

Hassan el Ouazzani interviews

Adrian Grima

1) If you had to present a cultural autobiography, on what would you put the accent?

I like to see myself as a Maltese-Mediterranean writer. I'm also a cultural organizer, a social activist and academic, but I see a certain continuity between my various roles. Much of what I do revolves around the use of writing and reading language, around the search for and engagement with marginalized narratives. In my poetry I try to articulate the emotions and tell the stories that move me, stories that often don't get told. And poetry to me is about the use of language, about saying the unsaid or perhaps even the "unsayable." To me it's often about transgressing language, going beyond its established borders. In this sense, writing poetry is about being clandestine migrants, "illegal" aliens.

2) You are a writer, social activist and cultural organizer. How do you conceive the relation between your poetic project and your other interests? How do you manage all this?

Although I see a great deal of continuity between my various roles, I also see differences. When I go to a Mediterranean meeting of social justice activists, I miss the literary and sometimes the academic dimension. When I go to an academic conference, I miss the more creative dimension of language, the direct involvement in social activism... There are so many sides to us all: I wouldn't like to have to choose between them. At the moment I can't see myself pushing aside any one of the areas I'm involved in. That would disorient and anguish me.

3) Some of your poems were translated into various languages (Italian, German, French, English...). What can translation give to the text, and to the writer?

Literary translations made by literary translators or poets allow a poem to be born again in another language, in another culture, with different sounds, different echoes, different metaphors, and within different social, historical and cultural contexts. In some important ways it becomes a different poem because no two words are the same, let alone two languages. When it is rewritten in another language a poem acquires a new life but often I cannot appreciate it because I don't know that other language. So what I get from it are the sounds, the emotions, the rhythms – and what people tell me about it.

When a poem is translated into another language, it attempts to be reborn in another world. And that rebirth cannot succeed if whoever is translating does not understand that new world well. I find that process of rebirth very

enriching for me both as a person who is interested in my own and other cultures, and as a writer, because it allows me to enter other worlds.

I'm also fascinated by what audiences in different countries and different languages like. Recently at the wonderful Voix de la Méditerranée poetry festival in Lodève, in southern France, I was struck by the fact that some of my more delicate and lyrical poems (ably translated into French from Maltese by Elizabeth Grech) which appeared both in my first book (*It-Trumbettier* 1999) and in my second one (*Rakkmu*, 2006) were particularly well received. Elizabeth tells me that particular poems work particularly well *in French*, because they unusual, suggestive, powerful. Other poems work better in Italian, or Arabic or Hebrew... Different worlds meet through the language, through translation, through poetry. That's why I believe that a region like the Mediterranean could benefit greatly from the art of translation...

4) You are the co-ordinator of Inizjamed, an organisation dedicated to artistic expression and cultural activity. What are the purposes behind this project? Do you always believe in the utility of literary and cultural groups?

Inizjamed has had a profound influence on my artistic work because it has created a dynamic space of creativity that both inspires and challenges me to write better literature, works that are stylistically and thematically challenging, works that do not bathe in the stagnant water of the tried and tested. At a time when Malta was experiencing a moment of literary stagnation, and in a country where nothing serious has been done for literature, Inizjamed has created an atmosphere that both attracts and empowers writers, especially young ones, with talent and who are also, inevitably, avid readers.

Inizjamed has also connected well with writers and other artists abroad, especially in the Mediterranean and in Europe, organizing and taking part in workshops, readings, residencies and international festivals. All this has opened up a challenging new world.

Literary groups are the means to an end not an end in themselves. When they become more preoccupied with themselves than with literature and creativity, then it's time for them to call it a day. Literary and cultural groups are meant to stimulate not stifle; they're meant to challenge themselves all the time, not to defend the status quo. Inizjamed has a very lean structure and it is very work-oriented. We work together to get things done, not to draw attention to ourselves or to our organization. In a country like Malta which doesn't even have a policy for the support and promotion of literature, the Malta Mediterranean Literature Festival would never have been possible without the combined resources of a group of people who are passionate about literature and want to share that experience with the general public.

5) You are the coordinator of the cultural association Inizjamed which organises the Malta Mediterranean Literature Festival. What is this festival about?

The Malta Mediterranean Literature Festival is about contemporary literature and how writers today are articulating their own experiences and those of people around them. It's about how writers, especially in the Mediterranean, are grappling with a literary language that continually needs invention and re-invention, that continually faces failures and successes in trying to communicate, or rather share, life's experiences.

This festival is about intercultural dialogue - after all, Inizjamed was chosen as one of the Maltese ambassadors of intercultural dialogue for 2008. It's about meeting and being together in the Mediterranean, listening to one another, inspiring and being inspired, shocking others and being shocked by others, and articulating the stories that don't get told in an increasingly superficial and cliché-driven mainstream media. Like literature, the Malta Mediterranean Literature Festival is about saying the unsaid and trying to express the inexpressible.

What makes it Mediterranean?

What makes it Mediterranean is the location, an ancient maritime port in a splendid, reinvigorated city in a thriving island nation in the centre of this Basin. To us, what makes it Mediterranean are the stories of many of the writers who are invited to take part in it, their own personal story and the stories they tell. Our idea of the Mediterranean is not only that of a mosaic, or polyphony, as Thierry Fabre calls it, but also that of a *devenir*, a on-going project or work in progress, a success that has the potential to become a failure, a failure that has the potential to become a success. We see the Mediterranean as a meeting point of different stories and experiences of the world, a common ground for debate, for disagreement, for affinity, a common ground or point of reference for solidarity.

It's a *Mediterranean* Festival because it sees our region also as a microcosm of the world, with its richness and diversity, with its creativity and perseverance, with its openness and *joie de vivre*. It's a Mediterranean festival because it's a babel-like courtyard of languages from the region but also from beyond, a point of reference but also a point of arrival and a point of departure.

6) You are one of the poets of the new generation. What are the principal characteristics of it? What are your relationship with the previous generation?

The new generation of writers, the third wave in the evolution of Maltese literature, that emerged in the 1990s, has tried to reinvent its language and its

themes: they are inseparable because form is essentially content and content is essentially form. When I read the poetry of Henry Holland published in *L-Artist tat-Trapiż* (The Trapeze Artist) in 1996 I was struck by how he used language, how that language offered different perspectives on childhood, on contemporary Maltese culture and history, on the Maltese language and what a writer can do with it. (At that time I had already finished writing the poems that eventually appeared in my first collection, *It-Trumbettier*, which was published in 1999.) Reading Holland's poetry was a bit like the overwhelming experience of the boys of one of his poems racing after each other on their bicycles and disappearing into the blackness and void of a tunnel... I find the language of his poetry and the early prose of Immanuel Mifsud disconcerting, which is, the way I see it, what so much good literature tends to be.

The new Maltese literature of the 21st century uses a different vocabulary; it plays with different rhythms and keeps away from the stock phrases and formulae of the canon; it is less concerned with issues of nationalism and religion; it responds to a different, more globalized world; it tries to narrate, and grapple with a world, or rather worlds, that are changing; it is perhaps less egocentric. What essentially it has created a literary language that is different from that of the pre-Independence romantics or the post-Independence modernists.

On the other hand, there is so much of earlier Maltese literature in the new works, even because trying to recreate a literary language means being acutely aware and respectful of the established literature.

I have a very good relationship with some of the established writers of the 60s generation who gatecrashed our literature into the 20th century. As a literary critic I have written a great deal about their work, especially in my doctoral thesis, but also in published articles, and many of them appreciate that. Some of them also respect the fact that I actively promote Maltese literature in Malta and abroad, even if my accent is often on more the contemporary works.

7) What do you think are the important characteristics of the poetic and cultural scene in Malta?

There is a small but vibrant group of contemporary Maltese writers (writing in Maltese) who have taken the plunge and have revitalized our literature and aim to reconfigure our collective imaginary. Since the 1990s, writers like Clare Azzopardi, Norbert Bugeja, Maria Grech Ganado, Henry Holland, Simone Inguanez, Immanuel Mifsud, Walid Nabhan, Karl Schembri, Ġużè Stagno and Trevor Żahra have been challenging our idea of literature and the way we look at ourselves and the world.

Renovation has happened in other areas of art too, like research theatre, the visual arts, film and ethnic music, but these are not areas I feel confident writing about. What is certainly true for all of the arts in Malta is that there is a chronic lack of vision from the country's leadership and therefore very little or no funding for the arts. Only recently the newly appointed Minister of Culture interpreted the challenge of creativity and promoting the arts in the Maltese Islands in terms of pitting popular culture against culture for the elite, brushing aside, in one fell swoop, the potential for creativity that lies in each and every one of us and the responsibility of the country to foster that potential.

8) You have a deep relation with the poetry and culture of Italy. What does this relation mean to you?

The value system and community structure in Malta is dominated by the Catholic Church. Almost all community celebrations are intimately tied to the Church. We don't seem to have alternative value systems and narratives similar to those of the leftist movements in Italy, for example, with their social and cultural activism, with their community rituals and celebrations. I miss that very much. When I'm with my Italian friends who are either artists or activists, or both, I feel liberated by the choice, by their alternative world, or rather worlds. Moreover, their socially and politically committed Catholic activists have so much to offer too, in terms of living their faith in authentic, rather than purely ceremonial, ways. And they can be a great source of inspiration.

In November 2002, for example, some Italian friends of mine invited me to the first European Social Forum in Firenze, and I was almost "shocked" by how much I felt at home! In many ways Malta is a conservative and reactionary country and it can be very stifling. There are many people in Malta with whom I feel at home, but the Social Forum was a great celebration of that alternative vision, something which can only happen on a small scale in my country.

Another important moment for me was when the sociologist, writer and activist Tonino Perna invited me to take part in a conference in Reggio Calabria, in southern Italy, which was part of a Mediterranean cultural project involving, amongst others, Italians, Spaniards and Palestinians. That meeting finally got me in touch with people who believe in a more just, diverse and sustainable Mediterranean. It was there that I got to know Luisa Morgantini, for example, who went on to become vice-President of the European Parliament but who has remained active at grassroots level in favour of justice and peace in our region and beyond.

With Italy Malta shares many aspects of culture, from food to the tendency to gesticulate when we speak; from the influence of the Catholic Church to an

innate *joie de vivre*. Being so close, it is convenient for us to travel to Italy, or through Italy, and for the Italians to travel to Malta. So my wife and I have a constant flow of Italian friends coming over to Malta for meetings or simply for holidays.

Then there's language. Although English is my second language, and I do most of my reading and writing in that language (apart from Maltese, of course), I feel a greater affinity with Italian and have written a paper in a book about the Mediterranean and spoken at conferences and meetings in Italian. Perhaps it's because it's closer to Maltese than an Anglo-Saxon language can ever be. Perhaps it's just about me.

Italy is the country I know best after Malta and therefore it is often in Italy that I search for alternative worldviews and ways of living which I can more easily understand and appreciate. I try to follow closely what is happening in the fields of social and political activism, culture, music, literature, grassroots politics, and so on. Of course, it goes without saying that there are many things I don't like about Italy, but then nothing and no one is perfect in this world.

9) Malta is characterised by the plurality of components and references of its language. How do you manage this plurality in your literature?

Although the Maltese Islands have always been lands of encounter and exchange, especially in the cities, there is still a strong element of distrust of, indifference towards and even fear of the Other, of those who many Maltese would consider to be "different" from us, from our "imagined community," which is what nations are. Because our Islands have also been lands of conquest and violent invasions, lands of isolation and fear of those who land on our shores, there is often a tendency of people to close in on themselves for protection.

But both our rich language, with its Arabic, Italian, Sicilian and English influences, and our telephone directory, with its world of "Maltese" surnames originating from different corners of the world, confirm the plurality and vitality of our culture. Contemporary Maltese prose and poetry attempts to narrate the many voices of contemporary Malta, even the different kinds of Maltese that people speak. And this is partly what makes the works of the new generation so attractive: their constant search for a new literary language, for new metaphor, syntax, juxtaposition, plot, themes, vocabulary...

It's not always easy to convey this literary innovativeness in translation. And that is also why the new generation of writers needs to help cultivate a generation of translators who are sensitive to their new literary language/s but also able to be creative and innovative in the target language.

10) Maltese is influenced by the Arabic language. In what measure has this factor been able to facilitate your rapprochement with Arabic poetry and culture?

Although Maltese is a language of Arabic origin, unfortunately we have yet to forge significant links with Arabic poetry and culture. I studied classical Arabic at school for two years in the early 1980s when all students had to study the language. But sadly after that I stopped studying it and so I can only read works of literature originally written in Arabic, like the novels of Elias Khoury and Naguib Mahfouz, or the poetry of al-Mutanabbi and Darwish, in translation

My Maltese comes in handy when I meet Arab writers, activists or academics. I tend to mix and make friends with the southerners more easily than with the northerners, though that is by no means a rule. Thanks to my language I can also appreciate some differences between classical Arabic and local versions of it, because Maltese is one such variety.

But there is so much that needs to be done to make Arabic poetry and the cultures of the Arab Mediterranean (and beyond) better known among the Maltese. Reading Arab literature would be a great way of connecting with this complex world which we know so little about.

11) What are your connections to Arabic poetry and culture?

As the coordinator of the Malta Mediterranean Literature Festival, but also of other cultural and literary initiatives, I have always been keen to collaborate with Arab writers, cultural operators and activists. Over the past few years I've become ever more interested in Arabic literature, in works by writers like Elias Khoury (whose prose, which I have read in translation, I find particularly stimulating, especially from a stylistic point of view), and in literature written in French, Italian or English by Arabs or writers of Arab origin, like Amin Maalouf.

I have many Arab friends who are either writers or cultural activists or both and this is one of the advantages of living and loving the Mediterranean, with all the baggage that comes with it. They live in Palestine, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, France, Italy, Malta... In 2008 I was asked to read my poetry in Algiers, Cairo and Alexandria, where I felt that there is a great respect for poetry and literature in general, and in 2007 I was asked to read with a young Egyptian poet in the Malta Arts Festival. Over the years, through Inizjamed, we have invited writers and other artists from different Arab Mediterranean countries and this has opened up a whole world for me, both on the human and cultural level, which was there all the time but closed off by the often mainstream Anglo-American pop culture that our country feeds on.

I have written many poems and articles about the Palestinian people, mainly through the eyes of my Palestinian friends living in their illegally Occupied lands, and recently I've written poetry and articles inspired by Algeria and Egypt. I have to say that I'm particularly interested in what Arab writers have to say about the Mediterranean, even when it's a negative take on a eurocentric Mediterranean narrative.

12) What does it mean for you to be a poet in the 21st century?

Being a poet in the 21st century means being acutely aware of the banalization of language and expression, of the power of the word to distort the truth in a 5-second clip or sound bite, of the potential language has to take you well beyond the superficiality of a mass media that is ultimately controlled by a handful of individuals with their commercial and political agendas and their "cultural" empires. Mass media has made the minority, affluent world smaller; it has given millions of people the illusion that a one-minute feature about some suburb or far away country can "say it all." The writer has the responsibility to tell the truth, to dig hard and deep for the truth, to doubt the truth that is presented to him, to question and challenge it.

But ultimately, like all writers, the poet of today is called to use language beautifully. Poetry is about language and how we use it to transport people, to move minds and hearts, to share powerful or everyday experiences. It has the potential to connect people in meaningful ways.

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<http://www.alkhaleej.co.ae/portal/b2cfa408-bd2a-4f3f-993b-25eff0fed15f.aspx>