

A festschrift for Daniel



STELLA BORG BARTHET, IVAN CALLUS (EDS): CROSSCURRENTS IN POSTCOLONIAL MEMORY AND LITERATURE. A FESTSCHRIFT FOR DANIEL MASSA.

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LOUIS SCERRI

With the season for festschrifts apparently now in full swing, it was the turn of professor Daniel Massa to be presented with a fine

collection of critical essays and poems which do justice to one of Malta's finest bilingual poets and who also enjoyed a distinguished academic career in the Department of English at the University of Malta.

The editors of the festschrift, which celebrates Massa's 80th birthday, have been able to attract several well-known foreign and local scholars whose contributions make of the volume an excellent scholarly contribution.

In her introduction, Stella Borg Barthet gives a very good overview of Massa's literary and academic career which she places in the context of post-colonialism with its ambiguous contemporaneous admiration and castigation of the colonial powers.

Divided between the possibilities for improvement and advancement offered by the colonial power but at the same time torn up by the exploitation one has to endure in one's own country, Massa experienced that dilemma in the Malta he grew up in and eventually saw gaining its independence.

Indeed, his first publications postdate the island's independence by two years and fit into that cultural spring that blossomed soon after 1964. He chose to write his poetry in Maltese because he thought he "would be much better off writing for [his] own people".

Still, Massa's is no blinkered vision that denies any worth to the colonial experience with its



Professor Daniel Massa with his grandchildren.

various aspects, certainly not least being the English language in which he could express his feelings and ideas as confidently as in his mother language and to the teaching of whose sublime literary heritage he would dedicate a lifetime.

Borg Barthet's introduction is an essential contribution to understanding Massa and his

literary, political and philosophical development, as is her concluding essay, 'Recollections', which pieces together anecdotal references from relatives and close friends.

This festschrift has attracted several noteworthy contributions from Massa's colleagues, not only from Malta but from farther afield as Mauritius, Polynesia, Turkey, South Africa and New Zealand.

Six of the contributors are local scholars. Ivan Callus, the co-editor of the publication, discusses Massa's poetical works but moves beyond to place it in the context of post-colonialist literature and literary studies. Massa's fairly recent revisiting of some of his poetry

and rewriting it in English is the way to reach beyond our shores. Is translation the price the Maltese author has to pay for international recognition? The discussion proves quite illuminating.

Adrian Grima sees the all-encompassing Mediterranean sea as Massa's alternative motherland with extended discussions of the poems *Delimara* and *Xibkat-uliss*, but not only. This image is also extended to a discussion of the poems' 'political' contents, especially in Malta's post-colonialist experience.

With his usual perceptive and illuminating vision, Fr Peter Ser-racino-Inglott, Massa's mentor and later colleague, focuses on Massa's 2001 study of Giordano



Daniel Massa during his graduation day.

Bruno's *De Gli Eroici Furori* and draws a parallel with Caravaggio's *Love* as regard the contrasts between earthly and divine love. The paper is unfortunately unfinished as the ailing Fr Peter was to die soon afterwards.

Lydia Sciriha asks whether English or Maltese is the *de facto* language in post-colonial Malta, a vexed question for a nation attempting to emerge from a colonialist past.

The analysis of the languages spoken in Malta, together with the public signage used, support the claim of the majority of Maltese who feel more proficient in English which also dominates in the written form.

Public signage is overwhelmingly in English as well.

Maltese, however, is the preferred language for everyday communication, even though Maltese who speak in English are often at the receiving end of mocking comments.

Using as examples three dramatists who, although competent in English prefer to use their native languages, Marco Galea explains that this is a deliberate decision to exclude non-speakers. Among local playwrights, he picks Alfred Sant and his play-within-a-play *Fid-Dell tal-Katidral* (1977).

The last local scholar in this *festschrift*, Norbert Bugeja, writes about the travel diary of Théophile Gautier's travel diary, *Constantinople*. Gautier, who even stopped for a short time in Malta on his voyage east, experienced a whole new different universe.

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Bugeja sums up his paper as “the story of an intriguing to and fro of textual interlocution and hospitality that has traversed, and continues today its alternate motions of acceptance, refusal, and rethinking of the Mediterranean”.

In Malta, Gautier noted with contempt the “discordant and bizarre presence” of the British colonising power, all too extraneous to the local realities.

The limitations imposed on this review only make possible very cursory and superficial references to the other nine foreign contributors, most of whom are critics and scholars of import and standing and whose papers contain several highly interesting observations, in particular to students of post-colonialism in its many facets.

Alastair Niven, who has been a judge at the Man Booker Prize for

Fiction twice, writes about literary awards in a Commonwealth context and the benefits that can accrue from such a participation, not least being that of being placed in the limelight and the resulting increased sales.

Bill Ashcroft comments on contemporary literature from the islands of Polynesia and Melanesia, while Fernando Cioni writes on various offshoots of *The Merchant of Venice* which reinterpret Shakespeare's original plot and theme.

Eckhard Breiting focuses on the autobiographies of Stephanie Zweig and Peter Fraenkel, two German Jews who had sought refuge in British colonies to escape from Nazi Germany. Their attitude to life there provides a very sharp contrast.

Gareth Griffiths sees a certain parallelism between American expansionism from the second half of the 19th century onwards with the imperialist positions of European States, while Nelson Wattie discusses the concept of ‘exile’ and ‘home’ in the social and cultural contexts of New Zealand with several of his ideas that could well find a local application.

Dieter Riemenschneider writes about the works and paintings of ‘early Orientalist’ William Hodges (1744–97) who



A young Daniel Massa during a bicycle ride from Żabbar to Rabat.

may have helped to introduce and sharpen European awareness of the East, while Xavier Pons analyses Australian novelist Steven Carroll's trilogy that traces the events that a group of characters experience over a period of 15 years. Pons sees echoes of Proust in Carroll's attempt to capture life in motion,

or what he call ‘the music of the years’.

Geoffrey Davis writes about the detective stories of author and journalist James McClure (1936–2006) which are set in Apartheid South Africa with its constant racial tensions and in-built inequalities. These are very readable novels in themselves but the

critic successfully shows the other layers of meaning and social comments that underlie them.

The *festschrift* is complemented by an interesting selection of photographs of Massa, his family, friends, other scholars and pages from his manuscripts, as well as a complete bibliography of his publications and an excellent index.