

This Fair Land – Maltese in London
(A project that promotes Maltese literature through translation)

Charles Briffa

(A talk delivered on 13th October, 2015,
for the official launching of *This Fair Land*

at Kabaret at Karamel, 4, Coburg Rd., N22 6UJ London at 8 p.m.

– an activity organised by

Francis Boutle Publishers together with the National Book Council of Malta)

Introduction

The sea and the sun are stereotypes of the Maltese Islands that suggest a fervent uniformity. But this generalisation is not the entire story. Reading *This Fair Land* attentively is realising how diverse Maltese culture is –

- how marked by history
- how characterised by religion
- how influenced by different languages
- how preoccupied by experience
- how fascinated by time –

in other words, how varied Maltese literature is despite the fact that it is, relatively speaking, a young literature: because Maltese literature is the young literature of a small nation living on two tiny islands – “small”, here, means modest and unassuming, but still expressive and significant.

Religious bias, socio-political attitudes, and cultural tendencies of the different rulers and their systems – conscious or unconscious – all conditioned the way the Maltese viewed their world. This is quite evident from the institutionalised elements and the obsolete forms of the language. The language helped to shape the mentality of the common people and their patterns of expression.

The anthology

This Fair Land attempts to show the interconnection between context and language, and is, therefore,

1. a record of specific literary achievements over space and through time, and
2. an account of the different contexts that shaped the people’s reasoning power.

The term “Maltese literature” is not bounded by language. It is not restricted solely to written works in Maltese.¹

- It includes also original works written by Maltese in other languages – most particularly in French (Laurant Ropa, 1891-1967), Italian (Giovanni Curmi, 1900-1973), and English (Francis Ebejer, 1925-1993); and
- it includes also translations of foreign works into Maltese – as, for instance, Victor Xuereb’s *Ir-Repubblika* (from Greek), Michael Zammit’s *Il-Bħagawad Gita* (from Sanskrit), Clifford Borg-Marks’ *Dao De Jing* (from Chinese), Michael Buttigieg’s *Is-Sid* (from French), Charles Briffa’s *Beowulf* (from Old English), and Alfred Palma’s translation of Shakspeare and Dante.

¹ C.Briffa, ed., *Il-Malti* LXXV, Nov. 2001 (Akkademja tal-Malti, Malta), p.96-97.

However, Maltese literature abounds with original works written in Maltese. For, literature in Malta grows from

- personal experience
- commonly held social attitudes
- national affairs
- historical events
- extranational matters

And *This Fair Land* tries to show this cultural cluster as it

1. defines the Maltese character,
2. delineates the dimensions of the literature of the Maltese people, and
3. expresses the people's commitment to cases and individuality.

Outline of literary history²

Literature written in Maltese does not have a very long life-story despite the fact that Maltese in its spoken form is a very old language and despite the historical fact that Malta had been in close contact with literary civilisations since classical times.

The 12th century

In medieval times, Maltese writers had to make use of a foreign language for the expression of their feelings and thoughts. In fact, 12th century Maltese poets wrote in Arabic (the dominant literary medium of the Mediterranean); thematically their works reveal the outlook and temper of the Mediterranean mind and stylistically their poetry is an amalgamation of Semitic and European elements.

The 13th & 14th centuries

Eventually the influx of Latin culture ousted Arabic as the dominant literary medium, and a significant twin process in the culture of medieval Malta was created: Maltese, basically Semitic, was used as an aural medium of an illiterate nation whose visual medium for formal communication, however, was often a Romance language. So the spoken language of the common people was Semitic (i.e. Maltese) and the written language of the elite and of the administration was Romance (mostly Latin, Sicilian, and Italian).

The 15th century

Then around the mid-15th century we find the only instance of medieval literature in the vernacular. **Pietru Caxaro** (d.1485) composed the *Cantilena*, a lament in which the poet expresses his misfortune that an ungovernable heart had thrown him into a sea of despair - an experience that conveys solitude but ultimately moves towards self-determination in a ray of hope.³

² What follows is a summary of Charles Briffa, "A Brief History of Maltese Literature" in K.Gambin, ed., *Malta, Roots of a Nation: The Development of Malta from an Island People to an Island Nation* (Midsea Books for Heritage Malta and the EU Accession Celebrations Committee, Malta, 2004), p.225-246.

³ The poem was found accidentally by Fr Michael Fsadni and Prof. Godfrey Wettinger at the back of a notarial document in 1966.

It is presently assumed that this poem in medieval Maltese is an attempt at challenging the assumption in contemporary culture of a monolithic or univocal Italianism. In this view, Caxaro's poem works to uncover the literary potential of the submitting mentality and thus it becomes a marginal voice that ignores the dominant Italianate mode. It attains a remarkable flexibility through its predominantly Semitic vocabulary and through the bold use of figurative expressions.

The 16th century

In the 16th century there was nothing written in Maltese. And nobody ever raised a voice in favour of written Maltese or against the threat of Italian domination. The Maltese language was disregarded as the medium of culture and it survived only as the spoken medium of the illiterate folk. The next step forward belongs to the early writers who dared to adapt the vernacular to the visual medium.⁴

The 17th century

It was only in the 17th century that Maltese started to be written down, and then very scantily – generally as wordlists by interested visitors to the Islands. But we also find a sonnet (written around 1672-75) by **G.F. Bonamico** (1639-1680) in honour of Grandmaster Nicolas Cottner (1663-1680). The poem expresses a political ideal as it seeks to channel the legitimate authority of the Order in directions consonant with the country's political needs.

The 18th century

In the 18th century the language is mobilised for personal and social pursuits. In the development of literature, prose generally comes after poetry since verse was often considered to be more expressive in an oral delivery and more easily memorised. It is therefore a rather remarkable feature of Maltese literature that 18th century writers produced a considerable body of written prose at a time which may be taken as the incubation period of Maltese literature. This unusual accomplishment was due mainly to the religious fervour of the preacher **Ignazio Saverio Mifsud** (1722 - ?), to the linguistic vehemence of **Can. Gian Frangisk Agius De Soldanis** (1712-1770), and to the idealistic vision of **Mikiel Anton Vassalli** (1764-1829).

Certainly in this century there was a firm consciousness of the past service the vernacular rendered to the simple country folk and of its present function and future mission. These writers

⁴In the later middle ages when the Normans consolidated their political position in Malta the language of administration was Latin which also replaced Arabic as the language of culture and learning. Gradually Italian in its Sicilian form made itself felt about the time of the *Cantilena*, but in the following centuries the language of culture in Malta was Italian in its Tuscan form. The language of Tuscany expanded and influenced the entire Italian peninsula. Since the 14th century the diffusion of Tuscan literature and the dispersal of Tuscans in search of commercial possibilities all over Italy left their literary and non-literary effects. The penetration of Tuscan into non-literary documents was unchallenged and became more common after the middle of the 15th century when political, commercial, and cultural activities interacted and left an indelible mark on the language of written usage. It was not surprising, therefore, that Tuscan also crept into Maltese administrative activities since there were traditionally close political, commercial, and cultural links with Italy.

realised that Maltese had the essential means of achieving its own progress and (in the case of Vassalli) of attaining a proper national dignity.

The 19th century

The essential feature of 19th century prose is the continuing emergence of Maltese as a written medium that contributed to the perceptual reorientation of the times. Vassalli's exhortation in favour of the mother tongue had far-reaching implications, and his solicitation for writing in Maltese coincided with a social need (encouraged by the British colonial authorities) for improving the local standards of education, making them suitable for the common people. This accompanied the emerging collective attitude as European romanticism encouraged the use of the native language as an affirmation of personal individuality and national identity within the consciousness of a community. The Maltese, under the influence of the Italian *risorgimento*, developed a sense of national awareness that brought about a wider use of the vernacular which in turn led to the growth of an indigenous literature, most particularly poetry and narrative prose.

The greatest achievements of 19th century writers was the fact that they established poetic diction and introduced literary forms into Maltese literature; that is, they paved the way to further development in literary creativity in the following century.

Prose – In the meantime prose became a social need. Political demands and social reforms (and most particularly the introduction of press freedom in 1839) extended the general need for written Maltese. The people had always spoken Maltese, now they wanted to write it and read it. They realised that written Maltese prose was no longer an impossibility. The main efforts of literary composition during the period may be seen in terms of three interrelated activities that contributed to the varieties of prose.

- a. First of all, there were the attempts by anecdotists to reproduce the common speech of the people.
- b. Then, there was a considerable amount of translation.
- c. Finally, there were the writings of the literary men who consciously sought to create a proper style in prose.

The talents of these anecdotists, translators, and cultured stylists were boosted by journalism. Their attempts, therefore, led to the development of modes of writing that gave information, discussed and reported events, and told a story.

The 20th century

The 20th century then saw two major literary groups:

- the Academy of Maltese Writers (founded in 1920) and
- the Movement for the Promotion of Literature (founded in 1967).

The latter was short-lived but its impact was more lasting. The Academy, however, survived and its functions and aims received the authorities' support during most of the century, and it entered the 21st century fully confident that it could face globalisation.

Political independence from Britain was attained in 1964 and this serves as a convenient dividing line.

- Pre-independence literature was mainly concerned with the search for a national identity and therefore veered towards traditional elements. It is dominated by a spirit of romanticism and by the figure of Mgr Carmel Psaila (1871-1961), commonly known as Dun Karm and Malta's National Poet – who was a co-founder and a pillar of the Academy of Maltese Writers.
- Post-independence literature, on the other hand, dealt largely with the conflict between the individual and society and steered towards the fundamental needs of the self. It is characterised mainly by a spirit of radicalism and modernism, and dominated largely by the Movement for the Promotion of Literature.

The 21st century

At the turn of the century Maltese literature still carried the imprint of the Academy and the Movement intermingled with a measure of updating as it scanned the times for current trends. By the end of the 20th century, Maltese literature took an unpredictable course, depending not on any corporate intellectual and/or artistic effort but on individual genius. Thus, Maltese literature, in the beginning of the 21st century must content itself with a moderate amount of scattered talents.

Each genre tends to stress something and reveals important facts about the 21st century writers. The Maltese poet is utterly aware that he is a full-time member of the global community. He has to be sensitive to the events and moods experienced outside his shores but at the same time he has to confirm his Mediterranean identity. The Maltese novelist, on his part, becomes very sensitive too and finds himself in solidarity against a structure of social injustice.

The environment and the self are, therefore, still very relevant as the 21st century sees Malta as a full member of the European Union and as an island that has to face the great European crisis of the refugees.

Conclusion

This Fair Land tries to depict most of these characteristics as it shows a tiny nation trying to remain intellectually active and lively, and attempting to demonstrate its literary significance in a globalised world.