, all alone,/ alone on a bathroom floor*” verges on the gloomy and the funereal. Martine’s last solitary moments stand out even further when the last mentioned sentence is contrasted with the picture of the actress’s most resplendent moments, when she was the object of desire of all men : “*multitudinous/ the eyes of hedonistic men*”. The contrast between glory and oblivion is further highlighted by the phonic contrast between palatal and velar vowels. All this without mentioning the picture full of anguish that comes up in the final three verses : “*Alone, all, all alone,/ alone in an open tomb/ under the sun of Cannes*”. Martine is now “*alone*”, but her tomb is “*open*”, ready to welcome “*all*”, even those film stars and members of the *jet set* who normally frequented Cannes during the sixties, when it was considered the uncontested European capital of luxury and lust.

The theme of the progressive degradation of humanity is present in Fenech’s poetry right from his initial Maltese verses. In *Kwadru mis-seklu ghoxrin* [*Picture of the Twentieth Century*] the author’s bitter and sarcastic conclusion seems to be shouting out a loud warning to the reader : our much vaunted century of progress is actually a century that only leads to sorrow and death :

Is-Seklu Ghoxrin :  
u mad-dsatax ta’ qablu hbiberija xejn,  
ghax dawn sekli ta’ dlam  
u hu mkabbar ghax progressiv.

Is-Seklu  
Ghoxrin.  
Is-Seklu  
tal-  
Progress! (Camilleri et al. 1966 : 30)



[The Twentieth Century :  
and with the previous nineteen no friendship,  
cause these are the centuries of darkness  
while the former is proud of its progressiveness.

The Twentieth  
Century.  
The Century  
of  
Progress!]

The consequent desire of secluding oneself from the rest of the world to question oneself and to question the *raison d'être* behind the workings of life is an exigency which finds confirmation in the following Maltese verses in *Tfittixa* [*The Search*], which was written more or less at the same time as *London Pictures* :

GHAŽIŻA, illejla tistenninix.  
il-lejla nixtieqni wahdi.  
Irrid interraq triq it-tfittixa.  
Irrid insib mill-ġdid il-jien.....  
il-jien jien,  
mhux il-jien illi għaġnuni (Fenech 1979 : 9).

[DEAR, this evening don't wait for me.  
this evening I want to be alone.  
I want to walk through the road of research.  
I want to discover my "I" anew...  
the "I" me,  
not the "I" they've made out of me]

The author's thirst for knowledge seems however destined to be always frustrated. Human beings can try as much as they can but they will never be able to understand the rules that govern this world. This is the gist of *Primum Movus* :

Hardly put my finger  
on the genesis & existence  
when i must move again  
to pastures new  
beyond my comprehension.

Since my brain's too small  
for a plan so vast

i leave the answers to  
someone higher up  
who should understand  
having set the ball rolling.

Half the world doesn't know  
half the world knows by different  
names - enough that there is  
someone higher up  
who sees  
who knows.

I am the Lord thy God...

illusion or reality  
it is best to bow our heads (Poet 1968 : 24).

Fenech's and the rest of humanity's impotence is rendered graphically through his transcription of the personal pronoun *I* in small letters, *i*. When man starts putting existentialist questions, God -who here seems to be taking humanity for a ride - answers back by quashing this 'i' inexorably. Fenech's auto-nihilistic technique is very reminiscent of the 'guidogozzano' utilized by the most famous representative of the *movimento crepuscolare* in Italy. But while in self effacing himself Gozzano actually really intended to ridicule Gabriele D'Annunzio, a great intellectual but still a human being, Fenech's intention borders on the sacrilegious since the target of his scorn is actually God himself! His conclusion, "*it is best to bow our heads*" is not intended as an act of humble resignation to the Lord's will! On the contrary, it is a polemic dig at the being "*higher up / who should understand*" but, as Fenech seems to imply through the use of the conditional "should", does not seem to know exactly what is happening!

The author's anxiety at being able to grasp the absolute truth does not distract him from the fact that he is an inhabitant of this world. If, on the one hand, his gaze is looking upwards, on the other, his feet are firmly fixed to the ground. He is really most attentive to all the 'political' matters going on around him. Undoubtedly, the London period contributed strongly to widen the hitherto restricted vision of the islander Fenech. Living in London brought about the opening of new horizons for the author; London actually constituted for him a window onto a new world.

## Fenech's 'political' poetry

The poem *After the Crisis*, that deals with the six-day war between Israel and Egypt, is undoubtedly the most 'political' poem of the volume. The first stanza is full of ironic imagery, which certainly reflects the author's lack of respect for the political leaders of the two countries. Moshe Dayan, who was considered by his countrymen as a veritable hero, is here treated like a vulgar pirate when he is portrayed "in Long John Silver patch". On the other hand, Gamal Abdel Nasser does not come out any better : for his countrymen he is "the Egyptian God" but for Fenech he is just another adventurer. The wars with Israel would be for him just a *divertissement*, a "poker game" based on chance and on coincidences, where the only people who go through risks are the poor inhabitants of the two countries.

This first stanza, which echoes Fenech's mistrust in the two leaders, is counter-balanced by a second stanza in which Fenech invokes the patriarch Abraham's intervention so that the rift between the two fraternal peoples be healed :

Come father Abraham come  
gather your Isaacs and Ishmaels  
depoison their fangs and tie  
them in brotherly knots.  
Come father Abraham come  
come father Abraham come  
come come father Abraham come ... (Fenech 1976 : 16).

On reading the author's appeal, an appeal that is rendered even more passionate by the use of the anafora in the last three verses, the reader is convinced of Fenech's faith in divine power, here represented by Abraham. Instead, the last verse "*Or are you leaving it to U Thant?*", isolated as it is from the rest of the poetry, immediately cancels the previous illusion. This derisive verse which is addressed to Abraham sounds like a real act of barefaced challenge to God's representative. Fenech does not have any faith in his fellow human beings, but he is also wary of divine intervention. His seems to be an act of total mistrust in everything and everybody, since humankind really seems to be at the mercy of an uncontrollable destiny.

Fenech's total mistrust in the 'political' actions of mankind is further reinforced in *Trafalgar Square*. The students who are demonstrating in

favour of world peace assemble under Nelson's statue, but Fenech seems to be completely uninterested in the motivations that spur on these youngsters to protest against the establishment. This lack of interest manifests itself in the apparently casual and careless way in which description and impressions are accosted to each other and given the same value in the picture of the event as portrayed by the author :

- |                                      |                        |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|
| girls looking like boys              | (1)                    |
| boys looking like girls              | (2)                    |
| Christ figures in Wellington coats   | (3)                    |
| Use Atom for Peace                   | (4)                    |
| Make Love Not War                    | (5)                    |
| trite slogans for a hackneyed march  | (6)                    |
| but dreadfully true                  | (7)                    |
| (besides, what else is there to do?) | (8) (Fenech 1976 : 12) |

Fenech's list, which at first sight might give the impression of being similar to a disorderly housewife's shopping list -and this is the effect desired by the author in order to reinforce his lack of interest in the event-, is actually drawn up according to precise criteria :

- |                 |                       |
|-----------------|-----------------------|
| (1) + (2) + (3) | = description         |
| (4) + (5)       | = stereotyped slogans |
| (6)             | = author's judgement  |
| (7)             | = an acknowledgement  |
| (8)             | = conclusion          |

This list is therefore a logical process of extreme rationality which, whilst departing from concrete elements (people, and what they say), comes to a conclusion totally built on indifference ("*besides, what else is there to do?*") through the evaluation of the facts on the author's part. His scepticism is reinforced by the behaviour of the demonstrators. Fenech seems to imply that in becoming more frequent ("*tenth of its kind*") these demonstrations in favour of peace are actually emptying themselves of all significance. So much so, that the few demonstrators who take part in the protest ("*thin one this time*") do so because it is an opportunity to fight boredom ("*after all, there's nothing else to do*").

That the same young demonstrators do not believe any longer in their stereotyped slogans in favour of peace is revealed in the expression that sums up the prototype of the pacifist demonstrator, "*Christ figures in Wellington coats*" : Christ (the most sublime example of peace) who wears a

coat named after Wellington (the great warrior who defeated Napoleon at Waterloo) is a contradiction in terms that does not need any further comment! A youngster “with ‘out’ ideas” who lives out of his times and who invokes “*man’s need of God*” actually realises this contradiction. But another youngster, the youngster of today who is so presumptuous as to feel the only arbiter of his own destiny, openly dismisses his fellow idealist, by exclaiming : “*God? This is the Twentieth Century, man!*”

Lack of faith in man; lack of faith in politics; lack of faith in God : these seem to be the key elements in Fenech’s poetry. One might wonder why Fenech is so sceptical about everything. The answer is to be found in the author’s uneasiness. Fenech does not have any faith in anything because in reality he does not even have any faith in himself. He would like to be able to grasp the ultimate truth, but he does not manage to do so. This contrast between wanting to do and being incapable of doing gives birth to his poetry, which is in fact the poetry of contrasts. London fascinates the poet because it reflects his contradictory personality :

Open Browning’s heart - Italy.  
Open mine - London.

For all it is  
I love (hate)  
This massive masculine city.  
London : my echo.  
My rainbow and my fog (Fenech 1976 : 10).

If Fenech could understand everything about London, if he could master in their entirety the thousand secrets of the avenues and little streets of this metropolis, then he would no longer be enthralled by its fatal attraction. The words “*love*” and “*rainbow*” would disappear from his oxymorous hymn of love and hate, which would thus be reduced to a lament of hate. Yet this is not so. In a nearly masochistic way, Fenech needs to be frustrated in his yearning to possess the city in its entirety. Knowing everything about it would be equivalent to killing every stimulus towards further knowledge. This crave for the unobtainable, coupled with a pinch of narcissism on the author’s part, who enjoys seeing his contradictory self reflected in the city, renders London the forbidden fruit he is so much attracted to.

## Fenech's ideal female figure

The attraction Fenech feels for London is not very dissimilar to the attraction he feels for his ideal female figure. In fact, the women desired by the poet are women whom he can never have! *On the Escalator* describes the author's furtive meeting with the woman of his dreams in the London underground station :

She rises from the sea, dripping  
pearls of water from her chocolate body.  
Excalibur in suppleness would have lost  
the duel, and Helios' steeds succumb  
in sleekness to her Jaguar line.  
Is this the shape that launched  
a thousand sighs  
in Acapulco and Nassau? (Fenech 1976 : 12).

This mortal being made of flesh and bones is transformed into a celestial divinity thanks to the precious imagery evoked by the author, imagery that recalls the mythology, the culture and the customs of the past : amongst other things, Fenech refers the reader to Botticelli, comparing his portrait of the nascent Venus to this woman who is also rising gradually ... as the escalator approaches; to the Greek mythological world (the steeds of Helios, the god of the sun, are poor things compared to the splendour which emanates from Fenech's nymph); to the legends of the Breton cycle (Excalibur, King Arthur's enchanted sword, envies the flexibility of the woman's perfect body) as well as to the trendiest places frequented by the jet set (Acapulco, Bahamas).

The woman seen for just a fleeting moment in the underground becomes the picture of personified perfection in the eyes of the poet. But this is the result of his not being able to have her. What will bring Fenech back to drab reality is the voice of the ticket collector in the underground, shouting "*Ticket please...*" in the most non poetic of ways. At this stage, the "*ideal*" woman disappears in the rain as quickly as she had appeared originally. This quick exit on her part is an essential condition if she is to remain in the poet's eyes not only as a nymph, but also as a "*framed Nelbarden nymph*", a superior being who is to be framed, admired and adored as a divinity.

Distance, which implies the impossibility of being able to frequent a person regularly, renders this person even more mythical and desirable to

the far away poet. Basically, therefore, although he has the possibility to establish contacts with other women who are spatially much easier to frequent, his ideal loved one is to be found far away in Malta. Irene, this is her name, is the protagonist of a whole poem, where the author sings her praises :

*Triptych for Irene*

Graceful as a fawn,  
As free and as elusive -  
My loved one my peace!

Rose tears in her eyes;  
Why do I hesitate so? -  
The plane is waiting.

I miss not the isle,  
Only its vernal daughter -  
Does she wait for me? (Fenech 1977).

The title itself is already emblematic of the high degree of sacredness to which the poet has elevated his beloved one. In fact, the triptych imagery cannot but bring to mind the figurative arts of the Middle Ages, which privileged this artistic means to convey the prevalently religious themes of the paintings of the period. Irene is Fenech's "*loved one*" because she is a "*free and elusive*" creature. Had she been easy to 'capture', then she would not have provoked in the author such strong desire. Fenech does not miss Malta; the only thing that he misses of the island is this "*vernal daughter*", offspring of Spring, the season which marks the rekindling of all human kind's hope. And, in fact, Irene symbolizes hope and faith in life : she is the counterpart of the poet's lack of faith in life, and is his real and only hope for the future.

The fact that Irene is considered to be the only safe harbour in Fenech's London poetry can be confirmed in *Home Thoughts from Abroad* (Fenech 1976 : 13). It is Spring but in London Spring does not seem to exist. If anything, it is more like Autumn : the "*skeletons of trees*" and the "*guillotined/leaves on rainwashed pavements*" can only bring to mind scenes of sadness and death. The author, therefore, depicts the desolation of London springtime as the antonym of that brightness that only the Mediterranean climate can produce : "*Golden sand*", "*rose red sun*", "*chocolate body*" is the imagery that the poet, who is far away from his island, can

recall. But these colours are so warm and full of life because on the “*golden sand*” of the beach, under a “*rose red sun*” which warms up the hearts, there lies the “*chocolate body*” of his beloved one. And the poet has “*mind serene*” because he is “*touching fingers with Irene*”. Therefore, the memory of springtime in Malta is pleasant because of the presence of Irene. She is a sort of Petrarchan Laura of the twentieth century, who bestows upon the surrounding nature her beauty and her warmth. And, in the meantime, she gives her far away lover a moment of serenity, a fleeting moment of faith which brightens up his inner world, which is full of spectres, doubts and shadows.

### Fenech’s English poems with a Maltese setting

As yet, we have only had a look at Fenech’s English poems, i.e. the poems written in England. However, since it is a well-known fact that islanders are much attached to their homeland, it is only natural that Fenech’s literary production should include poems that deal with the customs, habits and bad habits of his country. If, on the one hand, these Maltese poems are characterized by the attention they devote to the local colour, on the other they reconfirm that state of mind that lies at the basis of Fenech’s English lyrics.

At the outset of this paper, a distinction was made between the poet’s use of religious terminology and imagery in his poems written in Maltese and those of his English *London Pictures*. In this respect, his English poems written in Malta are to be considered totally distinct from the *London Pictures* and more on the same wavelength as the poems written in Maltese. In fact, in order to remain faithful to the local colour, his Maltese English poems *had* to include references to the language and the rites of the Catholic liturgy, which are still today an integral part of Maltese life.

The first stanza of *Fertility Goddess* describes the most important day of the year for each Maltese village. It is the day of the feast of the patron saint or, to put it in Giacomo Leopardi’s words, “*la sera del dì di festa*” :

Nightsky and balls of colour  
saints and fireworks  
band marches nougat sellers  
and people people people  
people people people -  
it is the village festa (Massa 1978 : 32).



All the imagery utilized by Fenech evokes religious feasts, but on examining this imagery closer, one realizes that there is only one real reference to the sacred : “*saints*”. The rest of the imagery recalls sounds (“*band marches*”), colours (“*fireworks*”) and tastes (“*nougat sellers*”) that are not normally associated with sacred and solemn ceremonies! By indifferently placing next to each other the sacred (“*saints*”) and the profane, the poet wants to prove that the so called religious feast is nothing else but an excuse to trigger off a spectacular choreography of lights and colours that serve to attract the attention of thousands of people (“*people people people*”, etc.) who are more intent on enjoying worldly pleasures rather than nourishing their spirit, as did their patron saint!

This negative attitude towards the catholic religion is further strengthened by the comparison with the scene in the stanza that follows. Here, in the prehistoric temple of Tarxien, the fat lady worshipped in Malta by neolithic man, the “*fertility goddess*”, “*sleeps*” in tranquillity beneath the trilithon. The pagan goddess isolates herself from all worldly feasts and surrounds herself by silence, that is the symbol of spiritual peace. Ironically, Fenech seems to suggest that the sacredness one should experience in Catholicism is in fact only experienced by a pagan goddess.

This goddess, who has “*known strange flags over Malta, / blood and toil, plague and uprising*”, has been witness to all the painful events of the past that have hit the Maltese islands. And she was not just an uninterested onlooker. In fact, in the verse “*She’s known strange flags over Malta*”, the adjective “*strange*”, apart from indicating an undisputed historical fact, namely the presence of various colonisers on the island over the centuries, is also a clear sign of the goddess’s point of view : for the pagan goddess of fertility there is something strange in the continuous alternation of foreign colonisers in what was, in her times, an oasis of peace. Such continuous coming and going, which was the harbinger of suffering and destruction for the Maltese people, has worried her for many centuries. On the contrary, the representatives of the Catholic church have never really bothered about the many problems which the Maltese people have had to face over the ages. The important thing was for the Church to consolidate its hegemony, even by taking advantage of and manipulating the festa in a certain direction in order to reach its objective — “*and always there was the festa*”.

Today, the fertility goddess is the only one who is not bothered by material and temporal well being, symbolized by the imagery of “*fireworks*”, “*band marches*” and “*nougat sellers*”. She is “*oblivious of the*

*petards*” because she is not interested in being noisy just to attract the attention of others. Despite being a pagan goddess, she is the only one to have realised that gods and their representatives on earth should only be absorbed in the silence of ascetic meditation, in order to fulfil their role of spiritual guides. Thus, she “*sleeps unperturbed/ defying time and the elements*”.

This diachronic antithesis between Christian and pagan, which echoes at local level the Dantesque contrast between the corruption of the Christian clergy, placed in hell, and the wisdom of the pagans, placed in limbo, is re-affirmed by the author at synchronic level in *Marsaxlokk*. Again, the author sympathises with the untainted pagans. This time, however, the author contrasts the usual rites of a fossilized liturgy with the practical and productive work of the old fisherman, Grezz.

In Marsaxlokk, a village on the southeastern coast of Malta, the main source of income is fishing. Every year in August, the *lampuki* fishing season is declared open by the parish priest, who blesses the fishermen’s boats. This is a tradition that has been going on for many years and is anxiously awaited by all the inhabitants of the place. In fact, it is an event that is very similar to the feast of the patron saint. Just like the feast day, even this ceremony has lost any real religious meaning and has become more of a folkloristic tradition. “*despite the priest’s blessing/ it’s been a long lean summer*”; which means that the priest’s blessing has not served any purpose! The disastrous economic consequences for the inhabitants of the village are clearly spelt out by the contrast in the second stanza between the optimism at the departure and the moral and physical depression when the fishermen return with no catch at all :

That bright August morning  
the *dghajsas* left in a procession  
of colour and hope.  
Most evenings they crept back  
on tired bellies upon a spiteful sea (Massa 1978 : 27).

What renders this contrast even stronger is the lexical choice on the part of the author : an ordered sequence adj./ noun/ noun/ noun (bright/ possession/ colour/ hope) in the first three lines to denote self confidence and strong hope in a future catch; a disorderly mixture made up of verb/ adj./ noun/ adj. (*crept/ tired/ bellies/ spiteful*) in the last two lines to emphasise the picture of total defeat which the fishermen had to suffer. This defeat further brings out the ironic connotation of the initial pompous im-

agery when the author had made use of an obvious reference to the Catholic liturgy ("*procession*").

On such a negative background, with religion that does no longer offer any guarantee against the problems of life, the old Grezz sticks out. He becomes the emblem of hope and the willingness to live life. Despite the poor catch; "*old Grezz grins just the same*"; despite everything, "*there's always the next season*". The good old man, of the same mould as Verga's Padron 'Ntoni, has lived on the sea and thus knows its good points and its defects as well as its tough laws. He has learnt that one must never defy nature, but accept its decisions meekly. The old man's strength lies exactly in this attitude that seems to imply submission to a predetermined destiny. In reality, the old fisherman has understood that one must not aim for objectives that are not within his reach : one must never go against what has already been decided! By not wasting his time in mythical fights against windmills, he has the time to enjoy the little things of life, like "*mend the nets*" and "*repaint the dgħajsa*". The true essence of life seems to have its roots in the simple philosophy of St. Francis of Assisi; namely the acceptance with joy of all the most humble things in life.

### **'Primitive' cultures and 'progressive' technology**

The contrast between the goddess of fertility and the choreography characteristic of the Catholic rite or else between the old fisherman and the stereotyped benediction is nothing else but a cultural localization of the clash between good and bad, that is a clash that invests the whole of humanity and which Fenech associates, on the one hand, with the genuine values of a 'primitive' civilisation and, on the other, with the rapid process of degradation of a 'progressive' technological society. *I Remember* deals with this topic.

The poet simulates a catastrophe that completely destroys the city ("*the city was gone*"). It is not a natural disaster, such as an earthquake or a volcanic eruption, over which man has no control. It is in fact a disaster provoked by man and by his inventions which, when gone berserk, manage to take over from their creator : "*A blown fuse some said in a supermarket/ (or was it the hospital?)*". The choice of place where the fire breaks out is quite meaningful : the supermarket is the symbol of how genuine products of nature are converted into processed food, thus distancing themselves totally from mother earth that produced them; the hos-

pital, on the other hand, instead of a place that restores to life, the way it should be, transforms itself into an infernal place, harbinger of death.

The original city, the Greek *polis*, was a conglomeration of civil and cultured people who lived in a community. Today's *city* has lost all cultural and civilized connotations and therefore does not deserve to exist any longer. Humanity's greed has led to its auto-destruction. Actually, Fenech seems to imply that what seems to be a catastrophe and a holocaust is in reality a sign of liberation : "*It was a simple accident./ It was the day of deliverance*". This biblical deluge of the modern era has a precise function : that of cleaning up the world of its corruption, while at the same time making humanity understand the real values of life, which are to be found in the little and simple things of every day. Therefore, humanity should return to the countryside, devoting itself to the simplicity of country life and, after a year of tough work and sacrifices, in Spring it should reap its well-earned reward, i.e. the eternal joy one gets from the simple fruits of the earth :

Then one by one the living took up plough  
and sank it into the earth  
into deep earth  
into the earth of their father  
and their father's father  
and their father's father's father  
and the earth slowly yielding  
delivered lilac fruit (Massa 1978 : 29).

It therefore seems that Fenech has understood the secret of happiness. This lies in the simple life of little centres, far away from the hustle and bustle of the big metropolis. Having discovered this secret, the author should have found the solution to his recurrent sense of uneasiness. Yet this is not so. In reality, his conclusion is only a provisional one. This is the characteristic of Fenech's poetry : in his works, a safe haven of certainty is never reached; everything is always discussed anew. And it is only right that things are so since every person needs to be taken up by unresolved problems and incurable contrasts in order to have the necessary stimuli to keep on going. Moreover, frontier people who have a heterogeneous socio-cultural background and very unstable roots, doubly need to question things and ... themselves.

The Maltese people, of whom Fenech is simultaneously a representative and a lucid historian at the same time, are indeed a frontier people.

Therefore, Fenech's poetry should not be seen exclusively as a transcription of the poet's feelings; it is also and more especially so the faithful chronicle of the epic story of a people always "licking wounds sustained for others" and continuously searching for a proper fixed identity.

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