

THE LANGUAGE QUESTION IN MALTA – THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF A NATIONAL IDENTITY

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The political and cultural history of Malta is largely determined by her having been a colony, a land seriously limited in her possibilities of acquiring self-consciousness and of allowing her citizens to live in accordance with their own aspirations. Consequently the centuries of political submission may be equally defined as an uninterrupted experience of cultural submission. In the long run it has been a benevolent and fruitful submission. But culture, particularly art, is essentially a form of liberation. Lack of freedom in the way of life, therefore, resulted in lack of creativity.

Nonetheless her very insularity was to help in the formation of an indigenous popular culture, segregated from the main foreign currents, but necessarily faithful to the conditions of the simple life of the people, a predominantly rural and religious life taken up by preoccupations of a subdued rather than rebellious nature, concerned with the family rather than with the nation. The development of the two traditional languages of Malta – the Italian language, cultured and written, and the Maltese, popular and spoken – can throw some light on this cultural and social dualism.

The geographical position and the political history of the island brought about a very close link with Italy. In time the smallness of the island found its respectable place in the Mediterranean as European influence, mostly Italian, penetrated into the country and, owing to isolation, started to adopt little by little the local *original* aspects. The most significant factor of this phenomenon is that Malta created a literary culture (in its wider sense) written in Italian by the Maltese themselves. For whole centuries no one doubted that one was Maltese while writing in Italian and according to the Italian inspiration and forms of expression. The local intelligentsia, belonging spiritually to a wider context of an Italo-Maltese world which transcends geographical demarcations, found itself in a natural way in its own environment by feeling itself an integral part of a whole region whose boundaries were not simply

territorial. In other words, the idea of a local Maltese culture was not limited, embracing only the isolated product, created and considered without any relationship (as far as humanly possible) with the foreign world.

This means that the old Italian element of Maltese culture, particularly the linguistic and literary one, is also a valid evidence of a political psychology; the intelligentsia considered itself an integral part of the Mediterranean sea which incorporated it in the Italian (or rather Latin) stretch of the same sea. Therefore the self-expression of the Maltese in Italian was the self-expression of the Maltese as such, or better of members of a small community living in isolation on a small island which had fundamental points of reference that overcome its narrow limits.

It is against this background that the upheaval on the level of party politics can be safely understood and interpreted. Up to the first decades of the nineteenth century the Maltese consciousness had concluded that (i) it had an old cultural identity attached to the presence of the Latin culture and that its language of culture was Italian, and that (ii) the introduction of English was a serious threat to the national identity, inasmuch as English was not only *the foreign language* but also the language of the colonizer. The English language could give a new advantage to the colonial ruler in the field of expression, by disrupting the normal expression and communication both of the leaders and of the cultured section of the population. (The democratic consciousness in favour of the people who knew only Maltese still had to reach maturity, as it did when Maltese writers who traditionally wrote in Italian discovered the Maltese language and embarked on a wide programme of cultural diffusion through literature). The introduction of the foreign language (English) and the removal of the local one (Italian) were considered as another clear example of British despotism. On the other hand, except in the minds of a few isolated individuals, it was too early for the Maltese language – a language which still lacked a normalized orthography, a suitable vocabulary for cultural matters, and a valid literary tradition – to be seen in its proper light of a *celebre et pretiosum venerandae antiquitatis monumemtum*, as it was called by Vassalli in 1791. Vassalli himself expressed his progressive ideas, inspired by the Illuministic and Romantic principles he inherited from France and Italy, in Italian, and not in Maltese. All the protagonists of the cultural development of Maltese, like Gużè Muscat Azzopardi, Dun Karm, Manwel Dimech, and Ninu Cremona, wrote extensively in Italian.

In the whole language question, the discovery of the Maltese language, as opposed to Italian (the medium of traditional Maltese culture) and English (the medium of colonial Malta), was the difficult conclusion which Maltese society was not yet able, or mature enough, to reach. Nonetheless, all this can be understood in its historical context as well as in the context of contemporary mentality which still looks down upon Maltese as an inferior and at times useless language. Historical prejudices have only assumed a different nature and identified themselves with more recent forms of justification.

During the language question the struggle transformed itself into a confrontation between dignity and power, that is between tradition and imperialism, between the Italian language of Malta (a colony with its own identity) and the English language (the medium of the British Government). The efforts of the pro-Maltese associations tried to keep away from politics as much as possible; however, political activity was the main, if not the only, platform for the introduction of Maltese as the officially new point of reference. For example, *Il-Habib*, mostly linked with Gużè Muscat Azzopardi, the father of Maltese literature, a prolific writer in Italian and in Maltese and a staunch defender of Maltese, often stated its unwillingness to interfere in politics in its endeavour to cultivate the people's language. At the same time it was this same paper of the best writers of Maltese of

that time (N. Cremona, G. Vassallo, Dun X. Cortis, Dun P. Galea, A. M. Galea, Dun Karm, Dun G. Farrugia, G. Micallef, N. Tagliaferro) which on 8 February 1912 stated: "The language which makes of us a separate people, which proclaims us as a civilized people to the world, which reminds Europe that we are a Latin people, is the Italian language. Without it England will see us like the Indians and like those colonies which do not have a history as we have."

In opposition to the report of the English commissioners Patrick Keenan and Penrose Julyan, the opinion of the Maltese leaders was that, in contrast with what Keenan suggested, English would create a distinction between workers who were familiar with English and those who were not; they also thought that, contrary to what Julyan said, Italian was not used merely as a *social ornament* but was a document of an old and rich civilization of a small and poor island which had then realized that if it wanted constitutional rights it had to present its cultural justification to acquire them. Besides the fact that Maltese had not as yet achieved this dignity, there was also the idea that the confrontation between Italian and Maltese meant that it would harm Italian more than it would benefit Maltese.

Within this framework the word *reform* becomes significant. Romanticism was basically a progressive movement which recognized itself in the preservation of major positive aspects of the past. The recognition of folklore and the rights of the people commonly known as democracy were, among other factors, indications of a radicalism which had its roots embedded in an unredeemed historical patrimony. In Malta the struggle quickly climbed the political platform when the two opposite blocks developed: the Reformist Party of Sigismondo Savona, pro-English, and the Anti-Reformist Party of Fortunato Mizzi, pro-Italian. To reform meant, in its proper historical context, to renounce to the whole cultural tradition of the island, now claiming cultural, and subsequently political, rights which had to lead to self-determination. To resist reforms signified, on the contrary, to proclaim and to exercise the right of national administration and to affirm the country's identity.

The language question, which approximately takes up the period between 1880 and 1939, did not take long in appearing in its truest dimension: the fight for national identity (the preservation of tradition, itself a right for autonomy) against the imposition (shown mostly by the substitution of a language by another) of a plan of Anglicization of the island. When one considers that a language is not only a system of expression but also a complex manifestation of a complete way of life, the difference between the Latin pattern of behaviour and the English one renders the language question a psychological problem as well. Analogous movements in other countries may easily conduce to a similar conclusion.

The gradual transition from the name *Anti-Reformist* to *National* and to *Nationalist* shows that, while the problem arose with the acquisition of a linguistic awareness (since the cult of the national language was one of the main trends of the Risorgimento movement within the wider framework of Romanticism), its roots were not a simple choice, even if a serious one, between one language and another, but a challenge in front of a new submission. Fortunato Mizzi and Salvatore Cachia Zammit summed it up in 1899 in the phrase *forcing a language upon the people*. This is why the controversy assumed its proper shape of a resistance against the colonizer, that is, it was to be only one aspect of the whole struggle for constitutional emancipation.

At the basis of the question there was the dilemma whether to be Maltese meant to submit to the terms of reference of the colonial rule or to react against them. Both before and after the period 1880-1939 the main challenge was one of self-determination, which embraced also the choice of language and culture. In a

linguistically conscious environment, bilingualism created, and still creates, a cultural problem which far transcends the realms of education.

On the political level the choice between Italy and England was settled, in the sense that it was put totally aside, when Malta became independent in 1964. But the roots of the argument were and still are psychological, that is, enormously deeper than administrative decisions of the highest order. As a matter of fact, apart from any historical consideration which relegates the language question to the past and puts it in a decided period of history, one can still speak of a perennial language question which, as already suggested, is embedded in the subconscious of the average Maltese. A large variety of parallelisms may, in fact, be drawn between what happened in the past and what is happening nowadays. One conclusion may be that, notwithstanding official developments, the frame of mind has not changed much.

FURTHER READING – Works by the same Author:

Movimenti Letterari e Coscienza Romantica Maltese 1800-1921, Guido Miano, Milano, 1980.

Cross Winds, Wilfion Books, Renfrewshire, 1980.

Storja tal-Letteratura Maltija, Klabb Kotba Maltin, 1979.