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and extension

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Malte
A history of maltese literature :
its nature and extension

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A history of Maltese culture may be said to reflect in various intimate ways the history of the whole community. Since, much more than in the case of larger countries, Malta could never do without larger countries, which ultimately turned out to be a complex process of influences, adaptations and reactions, such a history, be it political, social or cultural, is necessarily bound to assume, or at least include, a comparative character. This may be all the more so owing to the fact that what one may euphemistically call foreign contacts were nothing less than foreign occupations. Consequently the conditions which characterize and modify the process of, say, a political history of subordination may boil down to be the inalienable causes of analogous conditions in the cultural field.

The basic distinction is, to my mind, linguistic and not essentially cultural or psychological. Considering the two major languages which assumed, contemporarily or subsequently, the role of primary media for the sophisticated expression of a community's feelings, experiences and ambitions, one has to start by distinguishing between Italian and Maltese. (The presence of English is relatively too recent to be defined as another channel through which Maltese literature could, or actually did, seek new bearings. Apart from the fact that

the literary efforts of the Maltese in English are relatively few, since Maltese is now accepted by all as the best and more diffused medium of local literature, it is not likely that the marginal (or emarginated?) output in English in our times constitutes a significant aspect of our literary process).

The dialectical relationship between Italian and Maltese has been looked at, up to a few years ago, as controversial, or worse still, as the unhappy and not easily reconcilable, marriage between a rich Latin culture and a poor, quantitatively restricted Semitic one. (Apart from other motives, a sprinkling of anti-semitism may be found to form part of the crux of this prejudice). One can only conclude most easily that, if one agrees that the limits of this partial and impressionistic definition are just those which suit most the language question *ut sic*, initiated in the last decades of the Nineteenth century and prolonged up to the thirties and forties of this century, one has still to further subdivide the said distinction. In other words, one presumably has to define the basic nature and motivation underlying the apparently contradictory dialectic Italian-Maltese from a purely linguistic point of view. After getting a clear perspective of the language question — since it is only natural that languages which find themselves involved in

interaction within the limits of the same community are also bound to develop cultural and particularly literary cross-currents — one may proceed to deal exclusively with the literary question. (Incidentally, at this stage it may suffice to say that considering the widest possible use of languages the presence of more than one medium of expression seems to have caused schizophrenic traits in our linguistic habit. For example, our fathers presumably thought in Maltese — though some of them insisted that they did so in Italian —, spoke in Maltese, but wrote in Italian. An analogous situation is found in contemporary Malta : many think in Maltese (or in English ?), speak in Maltese, but write in English).

Without going into the details of the historical evidence we are provided with, I feel I could sum up the whole point as follows. Considering the traditional presence of both languages in Malta, the first conclusion is that Maltese is prior to Italian as a spoken language, whilst there is hardly any proof that Italian was ever adopted as the habitual speech medium by any local section of the native population. When Maltese started to be written on a relatively wide scale, Italian had already established itself as the only and unquestionable cultural language of the island and assumed a respectable literary tradition of its own. It is superfluous to stress that this considerable deposit of literary output throughout the centuries is the work of both Maltese writers and foreign ones (who happened to live or spend a period of their life on the island) alike. Thus, while Maltese has the priority on the level of the spoken language, Italian has the priority of being the almost exclusive written medium, both for political, social and cultural affairs, for a long period. Since it was only late (about a century ago) that Maltese could strive to attain the status of a decent literary vehicle, the first question the scholar has to ask himself may be this : from which historical point or landmark should a philologically oriented history of Maltese literature start ? The question is ultimately the same as asking whether the Italian literature of local writers should ever be included, that is whether it is at all legitimate to present scientifically the two languages in a state of mutual conflict even on the purely literary order. Or better, whether one should be after the establishing of the nature, thematic and technical, of the literary expression of the Maltese people when they traditionally and unquestioningly adopted Italian and when consequently, Maltese had no clear and immediate possibility of gaining the status every native language is normally given.

If one tends to seek the literary spirit of the Maltese throughout the centuries, one should only find it obvious to include, and give causative prominence to, the said Italian production in the whole picture, thus rendering it as the first, or preliminary phase of the whole literary development. This approach would seek to establish the extraliterary motives which conduced Maltese to be debarred from all cultural works, and why it was (and unfortunately, at times it still « is ») socially dishonourable to use it and practically always impossible at least difficult, to write it.

Alongside this dichotomy, resulting in the inevitable co-presence of two distinct stratifications of

local society, one should also seek to define the proper character of the Italian tradition, and this cannot be done if not through a comparative analysis of the Italian literature and of its forms of participation in the island. Here one should also seek to identify the character of the local development, which at its worst would be decadent imitation, of various movements such as the Renaissance, Baroque, Arcadia, Illuminism and then the first inklings towards Romanticism.

Since Romanticism, both Latin and Germanic, took a shape of its own both through its ways of revaluating the Illuminist diffusion of knowledge through the diffusion of the native languages, and then through the more mature and profoundly felt questioning and negation of the true significance and predictability of the concept of cosmopolitanism besides the fundamental discovery of the sense of individuality (both personal and collective or national), the Romantic epoch would be found to coincide with the first serious efforts towards the rediscovery of Maltese as one of the most ancient patrimonies, as Mikiel Anton Vassalli (1764-1829) prefers to call it, of the new emerging nation. The personality of Vassalli, most identifiable through his indefatigable passion for movement from one place to another (something which was neither easily possible nor morally well considered in the Malta of his times), his deeply rooted ambition of diffusing culture through Maltese, and his controversial political activity which caused him so much trouble, is the result of a harmonious fusion of the reconcilable components of two apparently contrary cultural eras, Illuminism and Romanticism.

One of the more important results of Vassalli's political and scholarly activity is the embryonic development of a nationalistic way of thinking which centered around two basic aspects of the Nineteenth century philosophy and aesthetics : (a) the affirmation of the singular and collective identity (an experience necessarily based on the absolute devotion the Romantics had for sentiment and passion, as opposed to the old and undisputed right enjoyed by the « goddess reason » which underleaded as evinced in almost all poetics since Aristotle, all previous works of art modelled with architectural precision and in a state of psychological equilibrium), and (b) the faithful cultivation and diffusion of the national language as the most valuable component in the definition of the *patria* and as the most effective justification both for a dominated community's claiming to be a nation and for the actual realization of unity of all fellow citizens under one banner.

Following this line of approach, the second phase of Maltese literature, or else of the literature of Malta, would be sought in the identification of two up to now distinct levels of literary expression, Italian and Maltese. The contemporaneity of the two schools, though linguistically much different and politically and socially opposed and engaged in a sort of ideological « civil war », may appear, at first sight, to be the thematic and formal distinction between the old literature still written according to the Latin tradition, and the new literature written according to some Semitic philosophy and technical apparatus (Maltese being looked, at, up to a few decades ago, as a mere corrupt Arabic dialect, the « poverty » of which was further proved

by its lexical « debts » to Sicilian and Italian).

Since the Maltese community had, or still has, a Catholic Orientation, and since the local writers who either abandoned Italian to start experimenting with Maltese or started their creative activity through Maltese were not in any way alien to the Italian tradition (they were repeatedly reminded of their being « *educati Italianamente* », and so they were), one can only speak of a fusion between the older and the new tradition, a historically organic continuation of one complete process with the sole difference of the use of the native language instead of the more respectable foreign one.

Maltese only needed then to assume this « respectability » and to be identifiable with culture, apart from folklore, popular comedy and religious ritual. This was the challenge which expected and needed a master of both languages, gifted also with a sublime poetic character. This could not possibly be one who was outside the (only) group of dedicated Maltese writers, that is those who cultivated the Italian tradition and sought to develop it locally. The situation, if purified from all the political innuendos which easily made one lose sight of the objective approach to the real problem (labelled as linguistic but in reality deeply radicated in social and ideological substrata), only lacked the presence of resourceful author who had already let European (and especially the Italian risorgimental) Romanticism exert considerable influences on his spirit to make him take the irrevocable decision of giving both Italian and Maltese their respective due. In fact, Dun Karm (1871-1961), today known as Malta's national poet, endowed with a deep sense of historicism, accepted the challenge in its entirety, but only « failed » to see any incompatibility between the two linguistic media on the literary, purely creative, level.

Since he wrote exclusively in Italian up to 1912 (his first poem, *La Dignità Episcopale*, goes back to 1889), when he started writing in Maltese he did not undergo a substantial or radical change, but retaining the formal and ideological characteristics he had already developed considerably in his first poetic phase, he passed on to assert the same dignity in the regard of the native language. The fact that this event of major importance in the literary evolution of Maltese did not take the form of a total re-examination but just of a healthy fusion between the past and the present, is further evinced by the other significant fact that Dun Karm went on to write occasionally in Italian even after the year of his « conversion ». In this way, he may be said to summarize within the limits of his poetic life the three historical phases which I have briefly tried to outline from the point of view of the linearity of a history of Maltese literature conceived and written as a history of culture : the Italian period, the Italian-Maltese period, the Maltese period.

Obviously enough, the Maltese period comes up to our very days. The contemporary period is cha-

acterized by the radical contestation of the thematic content of the previous literary schools, that is realism as a somewhat stale (or so, at least, it appeared to some of the new generation of writers) reproduction or documentation of human activity (a sort of literary photography which recalls the earlier European realist movements rather than the more subtle universal developments in these last decades), and romanticism, which, as it happens to all movements which prolong their existence too much, started to bear ample evidence of decadence and extinction. The new vision of the cerebralists, regarding both literature as a creed or a way of life and Maltese society, which had long started to modify its identity and to experience different modes of thinking and behaving, goes back to the sixties of this century when the new sense of national identity and political adventures naturally ought to give rise to more complex attitudes in the creative field.

Together with the reaction of young poets against the previous models (the elementary phraseology, the metaphorical nucleus, metrical formality, syntactic patterns which appeared to be obstinately afraid of traditionally unknown syntagmatic and paradigmatic deviations etc.) and with the reaction of young novelists against the historical novel (the basic structure of its narrative, the extrovert nature of characterisation, the classical or neo-classical, at times baroque-like, rendering of the language, the preference of decorative description to character investigation, the epic pattern which appeared to divert the attention of the new readers from new inward and outward preoccupations, etc.), one has to point out the attention which these same writers started to give to English and American authors. Being almost nervously aware of their foreign contemporary colleagues, local authors could at last claim that they were moving ahead apace with the most recent movements.

This is, of course, a rather sketchy delineation of the fundamental character which a history of Maltese literature may adopt. I personally would prefer to add a structural analysis of the formal and thematic evolution involved, together with the philological stratum which, things being as they are, is still indispensable and which in better conditions may be always valuable if adequately exploited. (By adequate exploitation I mean the disposing of the relevant data in the proper manner, particularly through the scholar's being rather scrupulously and rigidly selective in handling them, in order to arrive to establish an average qualitative level which does not present Maltese literature as inferior to foreign ones.) Searching deep in the literary patterns which would reveal themselves in such an exposition is always challenging and worthwhile, but it is also imperative in order to make way towards a methodic and exclusively scientific examination in spite of the common temptation to treat the whole problem in an improvised and impressionistic manner.