

## SPECIAL ARTICLES

# NEW BEARINGS IN MODERN MALTESE POETRY\*

An essay on the past ten years of Maltese poetry

By OLIVER FRIGGIERI

It is not easy to give a truly objective appreciation of one's contemporary poetry. The attitude and tension expressed in the works of today's poets are just the same attitude and tension of today's critics. Besides, modern Maltese poetry is relatively very young and although a good number of new poets are producing enough material of refined quality for them to be called "modern" poets, it is perhaps early to admit the existence of a widely spread movement. The contemporary touch, however, is the major characteristic of the new Maltese poetry.

Before speaking about the modern poets, it may be interesting to point out the parallelism which seems to exist between the situation of today's local poets and that of English poets of the early twentieth century. Since 1914 French prose and poetry began to be widely read in England and America. The result was the formation of a sort of formal influence on the new poetic image. While English writers who wanted to follow the modern trend had to look outside their own literature for their models, the French writers could follow, or react against, the great masters of the nineteenth century. French poetry began to cultivate the "new" approach since the times of Baudelaire. In other words, poets like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound could not but look at Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Mallarmé.

These comments are helpful to explain the condition of the new Maltese poets who are commonly accused of being against the historical background of Maltese literature, and with not being capable of relating their inspiration and its realization to

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that of the classical and romantic local masters of the early twentieth century. These young men began to read as much as they could, widened their experiences through studies and travelling, and may be said to have succeeded in understanding the true, but apparently insignificant, malady of Maltese literature, and poetry in particular, which years before had to be suppressed or underestimated, owing to the very bad state of the country's education under the British colonial rule. Many of the new authors were seriously obsessed by the need of bringing Maltese literature onto the same level of the contemporary continental movement. In the course of the history of Maltese literature, this is perhaps the greatest reaction: an urgent need to do away with the academism of the old poetic school and find new effective forms for the language and fresh, authentic inspiration for the subject-matter. One should admit, however, that, owing to the past lack of cultivation of the Maltese language under foreign rule, the poets of the early twentieth century had to establish, for themselves and for their successors, the artistic medium. And they did this in a most scholarly manner adapting the language, very poetic in many of its sounds, to the classical European style. On the other hand, they wanted to preserve the invaluable and vast basic Semitic element in the vocabulary and, as far as it was possible, in the structure of the sentence. Thus a new wave of neologisms, formed by means of the trilateral mechanism of Semitic languages, found its way in the written language. Dun Karm (1871-1971), the national poet, Ġużè Muscat Azzopardi (1853-1927) and Ninu Cremona (1880-1971) have the great merit of having created an artistic and sophisticated medium out of an underestimated dialect. The new poets were not only obliged to accept this classically adapted vehicle, but also, in their own turn, to make it more immediate and relevant to the new trend of the more pretentious and demanding young generation. As a matter of fact, these poets wanted to speak freely primarily to the budding citizens of independent Malta.

Another important reason which explains the motives of this reaction lies in the contemporary artistic necessity to go out of the internal world of introspection and be active. It is an exodus from the subject to the object, from what is immediate and immanent to what is mediate and sensual. On the social level

this caused the modern literature to come out, once and for all, of the closed groups and academies, which had given it an almost exclusively scholastic brand, and acquire a much healthier and truly national significance. This change continued primarily because of the active and bold part which these poets determined to take in the more popular daily papers, radio discussions and other public meetings. On the whole, however, poetry began to be considered as a source which gave a better meaning to the universe, and not simply as a private reproduction of one's own life on the conscious or sub-conscious level. This alternative, easily acceptable, appeared as a magical formula, and poetry began to be looked at as a religion, or an interesting form of it, a way of living up to one's ideals. Among a profoundly and traditionally religious people such as the Maltese, this new vision, whatever its moral value, was bound to become fastly incorporated within the national culture.

All this seems to be paradoxical, however, because a good number of the leading modern poets were reacting not only to the literary and spiritual in its widest sense point of view, but also to the moral and theological aspect. They questioned many traditions, they professed a highly individual religion as opposed to the collective disposition of the institutional church, and they pointed out openly the shortcomings and incongruities of the intellectual and moral life of the quiet people. Fortunately, however, the controversy, in which some new poets played an important and a genuine role, ultimately meant a break-through for the local author to express himself without any inhibitions, and without fear of being suppressed. The test was over, and the audience, out of interest or sheer curiosity, increased considerably.

The widening of views, the search for a solution of more complicated problems, the new industrial and technical environment which began to appear in Malta within the last ten years, the continuous foreign influence of all sorts of mass media, the silent but real and effective revolution of the new generation at schools and higher educational institutions: these factors made greater linguistic demands on the poets. One of the main difficulties was due to the social, and not literary, changes which took place during this decade or so. The poets, like Daniel Massa, Victor Fenech, Achille Mizzl and some others, became

particularly sensitive to the current ideology, the preoccupations and general attitudes of a changing nation. An utterly new consciousness was spreading about. The higher students, among whom there was a nucleus of budding writers, expected intellectually better equipped poets, and criticized the simple, peaceful poetry of the older generation.

This was not an artistically sterile and purely rational or philosophical approach, as some modern poems of the time may suggest. It was a more powerful awareness of the hidden forces which were exerting great pressure on the Maltese way of life. Consequently the poets became more conscious of themselves — and this was something totally new to the local literary tradition — and decided to find better ways of transforming their personal and social experience into poetry. The more complicated vision of a politically independent Malta, the unhappy residues of a socially difficult and culturally sterile colonial era, and the revolutionary conception of the external world, especially within the framework of a conservative little island: all these elements led the young poets to decide that they should do away with the old poetic image and seriously try to come to terms with the material world around them. While major romantic poets, like Anton Buttigieg (1912- ), Rużar Briffa (1906-1963), Karmenu Vassallo (1913- ) and Ġorġ Zammit (1908- ) kept on searching for a solution on the purely personal and intimate level, the younger poets wanted to give a social reference to their work. They introduced a clear political connotation and wished to make contact with the widest possible audience. These poets, calling themselves social, as if the older ones were not, hoped that their thoughts would be understood by many. It was because they confessed, in daily newspapers and literary magazines, especially "Il-Polz" (1967- ), that their imagery, ideas, ways of expression and technique, were all drawn directly from an authentic analysis of the present world.

The social awareness showed immediately that existence is complicated even for the modern poet. Perhaps it is still more so. Because of the great complexity of present civilization, many poems were harshly criticized for not being intelligible; poets argued that they knew what they were saying, and the reader could only expect allusive and complicated poetry from the sensibility of a contemporary observer. Critics tried to say that,

at times, the poet may make a dialogue with himself. However, the main aim of the modern exponents was to make a real dialogue with their readers. The rejection of conventional verse forms by almost all the poets, the adoption of the so-called "*vers libre*", the tendency to be allusive, the replacement of Dun Karm's logical continuity by dislocated speech, the abolition of punctuation marks: all these efforts were meant to bring the poet in direct contact with his people.

The basic problem left was a linguistic one. Dun Karm, the refined poet of high craftsmanship, had succeeded in creating an effective medium which, though classical, was not very far away from the common way of expression. Besides the vast flow of spoken words, it ably incorporated a limited number of neologisms and archaisms from the basic Semitic structure, and also some barbarisms from the Romance superstructure, especially Italian and Mediaeval Sicilian. But the world of Dun Karm was an apparently serene, nationalistic utopia. The new poets immediately realized that they could not grapple with their complicated themes through the accepted traditional idiom. They were bound to escape from it, and try to exploit all the resources of the beautiful Maltese language.

This is one of the major merits of the contemporary poets. The foreign reader should bear in mind the fact that the local literary tradition is just about 200 years old. So the poetic process aimed at widening ideas through widening the vocabulary, enriched mainly by a flow of Semantically absorbed English and Italian loan words; the grammatical structure at times wanted to get rid of the syntactical compactness and create new linguistic explosions, pregnant with original associations and values. The well known emotional images were forgotten to make room for cerebral, mechanical symbols taken from the modern Maltese environment. This poetic revival can be traced back to 1964. In "*Il-Muża Maltija*" (1964), the major comprehensive anthology of Ġużè Aquilina, the holder of the chair of Maltese and Oriental languages at the Royal University of Malta, twenty three young poets were presented for the first time. Among them there were Wallace Gulia, John Sciberras, Peter Serracino Inglott and Charles Coleiro.

But this is a partial vision of the poetic situation. Alongside the neo-romanticism of Anton Buttigieg (1912- ), who is still

producing verse of great delicacy, the new writers are still searching for forms and linguistic adaptation. While Buttigieg, who was formerly known as a visionary escapist, is now betraying subtle forms of the romantic crave to evade everyday life, the others acquire the truest significance of their existence precisely by living and "shouting politely" in the midst of their people, whom they love and hate at the same time. Their social commitment is their point of departure. Besides, there is also a minor nucleus of poets, who may be termed neo-classical, who are still in favour of a continuation of the traditional era, especially from the technical point of view. Dun Karm's influence can still be traced in religious and patriotic poetry. On the other hand, however, these two major types of poetry, always given a mediterranean touch, are nowadays being tied more authentically to the modern way of living. The characteristics of a small island, sunbaked, stony, silent, historic and very young in terms of political freedom are being associated with or separated from the traditional, almost folkloristic and ritual, belief in the spiritual world. There are also young poets who are inspired by an emotional vision of the world, and seem to breathe the same air as the neo-romantic poetry of some of the Russian and Italian poets.

All these repercussions were united and organized owing to the controversy of 1966. The poets felt the need of presenting themselves as a responsible body. In 1966, some of them started writing memoranda and manifestos in *Il-Haddiem* and *L-Orizzont*, two of the leading dailies, then founded the *Moviment Qawmien Letterarju* (Movement for the promotion of Literature) which embarked immediately upon a programme aimed at bringing the new poetry to the people. This was done most successfully through beat and literature programmes held in streets, main squares and churches. The immediate effect was that large crowds became aware of this modern literature for the first time.

The relation of these poets' works to current speech and problems proved that they did not have purely individual ends, but wanted to embrace a wide universe of objects, persons and events. Traditional syntax, poetic forms and metres were not done away with completely; however, in many cases, as seems to be the case with major European poets, this is something

which depends simply on the mood and natural tendency of the individual, and is not basic and indispensable for the so-called "modern".

These are some of the more significant qualities and conditions of Maltese poetry within the last ten years. There is the heart of a faithful, patriotic people, emerging out of a prolonged colonial era and searching for a true identity. There are still, and probably will always be, subtle reminiscences of the pre-historic inheritance, the Great Siege of 1565, the Second World War (1940-43), the pathetic nostalgia for a rustic and primitive island. Today's poetry is, as ever, the truest interpretation of the hidden sentiments of the country: love, hospitality, protest, despair and hope. This poetry, expressed in the intensity of the spoken language, is the affirmation of the varied experience, past and present, of a small, yet spiritually rich, Mediterranean people.

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