

## CRITICAL NOTES ON FIVE MALTESE AUTHORS

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### Ġużè Muscat Azzopàrdi

Ġużè Muscat Azzopàrdi (1853-1927), born at Qormi, Malta, is one of the more colourful personalities in Maltese literature. His literary activity is rather vast and embraces various genres. Like most writers of his time, he is the author of works both in Italian and in Maltese, but it is mainly his output in Maltese that justifies his fame.

As a versatile journalist he contributed considerably towards the popular and semi-literary rehabilitation of the language. In this respect his contributions to *Il-Habib*, launched in 1912 with the specific aim of providing the people with valid reading material in Maltese, are the most significant. He is closely connected with the foundation of the *Għaqda Kittieba tal-Malti* (1920) and was its first president.

Muscat Azzopàrdi's literary work may be divided in three sections: poetry, narrative prose, translation. One of his intentions was to educate the masses through material which could be at the same time pleasant and instructive. For this purpose he translated numerous works into Maltese, including the Gospels and official Catholic literature. As a poet he sought to unify within himself the two opposite extremes of his personality, the popular and the literary. A look at the range of topics, themes and forms included in *Hamsin Poezija bil-Malti* (1890) confirms this conclusion. His inspiration is directly rooted in the immediate experiences of his environment which he observed, analysed and frequently criticised, thus proposing to the new generation of writers the adequate role to be adopted by them as interpreters of society.

His idea of reviving the language and adapting it to the needs of contemporary society stems from his cultural background as a classicist and then as a romantic. The first component of his identity made him look back towards the great models of Italian tradition, whereas the second one motivated him to look ahead and to seek inspiration in what was socially relevant. The older dimension more evident in his Italian works, and the new one, typically aware of different necessities, particularly the need to discover the concept of a nation in its fullest sense, are two inseparable aspects of one unique personality. The way he handled the language went through various phases and readily modified itself according to themes and moods. It is difficult to forget that the journalist in him always played a determinative role, and perhaps this was one of the advantages which helped him a lot to render his works readable and enjoyable.



*Professor Oliver Friggieri in front of Trinity College, Cambridge University, where he addressed an international conference in December 1994.*

He strove to combine within himself the educated journalist and the sophisticated man of letters. Consequently his poetry delves into an extremely wide area of themes, each treated in a manner which befits his own preconceptions of the reading public and the chosen genre. At times he does not hesitate to give secondary importance to the purely aesthetic character of verse and to concentrate exclusively on the educational and didactic content. In such instances his formal devices are immediately popular, taken directly from the language spoken with instinctive spontaneity. In no way does he depart from the territory consciously occupied by other writers like G.A. Vassallo, R. Taylor, A. Preca, D. Cachia and A. Muscat Fenech.

On the other hand he is also a refined poet who explores the hidden potentialities of the language and who translates his verse into a respectable version of intimate feelings. The most characteristic motives of traditional poetry as well as the more recent ones pertaining to the romantic vision of the nation as the all-embracing world of man the citizen are consequently expressed according to the sufficiently elaborate criteria of contemporary Maltese literature. His sonnets and the poems in which he adopts a semblance of nostalgia and melancholy are perhaps his best contributions. He remains distant from the basic preoccupations of mankind and lacks a world vision of his own, but the content he inherited from tradition and observed in his social milieu is properly conveyed in verse form. In this sense he is more a poet of culture than a poet of experience.

His place in the history of Maltese literature depends much more on his novels. *Toni Bajada* (1878), *Viku Mason* (1881), *Susanna* (1883), *Cejlu Tonna* (1886), *Censu Barbara* (1893) and *Nazju Ellul* (1909) present the image of a novelist poetically in love with history. The past is relived in order to suggest its lasting relevance; periods and heroes are revived in the manner typical of most romantic narrators who evoked the past in order to foresee the future. Muscat Azzopardi's commitment to the restoration of the fundamental nationalistic values is best illustrated through a series of tableaux which at least have two specific aims: the literary diffusion of historical knowledge and the depiction of the lyrical substance of events. Scientifically proved facts are re-elaborated according to the dictates of imagination and sentiment, thus giving room to the formation of a fictional plot alongside the objective point of departure.

Owing to the fact that he researched well the historical content of his novels (in 1903 he published *L-Istorja ta' Malta*, a translation of Paolo Debono's work), it is difficult to distinguish between the popular historian and the imaginative writer in him. *Nazju Ellul*, for example, is enormously loaded with purely historical material, although the whole texture, the language and the methods of construction are typical of the average historical novel prevalent in the nineteenth century. Characters are depicted more in terms of action than in terms of intuition and insight into their inmost identity. Action-biased plots, minutely built descriptions, passages of exhortation and subtle instruction, and a constant effort to narrate directly and explicitly are his main devices.

Muscat Azzopardi marks a significant stage in the evolution of the novel from its previous popular territory to the literary level. He is one of the more important prose writers who gave a patriotic character to literature and to local mentality at large. It is not difficult to prove that the vision he proposed of the country found ample fortune in the political field later on. His novels are translated into an illustration of values summed up in the belief that the nation and religion form one complete entity. Right and duty, according to Mazzini's dictum, are inter-related; when transformed into a plot, they signify the impact of an ever-relevant past on the consciousness of the present. The discovery of a national identity is at the core of his more important novels. Most of his translations share this sensibility. Actually this is one of the main principles embraced and worked upon by all the significant writers of the period.

## Temi Zammit

Temi Zammit (1864-1935), born at Valletta, is one of the more important personalities in the long list of prominent people connected with the Malta University. His significance transcends the limits of literature, although he is mainly remembered as a writer. He contributed towards the recognition of Maltese not only through his works but also through the dignity of his unique personality as a prominent man of culture. His merits in the fields of archaeology and medicine are not totally alien to the real substance of his literary output. If considered from a purely social point of view, these aspects of his personality may be considered as a further proof of how decisive his choice of the literary medium was in an environment which was not yet mature enough to favour the cultivation of Maltese for aesthetic purposes.

It was culture that made him aware of the importance of literature as a medium for self-expression and popular education. His dedication to historical research, as well as his desire to discover the real identity of the island are the primary motive and the unifying factor of his literary work. His friendship with Patri Manwel Magri is meaningful in more than one sense; it is perhaps this relationship which bridged for him the distance between scientific investigation and the sublimation of empirical knowledge in literature. From the stage of cultural diffusion, as illustrated in his purely educational works like *Tagħlim fuq id-Dinja* (1901) and *Il-Gzejjer ta' Malta u l-Graġja Tagħhom* (1924), he passed on to literary creativity. The raw material of his short stories, published in *Il-Malti* since 1926 and in *Lehen il-Malti* since 1931, is actually the experience, historical and contemporary, he acquired both as a scholar and as a keen observer of the people. Alongside the patriotic vision of the romantic poets and novelists, he consequently proposed the observation of one of the social classes of the community.

Romantic and realist attitudes tend to co-exist harmoniously in the works of the earlier traditional authors. The most fundamental discovery concerned Malta as a nation, and writers embarked on a two-fold programme of reconstruction. On the one hand, they adopted Maltese as a valid literary medium and strove to bring to the fore the forgotten and still unexploited characteristics of its syntax and lexical heritage. This basic choice, which has to be set against the background of the language question and to be seen in the light of the fact that the language still lacked recognition and cultural lustre, motivated the need of constructing a style which attracts attention and proves that Maltese possesses inherent dignity and forceful expressiveness not necessarily illustrated in the popular usage. The sublime sentiments of the romantics necessitated the choice of an idiom largely different from the common language. The historical disadvantage of Maltese also demanded the thorough reconstruction of the medium itself. Literary expression and linguistic rehabilitation formed a dualism which somehow had to be fused into one unique whole. Hence the combination of romanticism and stylistic craftsmanship which is so evident in most poets and novelists of the period.

On the other hand, social awareness had to be coupled with a faithful reproduction of the most typical patterns of popular discourse. Rather than recreating language, the writer was bound to behave as a detached observer and listener. Objective content, even if eventually moulded through the writer's own ability for refashioning facts according to personal criteria, had to be a constant point of reference.

Temi Zammit actually adopts the attitude of a literary journalist in front of facts, people and situations, all set in a typically Maltese rural environment. He provides an

alternative picture to the romantic vision of a patria which has finally acquired self-consciousness and pride through the idealisation of history. In depicting a series of colourful vignettes he designs the realistic portrait of an unambitious society in all its immediacy and primitivity. Instead of heroes, historical or fictional, he chooses common people and their uneventful experience. Rather than idealising the past in order to give relevance to an analogous present condition, he emphasises the little virtues and vices of contemporary behaviour. Nostalgia is replaced by comment, idealism by social inquiry.

In the more representative short stories, like *Il-Gideb Ghomru Qasir* (1928), *Ċensa u ċ-Cine* (1929), *Biežla u Għaqlija* (1930) and *Ahlef u Ghid is-Sewwa* (1931), Zammit shows a greater tendency to unite the small world of his observation with the values directly deducible from such situations. The underlying principle of his vivid portraits of folk life is that solidarity, ignorance, little troubles, the relationship between family and social experience, and other inter-personal features are all rooted in the people's unpretentious struggle for survival.

The village is a world on its own, far removed from the tensions of sophisticated city life. Each plot has an ethical reference, and the distinction between trouble and ridicule is easily done away with. In sharp contrast with Ġwann Mamo's *Uljed in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerka* (1930), Zammit's short stories reduce the Maltese popular life to an entertaining panorama, deprived of political innuendos and immune to the needs of modernisation. Satire is only hinted at, even if his simple plots frequently augur its development. Folklore, with all its positive and negative components, is considered scientifically, as a neutral phenomenon, rather than as a point of departure for a far-reaching exercise in socio-political assessment. He ultimately falls in love even with the less edifying agents and actions he depicts.

Zammit marks a moment of considerable significance in the evolution of Maltese narrative prose. He reduces minute descriptions, so common in traditional novels, and gives great importance to dialogue. His structure is basically conversational. People are heard directly rather than noticed from afar. Facts substitute ideas, and consequently the language is more concrete. Characters are built up in terms of action and not in virtue of judgement. Grammar is reduced to its simplest forms, and the narrator frequently transforms himself into a transparent partner of the whole plot. The distance between the narrator and narration is diminished to the possible minimum. Spontaneity, even if technically manipulated, is the ultimate overall impression the author wants to convey.

From a purely thematic point of view, it has to be said that his short stories, the complex result of accurate watching of contemporary insignificant events, have a noteworthy value as folkloristic material which, although elaborated and reconstructed literarily, is never submitted to extreme imaginative readaptation. In this respect his articles on local customs and traditional folk life are intimately related to his creative works. He shows a constant tendency to narrate even when imparting pure information; articles like *Ghodod tal-Biedja* (1927), *Id-Daqqaqa ta' Dari* (1931) and *Is-Suq tal-Mogħoż* (1932) seek to bridge as much as possible the distinction between the essay and the short story. Inversely, he occasionally resorts to the essay form when unfolding a plot. In both cases he reveals an essentially instructive concept of literature.

## Dun Karm

Dun Karm (1871-1961), born at Żebbuġ, remained proud of his rural origin throughout his life and succeeded in identifying the real character of Malta without renouncing to his cultural background, which was largely determined by the central role played by the Italian language and literature in his social and educational environment.

His ability to arrive at a synthesis of the two apparently irreconcilable extremes of popular Maltese culture and sophisticated Italian inspiration is typically romantic and is perhaps the basic justification for his being known as Malta's national poet.

His earlier works in Italian, dating from his first known published poem, *La Dignità Episcopale* (1889), illustrate the peace and tranquillity of his childhood and youth. The death of his mother in 1909 and the fact that from 1910 onwards, when he had to start living on his own, he had to face solitude are followed by the most significant aspect of his poetic life, the discovery of the Maltese language in 1912 as his main medium of creative expression. From then onwards he embarked on a thorough exploration of the island's historical and cultural identity as well as of his innermost tension as an artist of sentiment and experience.

His Maltese poetry written between 1912 and the late twenties reveals two major points: the sublimation of his past life, now seen as a motive of deep nostalgia, and the celebration of the characteristics of his country. The most important poems of this period – *Mingħajr Omm* (1912), *Id-Dar* (1912), *It-Tbahhir* (1912), *Inti ma Targax* (1912), *Wahdi* (1914), *Lill-Kanarin Tiegħi* (1915), *In-Nissieġa* (1913), *Lid-Dielja* (1913), *Il-Għodwa* (1914), *Gunju* (1914), *It-Tifla tar-Raba'* (1915), *Il-Musbieħ tal-Mużew* (1920), *Lill-Mithna tar-Riħ* (1922), *Għanja ta' Malti fl-Amerka* (1923), *Xenqet ir-Raba'* (1926), *Il-Għanja tar-Rebħa* (1927) – determine his future development as a poet of subjective feelings as well as a poet of collective aspirations. Personal and national features blend to form one unique whole which at the same time reveals the fundamental dualism of his identity: the singular and the universal. Both components continued to find their expression in later works.

The thirties are perhaps the years of his maturity. Poems like *Fil-Katakombi – I* (1927), *Naf u Nemmen* (1933), *Fil-Katakombi – II* (1934) and *Lil Gannina Pisani* (1937) discuss the existential problem from a deeply religious point of view. In 1927 he had already showed his intention of translating Foscolo's *I Sepolcri*. The publication of *L-Oqbra* in 1936 has a long background of study of the Italian poet's human and intellectual personality. Such an exercise prompted in him a profound meditation on the moral content of the Italian poem and a need to complete the picture by providing a poetic answer to Foscolo's philosophical queries. The poems mentioned above anticipate his conclusions in *Il-Jien u lil hinn Minnu*, a major work begun in 1936 and published two years later. The initial crisis of solitude already defined in individual terms is now translated into a universally human condition. Man himself is alone on earth and his main preoccupation is how to satisfy his basic wish to transcend death.

Other works of the same period – such as *Żagħżuġ ta' Dejjem* (1933), *Wied Qirda* (1933), *Għal Dun Mikiel Xerri* (1933), *Lil Mikiel Anton Vassalli* (1933), *Dehra tat-VIII ta' Settembru 1565* (1935) – contribute to the same vision of the poet obsessed with two apparently distinct preoccupations: how to interpret man in his national capacity and how to explore the destiny of man as a temporary inhabitant on earth. As time went by, the poet seems to have reached a higher level of spiritual equilibrium, poetically expressed through a dialogue with nature as evidence of a hidden divine plan.

The evolution of Maltese poetry owes much to Dun Karm's contribution. The vision he proposed of Malta as a nation is probably more intriguing for its extraliterary impact, and this confirms the relevance of his poetry which he constantly sought to transform into a sublimated image of his immediate environment.

### Guzè Ellul Mercer

Guzè Ellul Mercer (1897-1961), born at Msida, may give the impression that he is only interested in narrating a simple story, whereas the deeper layers of his prose, always lucid and conveniently realistic, betray his search for the hidden truth of his characters. He participates in various ways in the popular trends of Maltese narrative works of the first half of the twentieth century, a period which combined the writer's inner need of self-expression with the historical necessity of rediscovering the old, predominantly unwritten language and remoulding it into a sufficiently respectable literary vehicle. His works have a place in the vast programme of syntactic and stylistic reconstruction launched by novelists and poets alike in the nineteenth century, but his more valid contribution stems from a profounder preoccupation with a number of problems, social and existential.

Ellul Mercer published a considerable number of short stories in *Il-Fmar*, *Il-Kotra*, *Il-Malti* and elsewhere. *Frejjet ta' Minghul* (1929) are perhaps the best example of his early experience as a literary writer who combines the exploration of a personal style with the expression of his own vision of life. Although he falls in various respects in the category of the novelists of his age, he goes beyond the more popular limits and suggests different, more modern approaches to the concept, if not to the construction, of the novel. He is very far from departing from the rigid traditional structure of a story understood as a self-explanatory series of causes and effects, and frequently adopts the attitude of the unpretentious story-teller whose primary challenge is to establish an immediate relationship with the average reader.

In spite of this, he reveals an appreciable awareness of some of the themes which came to the fore in the early twentieth century European prose. The realistic and the psychological components of modern narration found a synthesis in his work, even though he did not detach himself to a great extent from the type of literature being written in Maltese by the other significant contemporary authors. His past is recent, not remote, and is given a social, and not a historical, dimension. Man is seen as an individual and not as a member of a nation.

*Leli ta' Haz-Zghir* (1938) is an important attempt at moving forward towards the psychological novel. The environment is depicted in clear terms and the author's social consciousness, better developed in his shorter stories, like *Mari* and *Mara tad-Dnub*, occupies a large portion of the narrative; it does not resolve itself, however, into the main aspect of the novel. The story is constructed as a set of events which take place one after the other and the people involved are made to look as if they were only other elements of one whole visible picture, which is actually introspective. His real concern is for the protagonist, the almost silent, introvert bearer of truth. The environment itself lives within him although Ellul Mercer employs his literary devices to depict it in its colourfulness and monotony. The love-hate relationship between the writer and his object of observation, so typical of Maltese modern prose, is already present in him. Leli forms a unique part of the self-contained "world" of Haz-Zghir, the village where nothing ever happens. In the long run, the village becomes an image of the whole country, perhaps of the whole

world, and Leli comes forth as the unidentifiable anti-hero, the conscience which suffers in silence, the mind which cannot be understood. Self-expression and communication are transformed into problems of a sensitive, tormented soul.

Isolation and retirement of the self are the two paths through which Leli faces truth, now that he is enlightened with the knowledge of great philosophers who impose basic questions on his sensibility. Ellul Mercer's quest is to reconcile philosophy with faith, science with religion, empirical data with metaphysics, reason with intuition. The Kantian distinction between science and man's sense of moral duty, positivism and the discussion of God in Dostoyevsky's novels are the cultural point of departure of the writer. He only fails to insert such a detailed discussion in his story, but the background of Leli's profound crisis of knowledge is simply the intellectual deposit he acquired through constant reading.

On the other extreme of the whole picture there is the village, simple, ignorant, inactive, removed from the fundamental preoccupations of a thinking man. Consequently Leli may be said to form a unique part of his environment only in so far as he has to live physically there. Spiritually he belongs to somewhere else, and finally to nowhere. His intellectual preparation puts him in an almost self-inflicted exile. The negative forces of the village lead him to a sort of madness subtly understood in the positive sense of superiority. Hence the reference to the identification of genius with madness and particularly to Max Simon Nordau's work.

Ellul Mercer makes all this sufficiently clear through the reference to Plato's allegory of the cave in *The Republic*, Book VII. Plato compares human nature in respect of education and its lack to dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern with a long entrance open to light. Of all the people in the village – *Haz-Zghir*, and symbolically Malta – one individual succeeds in detecting the light. From this point onwards Leli leads a life of utter detachment and misunderstanding. The author's basic idea is how to develop the inner realm of Leli, the conscience of an enlightened thinker in the midst of a thoughtless community. The didactic excerpts of the novel, almost intervals in which the narrator becomes a sociologist or a moralist, can be partially justified with reference to his intention of making the implications more relevant to a particular historical condition.

Leli's fundamental problem is how to reconcile certain contents of his knowledge with the feeling of the existence of God. The anti-hero is, in fact, called *Leli*, the biblical meaning of which is "God is with us". The novel also reveals the author's devotion towards his mother, a deeply religious woman chosen to close the whole narrative in prayer for her son plunged in meditation and melancholy. In many instances *Leli ta' Haz-Zghir* is overtly autobiographical.

*Leli ta' Haz-Zghir* is perhaps the most religious novel in Maltese literature. The prominent role given to the main character as a disturbed mind and the distance established throughout between him and the other members of the plot render the novel an important attempt at introducing the psychological approach and at promoting literature's purely intellectual content.

### Rużar Briffa

Rużar Briffa (1906-1963), born at Valletta, is one of the more important romantic poets of Malta. His lyrics translate personal sorrow into a universal vision of human suffering and express in a sentimental way his attitude towards life seen as a difficult condition to which man is solitary and largely unable to understand himself and be understood by the outer world. He succeeds in blending together

daily experience and a basically negative intuition of life. His vast medical experience, especially with the lepers, is the most significant point of reference of his inspiration and one can hardly distinguish the medical doctor from the poet in him. Briffa is always conscious of suffering as the supreme adventure of existence.

Most of his works fall into a pattern which recognises two major dimensions, time and space, within which life, and subsequently poetry, must inevitably evolve. The time dimension insists on aspects which indicate retirement (the evening, the night, winter, bad weather), whereas the space dimension depicts a solitary world where man becomes fully aware of his natural inability to go beyond the limits imposed by existence itself. Silent gardens, cemeteries, lonely streets, abandoned places such as churches and the vast seas, form one whole environment which is actually a figurative rendering of his constant psychological condition.

His best poems, such as *Il-Ghanja ta' l-Imnikket*, *Il-Kotra u Jien*, *Nofs in-Nhar Saffi*, *Metamorphosis*, present man in relationship to himself, deprived of illusions, incapable of self-deception (ultimately reducible to the belief that worldly happiness is possible). Melancholy is almost a natural state, and stability an unattainable desire. Briffa is eminently the artist of anxiety.

The love themes plays a central role in his poetry. *Lin-Namrata* (1931), *Wahdieni* (1933), *Il-Ghanja ta' l-Imhabba* (1927) and *Ghanja* (1933) may in some way be associated with his first marriage to Constance Winifrid Dunn who died in 1950 after having been married to him since 1933. On the other hand, the gentle and equally remote figure of his mother Govanna, as depicted in *Lil Ommi* and *Lil Ommi - Omm Int le Taf*, both written in 1928, is a source of great, even if at times indirect, inspiration. The poems reveal the timidity of an eternal son in front of a woman who alone can give the poet refuge and self-confidence. The theme of a return to the womb appears in two of his later poems, *Ilbierah* (1960) and *Ilbierah Dhalt*. His second marriage to Louisette Attard Bajona in 1952 gave him the tranquillity he craved for throughout his previous life, but in 1961 he found out that he was fatally sick and died two years later.

His last poem *Il-Ballatella tal-Funtana* (1962) is not very different, poetically and psychologically, from his very first known work in Maltese, *Lacrymae Rerum* (1924). Both are expressions of a solitary soul in search of unattainable inner peace. His whole poetic life is characterised by a deep sense of frustration and an almost innate inability to come to terms with the conditions of existence.

Love and faith are both translated into poetry as if only these two dimensions can render life meaningful. Sorrow is frequently associated with love, and faith is seen as a way of giving significance to suffering. Ultimately these two aspects form a psychological condition typical of his search for a level of being which transcends common reality. Love is transformed into a discovery of the inner self, and faith assumes the character of another crucifixion.

Alongside the personal *angst* of his own experience there is a whole background of sickness and deprivation revealed to him through his work with the lepers. The poet and the medical doctor constitute one unique personality which manifests itself in a way of behaving (as a man he was extremely kind and sympathetic) and of writing poetry (as a poet he depicts life as tormentous).

He himself declared in 1945 that poetry is not a pleasurable job but rather another sort of suffering. He used to think out his poem for a very long time, for months and perhaps for years. Then, all of a sudden, he felt a great urge to write it down immediately. Even his method of creating verse is parallel to his more known aspects of behaving as a man. Timidity, solitude and fear from the more external aspects of life are not only patterns which describe the real substance of his poetry,

but also features which form his definition as a man. As a romantic in the truest sense of the term, biography and verse are always interchangeable and only as phenomena do they appear as distinct and separate.

The cause-effect relationship between sensation and inspiration is intentionally developed to the full, and his poetry acquires its relevance primarily as another document of human expression rather than as a realisation of an aesthetic principle. On the other hand, poetry creeps in when universal relevance is attained. Briffa's continuous challenge as an artist should therefore be evaluated in this respect, that is as an effort to transcend autobiography and reach out for what is probable and necessary to all humans.

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