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THE FUSION OF SEMITIC AND LATIN CULTURES IN THE LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE OF MALTA

A history of Maltese culture may be said to reflect in various ways the history of the whole community. Since, much more than in the case of larger countries, Malta could never do without foreign contacts, necessarily causative of a complex process of influences, such a history, be it political, social or cultural, is bound to assume a comparative character. What are euphemistically called foreign contacts were nothing less than foreign occupations. The conditions which characterise and modify the process of, say, a political history of subordination, may boil down to be the real causes of analogous conditions in the cultural field.

Conflicts of various natures did come to the fore throughout Maltese history. In the case of literary culture, the basic conflictuality seems to be linguistic and not necessarily cultural or psychological. The roots of the dualism to be discussed here are embedded in the soil of political experience: there were the foreign rulers and the natives, the ruled ones. Within the category of the ruled, social stratification manifested itself in linguistic diversity. The so-called uneducated class only knew Maltese, the native tongue, whereas the others could immediately distinguish between the language of culture, traditionally Italian, and the local dialect.

Considering the two major languages which assumed the role of primary media for literary expression, one has to start by distinguishing between Italian and Maltese. The relationship between Italian and Maltese has been looked at, up to a few years ago, as controversial, or worse still, as the unhappy intercourse between a Latin culture, the presence of which in the island goes back many centuries, and a Semitic one, characterised mainly by the basic Arabic structure of the popular language which, owing to the island's uninterrupted contacts with the outer world, adopted a Romance superstructure. One has to define the nature of the apparently contradictory relationship Italian-Maltese from a purely linguistic

viewpoint. After getting a clear perspective of the 'Language Question', which constituted one of the major political preoccupations between 1880 and 1939, one may proceed to deal exclusively with the literary question.

The literary tradition

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 population. The Arabs conquered Malta in 870 A.D. and thus laid the foundations for the language we now call Maltese, unique for being a Semitic tongue written in the Latin script. With the Norman conquest in 1090 A.D. the language of the island started to find itself open to extra-Arabic influences, a process which has widened the lexical stock and the syntactic patterns and which is still active nowadays.

When Maltese started to be written on a significant scale in the 17th century (other instances are being here purposely omitted since they are rather rare and sporadic), and then on a much wider popular level in the 18th and I9th centuries, Italian had already established itself as the only and unquestionable cultural language of the island and had a respectable literary tradition of its own. One of the earliest documents in Italian dates back to 1409. Maltese men of letters developed an uninterrupted local "Italian" literary movement which went on up to the Second World War period, whereas Maltese as a literary idiom started to prominently co-exist in the first half of the I9th century, and reached a respectable climax in its last decades. This considerable deposit of "Italian" literary output throughout the centuries, a large section of which is still in manuscript form at the National Library of Malta, is the work of both Maltese and foreign writers (who happened to spend a period of time or live in the island).

Thus, whilst Maltese has the historical priority on the level of the spoken language, Italian has the priority of being the almost exclusive written medium, for sociocultural affairs, for the longest period. The native language had only to wait for the arrival of a new mentality which would integrate an unwritten, popular tradition with a written, academically respectable one. This situation could only lead to the fusion of two major cultures, the Arabic and the Latin, into one unique whole. The Maltese language is the most significant example of such a phenomenon, but it is not the only one. The best example of such a fusion of Arabic and Latin culture can be immediately found through a close look at the national anthem of Malta, the words of which are composed by Dun Karm Psaila (1871-1961), the national poet of Malta, who has written exclusively in Italian till reaching his early fourties, and who then went on writing in Maltese, which is basically Semitic in its vocabularly. The following are the six lines constituting Malta's national anthem, as written by Dun Karm Psaila. All words are Arabic,

but the metrical pattern is based on the hendecasyllabic line, the most esteemed rhythmical pattern of the whole Italian prosodic tradition:

Lil din l-art helwa, l-omm li tatna isimha,
Hares, Mulej, kif dejjem Int harist,
Ftakar li lilha bl-ohla dawl libbist.

Aghti, kbir Alla, id-dehen lil min jahkimha,
Rodd il-hniena lis-sid, sahha 'l haddiem,
Seddaq il-ghaqda fil-Maltin u s-sliem.

A highly significant and far reaching conclusion may be drawn at this stage. A certain section of the community adopted two distinct languages, within the same inhabited territory, for different purposes. The spoken language was Semitic, whereas the written one was Romance. It is a distinction which may account for a certain degree of Malta's inherent inconsistency in assessing its own identity, which is still present nowadays when English in various respects assumed the role previously granted to Italian and made new inroads which, according to the criteria set and declared by UNESCO and the Council of Europe, occupy a territory exclusively reserved for the native tongue. Again. the dualism English-Maltese is not only linguistic but also cultural, social and political. It is sufficiently safe, however, to presume that Maltese is still the common factor, the most efficient component in the definition of Malta as a distinct national community.

If one seeks to identify the literary spirit of the Maltese throughout the centuries, one should also find it obvious to include the said Italian-oriented Maltese production, thus rendering it the first, or preliminary, phase of the whole spectrum, itself leading towards the modern emancipation of Maltese. This approach would seek to establish the social motives which debarred Maltese from all cultural manifestations, and why it was somehow dishonourable to use it. It is paradoxical as much as it is logical that the major literary figures in the history of Maltese are all so-called converts; they were all authors well versed in Italian who, at a certain point in their life, discovered the sheer beauty and wealth of the native language, and eventually transformed it into a first-class literary medium.

Pietru Pawl Saydon (1895-1971), an eminent Biblical scholar of international repute, adamantly proved this point by dedicating not less than thirty years of his life to the translation of the whole Scripture from the original languages. Dun Karm (1871-1961), the national poet, openly declared that he wanted to show that Maltese was in no way inferior to either Italian or any other language. At times through translation, but mainly through the formation of new words through the activation of the triconsonantal Semitic system inherent in

Maltese, he soon proved that what the language lacked was only a fine craftsman. And there he was, to prove that a whole tradition went utterly wrong. These are some of the most typical Maltese words of Semitic origin which Saydon adoperated in order to remain as faithful and as close as possible to the original texts: *maqdes* (temple), *qsusija* (priesthood), *amar* (command), *ghamara* (abode), *bassar* (prophet),

The importance of romanticism

One should also seek to define the proper character of the Italian tradition. This can be done best through a comparative analysis of the peninsula's literature and of how it influenced the island during a series of cultural epochs, such as Renaissance, Baroque, Illuminism and then Romanticism, by far the most important period so far as the formation of a national awareness in Malta is concerned. Romanticism, both Latin and Germanic, revalued the Illuminist concept of cultural diffusion and, while questioning the true significance and practicability of cosmopolitism, fostered the cult of national languages. This epoch, fundamentally based on the discovery of the sense of personal and national individuality, coincides with the first serious efforts towards the rediscovery of Maltese as one of the most ancient patrimonies of the new emerging nation. This is how Mikiel Anton Vassalli (1764-1829) calls it in 1796 in the important introduction to his dictionary.

The antiquity of a popular language featured very significantly in the concept of nationalism which European romanticism sought to form and preach. Nineteenth century mentality shaped the future of both language and literature in Malta in the times to come. One of the more important results of Vassalli's political and scholarly contributions is the embryonic development of a nationalistic way of thinking which centred around two basic aspects of romantic philosophy and aesthetics: (i) the affirmation of the singular and collective identity (an experience emanating from the absolute devotion the romantics had for sentiment and passion, as opposed to the old and undisputed right enjoyed by the "goddess reason") ; and (ii) the cultivation and diffusion of the national language as the most sacred component in the definition of the patria and as the most effective justification for a dominated community's claiming to be a nation and for the subsequent struggle against foreign rulers.

This new national belief promulgated by romantic Italy pervaded Malta during the period of the Risorgimento, namely during the first six decades of the nineteenth century, when writers, journalists and political rebels sought refuge in the island. Alongside their activity in favour of a united and independent homeland these refugees engaged themselves in an analogous mission: that of inviting the Maltese themselves to fight for their own political and cultural rights against the British colonial domination. This started to give rise to an ever wider utilisation

of the native language and to the gradual growth of an indigenous literature fully aware of the political, social and cultural rights of the community.

Different cultures, political attitudes, world visions and social customs crossed each other in 19th century Malta and determined to a great extent the beliefs and modes of the people for a long time to come. What may superficially look like a mere historical background, buried in a relatively remote past, is actually the real foundation on which contemporary Malta is built. Languages were finally put in direct conflict, the past and the present transformed themselves into two ways of being, and colonialism and the concept of sovereignty became items of a new national agenda which demanded that a decision should be ultimately taken. History in Malta is perhaps more debated than actually known; at times it even assumes the role of an arbiter between political parties in search of self-justification.

Language and literature as distinctive features

What is this multidimensional self made up of? The religion of the Maltese, originally Christian, namely oriental (going back to about 60AD, as narrated in the Acts of the Apostles), has become Catholic, namely eminently Latin. The language of the Maltese is basically Semitic, dating back to the Arab occupation (870-1090), whereas the national culture is fundamentally European. Most of the terms used in liturgy are originally Semitic, whilst they form part of a Catholic ritual. The following are some of the more important Maltese words of Semitic derivation which are of primary importance in Christian ritual as expressed in Maltese: *Alla* (God), *quddiesa* (mass), *tewba* (penance), *barka* (blessing), *qrar* (confession), *qdusija* (sainthood), *maghmudija* (baptism), *randan* (lent).

Colonialism has left an indelible mark on all aspects of life in Malta, including the psychology of the average inhabitant, but political emancipation has provided the people with the full rights any people can dream of and strive for. The language is the most amazing example of how history in Malta is the final outcome of different components.

Perhaps the old man still lingers on in the Maltese, but he has to come to terms with himself and realize that he is politically new, namely free, enjoying all the means of self-determination. The supreme dignity of the nation lies in the remote past - in Malta there are some of the most outstanding temples of all prehistory - but contemporary life demands what is fashionably called development. Land development frequently implies the loss and utter destruction of whole areas intimately associated with the ancient past.

The island's heritage is essentially made of stone. Assuming the function of an imaginative archetypal pattern - as Maltese poetry amply shows - the stone signifies stability, continuity, actually a sort of historical eternity. But stones which constitute a building can also serve as toys; a whole building can be

eventually demolished. and the process seems to be endless. What is apparently a physical act may betray psychological .traits. Whoever seems to be so moody in front of a stone may be moody in all his or her psycho-physical set-up. The superficial builder is perhaps a profound researcher. And what is being unearthed seems to be nothing less than the self, both individual and collective. To detect the relationship between individuality and collectivity may be enough to merely establish matters quantitatively.

This is what we normally mean by "a trend", a massive, initially voluntary but finally instinctive, participation in an act. When such an act is shared by a relatively large portion of society, it is bound to take the shape of a ritual. And there we are: Maltese history recognises its prehistoric birth in ritual, and since then it seems that the islander has not changed substantially. His attitude towards his heritage in stone is still ritual. He builds churches with the same facility he constructs villas; a church may resemble a villa, and vice-versa. A church is not only useful but also symbolical; so is a Maltese house. It is not merely an abode; it is also an image.

All this may drive home the point that different cultures did not simply meet in Malta and leave their trace. They have also produced a specific psychological frame, an unquenchable thirst for new, hitherto unknown, tastes. All the different cultures which form the island's remote history - Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Arabs, Normans, British, just to mention major ones - simultaneously denote submission to superior forces and the gradual formation of an indigenous identity through assimilation and adaption of foreign influences. In other words, foreign dominations have also moulded the Maltese character, and the latter has proved itself strong enough as to reshape whatever it had been subjected to. The literary spirit of the island can be summed up along these lines.

The main evidence of this phenomenon is to be found in the language. It is obviously the most characteristic feature of the island's national identity. It is primarily owing to the fact that Malta has got its own ancient language that it survived as a distinct nation and overcome the temptation of integrating itself with foreign countries and the danger of being absorbed by them. The paradox can be outlined as follows: whilst the Maltese tongue sharply distinguishes the island community from any other, it is also an unquestionable document of linguistic subjugation. The Maltese language is a source of pride as well as evidence of colonialism. What was initially an Arabic dialect imposed on the then tinier community grew up into a fully fletched language. Since the Norman conquest Maltese has been extensively exposed to non-Arabic, essentially Sicilian and Italian influences. Even English words introduced into Maltese have to adapt themselves to the local linguistic forms. The end-product is unique: Maltese is distinct to the extent of being a Semitic language hugely enriched by Romance elements.

A brief account of what is known as "The Language Question" may throw more light on the way different cultures flourished in Malta whilst giving room to the formation of a mature sense of modern national awareness.

The language question

Malta's insularity largely accounts for the development of an indigenous popular culture, segregated from the main foreign currents. Traditional mentality, which largely accounts for what real Malta still is, expressed complete faithfulness to the conditions of the simple life of the people, a predominantly rural and religious condition taken up by preoccupations of a subdued rather than rebellious nature, concerned with the family rather than with the nation.

The geographical position and the political history of the island brought about a very close link with Italy. Traditional European culture was mainly Italian. The Order of St. John (1530-1798) managed to transform the island into a cultural centre which had its own respectable place within the Mediterranean spectrum. It was not surprising at all that Napoleon himself imposed his own power there in 1798. Owing to isolation, however, this multidimensional influx adopted the local 'original' aspects. The most significant feature of this experience is that Malta formed a literary culture written in Italian by the Maltese themselves. For whole centuries no intellectual doubted that one was Maltese while writing in Italian and according to the Italian thematic and stylistic patterns. The local intelligentsia, belonging spiritually to a wider context of an Italo-Maltese world transcending geographical demarcations, found its real historical self in forming an integral part of at least a big sector of the region. Boundaries were not considered to be territorial.

In other words, the concept of a local Maltese culture was not limited. It did not simply recognise the isolated product, created and considered without any relationship with the outer world. What we now term 'foreign' was only 'outer'. Isolation, therefore, and insularity were not synonymous. Again, this is paradoxical: it was, as already stated, through insularity that the island managed to create for itself its own indigenous culture, but the source of initial inspiration was not isolation. Maltese writers expressing themselves in Italian were adequately conscious of what was happening in the nearby country. The major texts of Italian literature were very well known to them, and their educational apparatus relied to a great extent on them. On the other side of the fence there were the common people, speaking a traditionally dowdtrodden dialect, deprived of any official recognition, which up to the first decades of the twentieth century still lacked a standardised ortographical system.

The language of the Maltese relied for many centuries on an almost exclusively oral tradition. It therefore had all the necessary credentials for claiming to be the only real language of the Maltese; it was the oldest language known

to exist in the island. It also had the inner strength of survival and automatically served for all the purposes of popular expression and communication. It was spoken by the whole community. Undignified though it seemed, it went on from strength to strength, becoming more resourceful and precise. It had a massive social function, it was the means of religious expression, it guaranteed solidarity within the social class of its speakers. One day, when new trends of thought were to reach Malta from central Europe, this 'unworthy' speech medium was bound to attain the full recognition it warranted. The two distinct cultures, emblematic of two distinct social classes, were destined either to come in direct conflict with each other (as it happened on the political level) or to find a proper meeting point where the dignity of the written tradition could be assumed by the undignified unwritten one.

Both options were actually taken, and all this is being stated with hindsight and in the light of scientific research. In the early decades of this century, however, things could not be, and were not, so simple and clear-cut.

Let us look at the phenomenon from another angle. The old Italian element of Maltese culture, particularly the literary one, is also a valid component of political psychology: the intelligentsia considered itself an integral part of the Mediterranean Sea which incorporated it in the Italian segment of the same region. Therefore the self-expression of Maltese writers in Italian was the self-expression of the Maltese as such, or better, of members of a community living in isolation on a small island which had fundamental points of reference that overcome introversion and provincialism.

It is against this background that the unheaval on the level of party politics can be safely understood. Up to the first decades of the 19th century the Maltese outlook was that (i) the country had an old cultural identity closely related to the presence of Latin culture and that the language of culture was Italian; (ii) the introduction of English constituted a serious threat to national identity, inasmuch as English was not only "the foreign language" but also the speech habit of the coloniser. English could easily give a new advantage to the British ruler in the field of expression, by disrupting the normal expression and communication both of the leaders and of the cultured sector of the population.

The democratic awareness in favour of the people who knew only Maltese still had to reach maturity, as it did when writers who traditionally wrote in Italian discovered the sheer strength and beauty of the Maltese tongue, and embarked on a wide programme of cultural diffusion through literature or articles of a general nature written in an elegant Maltese style. Journalism is itself indicative of cross-cultures in action and reaction within a set environment.

The introduction of the foreign language (English) and the removal of the traditionally 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 to be seen in its proper

perspective of a famous and precious monument of antiquity, worthy of esteem, 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. All the protagonists of the cultural development of Maltese, like Guze' Muscat Azzopardi, Dun Karm, Manwel Dimech and Ninu Cremona, wrote extensively in Italian. But things were bound to follow a different course as the whole world situation changed radically.

In the whole Language Question, the practical co-existence of Maltese, 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 to reach. Nonetheless, all this can be understood in its historical context. The emergence of Maltese as the national language and of both Maltese and English as the official languages finally solved a thorny problem which had survived for centuries. The Constitution of Independent Malta (1964) recognises and sanctions this reality. Maltese is taught in all schools and at all levels, and has its own Department at the University since the late thirties. It is officially recognised as a medium of instruction and, together with English, is the official language of the University. Books in Maltese abound, covering a wide area of subjects, though most books are still literary. Literature itself is considered as an important way of individual and collective expression. There is no doubt that Maltese is nowadays the best means for anyone who wants to convey any sort of message and in the best way to most people. Both the Church and political parties make full use of Maltese in both the written and the spoken levels.

During the Language Question period the struggle had transformed itself into a confrontation between dignity and power, that is, between tradition and imperialism. Pro-Maltese organisations tried to keep away from party politics as much as possible. However, political activity was the main, if not the only, platform for any efforts to be done in favour of the introduction of Maltese as the officially new point of reference. The Language Question did not take long in appearing in its truest dimension: a fight for national identity against the plan of Anglicization.

Since a language is not only a system of expression but also a complex manifestation of a whole way of life, the difference between the Latin, or better Mediterranean pattern of behaviour, and the English one renders the Language Question a psychological problem as well. An analysis of analogous movements in other countries may easily conduce to similar conclusions.

The aftermath

In the meantime, however, English could no longer be merely considered as the language of an Empire but steadily grew into an important vehicle for international communication. It was no longer possible to identify it solely with

Britain, and it was necessary to adopt it as an instrument for relating with the outer world. In actual fact, since the post-war period it ended up with assuming the role previously played by Italian. The real innovation which occured in this battle for cultural identification was the emergence of Maltese as the truly distinctive language of the country. Politicians and intellectuals now understood that it was mainly this traditionally dowtrodden language, inherited by word of mouth since the 9th century A.D., itself evidence of colonialism, that had kept the community united and nourished its sense of national individuality.

The conflict between the two great cultural forces which exerted their fullest influence on Maltese sensibility, the Italian and the British, found a way of expressing itself through the recognition and the emancipation of the popular language. The assertion of Maltese, implying the automatic affirmation of ethnic, cultural and political prerogatives, could be best executed by writers who were well versed in the foreign, and locally esteemed, media. This is what happened since Vassalli and De Soldanis, up to Cuschieri and Dun Karm. This process of mediation, however, is not lacking in points of contact with either of the two foreign cultures. Maltese national identity was to be consolidated through, among other factors, the radical modification of the central role traditionally played by Italian, although it was the culture of the nearby peninsula which formed the personality of the Maltese writers themselves. Most of them, in fact, spent long years writing exclusively in Italian before trying their hand in the native language. Dun Karm himself passed his fourtieth year before producing his first lyric in the vernacular. Throughout the twentieth century they have expressed themselves in Maltese.

Time and the course of events healed a number of historical prejudices, and the two languages were to be identified with different values traditionally alien to them. For instance, following the Second World War, Italian was not primarily considered as the classical medium of culture but as the language of a country which bombed the island; English did not go on being emblematic of colonial domination, but started to be identified with the country which defended Malta.

The importance which the Maltese language now enjoys in all spheres of life in the island is indicative of a normal situation prevailing in a republic resembling any other in the continent. It is mainly through Maltese that the island state presents its claim to be a nation on its own. In this sense even the political prestige Malta enjoys in the political field is related to its geographical position at the Southernmost part of Europe and so close to North Africa. Thus it can be safely concluded that the cultural fusion of whatever is Semitic and Latin has largely contributed also to the definition of Malta as an independent state.