

naturalisti italiani. Scrisse anche in maltese, verso il 1675, una poesia in sedici versi, intesa ad essere recitata nella piazza centrale della Valletta durante la festa popolare del Calendimaggio.³⁷ Anche questo breve ma interessante componimento poetico in maltese risente chiaramente della lirica italiana dell'epoca, ed è un esempio evidente e significativo della assimilazione dialettale di temi e forme della letteratura nazionale. Si tratta di una poesia barocca, come si vede dalle immagini e dall'enfatico omaggio al 'protettore', il gran maestro Cottoner: ma nella grazia e mollezza dei versi e nel lieto e idillico canto alla vita espresso nelle prime due strofe, sembra già preannunciare l'Arcadia e il Settecento.³⁸

Scuola Normale Superiore,
Pisa - maggio, 1970

³⁷ Ved. il grosso vol. inedito (ms.144) di F. Agius de Soldanis, *Nuova Scuola dell'Antica Lingua Punicata scoperta nel moderno parlare Maltese e Gozitano*, p.108. Questo 'sonetto formato in XVI versi di una esatta Poesia dalla penna eruditissima del nostro Dottore G.F.B.' è seguito da un lungo componimento in versi scritto in maltese da un autore anonimo verso il 1700.

³⁸ La seguente è una traduzione letterale della poesia:

Maggio è venuto con le rose e le zagare,
Passato il freddo, la pioggia e i lampi,
La terra s'è coperta di germogli e di foglie
Cessato è il vento, silenzioso il mare.

Volate via son le nubi dalla faccia del Cielo,
Fin sulle rocce è spuntata l'erba,
Ha ripreso a cantare ogni uccello femmina
E nella gioia ogni cuore si rinnova.

Poca gioia ci sarebbe in quest'Isola
Se non ci fosse chi le stia vicino,
Se non ci fosse chi la guardi
Piangerebbe dalla fame come una schiava.

Tu sei la gioia e la felicità nostra,
Cotoner, luce dei nostri occhi,
Finché il Cielo ti lascia a noi vicino
Nel peggior freddo sentiremo calore.

POEMS

By J. AQUILINA

TIME

Time plunging forward keeps us all besieged,
Encircling us with his armies on all sides,
While we retreat, despondent and aggrieved:
Of all that is, or was, nothing abides.

Death, his companion, scours the global space
That is confined within the span of life,
Destroying one by one the human race -
Love's dearest fruit - the husband and his wife.

How can we beat such Enemy, throw him back,
Disperse the mighty force that hems us in,
Before the onslaught and the ruthless sack
Of all the treasures that we hold within?

Time too awaits its doom not less than we,
But we, not Time, shall reach Eternity.

11.x.70 - Balzan

LOST HOUSE

The Light withdrawn from me, swaddled in Night,
Like to a foetus in his mother's womb,
Sightless I grope to free me from the gloom,
Cutting the ligaments of unborn Light.
Where are the Lantern that shines long and bright,
The Crucifix enlivening the sealed tomb,
Old gates unbarred, recission of the doom,
The healing hands that can restore lost sight?

Put up the signpost I must travel by
To seek and find the House that lies ahead,
The House with open doors, the House of Rest.
My Lord and Master, as you break the Bread
That is your Flesh and Blood, let me not die
An outcast from your House, uncalled, unblest.

8.ii.71 - Balzan

REPENTANCE

When I reflect how fragile and how weak
 Are Flesh and Will, how low they both can sink,
 Despair mocks me aloud calling me, 'Sneak,
 A ruffian and a dallier on the brink
 Of the damnation of his perjured soul,
 Who builds himself a paradise of lust
 Deviating, like a coward, from the goal,
 Lost to God's Grace, a charnel of vile dust'.
 But as I grieve with tears for all my sins
 Hope, following Repentance, like new rain
 Restores lost freshness and God's love begins
 To reconstruct His kingdom once again.

Mock me no more; for all my sins I grieve:
 I love the God I hurt, trust and believe.

22.ii.71 – Balzan

EPITAPH ON A CRITIC

Here lies buried a most conscientious critic,
 A very famous one,
 Who, having spent his life picking holes
 In other people's work,
 Left his own masterpiece undone.

22.ii.71 – Balzan

DOUBLE EPITAPH

Let us mourn the death of Mr. Jones, a very brilliant critic.
 Alas, death comes unbidden;
 And let us mourn no less the loss
 Of all the books he left unwritten.

22.ii.71 – Balzan

LAMP OF LIFE

When the Lamp of Life is shattered,
 And the light of joy goes out,
 Hold your ground, do not despair:
 But pick instead the fragments scattered
 About your feet, with patient care:
 Then say like God:
 'Let there be light –
 The end of groping and of night,'
 Till the phantoms that haunt your room
 The silent griefs that vex your heart,
 And all the shadows of your gloom
 Shall melt to nothing and depart.

6.iii.71 – Balzan

FAITH

When I consider how, with nimble feet,
 Time, insubstantial shadow, sneaks away
 And of our lives spares not a single day,
 But eats away their bitter and their sweet;
 When I recount the tomes of ancient scribes –
 Dead poets and dead scientists, common men,
 Shakespeare and Dante immortalised by the pen,
 Not less proud Caesars and renowned divines –
 I feel the light go out, stabbed by the pain
 That hurts the moaning spirit like a thorn,
 Doubt questioning the sense of being born
 Once Death proves us so futile, life so vain.

I conquer fear by pondering what He said;
 They that had faith live on – they are not dead.

Balzan – 19.iv.71

J. AQUILINA
 ANGUISH*

When I heard news of your fell disease,
 The racking of your body and your soul,
 Tossed like a ship that weathered many seas,
 Its hull torn open with the tall masts broken,
 As it goes down with many a breach and hole,
 The rigging blown away by the loud gale,
 The captain at the wheel with terror frozen,
 Knowing this is to be Last Journey's tale
 Before the stopping of the engine, sinking
 Under the billows swelling like a mountain,
 Tears filled my eyes as Memory started thinking
 Of your brave manhood bubbling like a fountain.
 I pray, my friend, Death shorten your last fight.
 Fear not to leave this world – Day follows Night.

28/iv/71

*Written on hearing the sad news of the painful agony of my old friend Rev. T. Tabone, holder of the Chair of Canon Law in the Faculty of Theology from 1944 to 1964 and Acting Professor of Canon Law in the Faculty of Laws from 1956-1965.

NIGHTMARE

We live in a dream,
 Out of which we jump
 As we jump out of bed
 Rubbing our eyes
 With a feeling of horror
 After a nightmare.

June, 1971

EPITAPH (1)

Here lie the bones of a very learned man;
 He died not of a heart attack, nor of gout.
 He died of worries for he never learned
 That life is not worth worrying about.

Balzan – 3.vi.71

POEMS
 EPITAPH (2)

Here lie the bones of one who worshipped power;
 A man whom vile ambition made unjust,
 Who thought himself the greatest man on earth:
 His weight is now a pound or two of dust.

Balzan – 3.vi.71

TRIAL

This is for me
 The loneliest hour of my trial
 Held during the night
 When man is alone with himself
 And his Inquisitors.
 Silence in the Court!
 All curtains down,
 Lights out.
 Man in the dock for questioning
 By the policeman posted at the frontiers
 Between Time and Eternity.
 Guilty or innocent?
 What does the jury say?
 Let us hear the verdict.
 Terrible suspense! –
 The end of freedom
 The end of dialogue
 The beginning of doubt
 With darkness everywhere –
 The stars, the sky's bright eyes,
 Plucked out of their orbit
 Unseeing, unpitying,
 One last hope for freedom left
 When Night is over
 And the sun reappears with birds and bees hailing the return
 Of fragrant Spring
 On a chariot of blossoms,
 Lazarus walking out of the grave
 And the voice of a Friend calling us by our names.

O my brother Lazarus and O my brother Joseph,
 'This is your hour of resurrection
 The verdict of the jury is in –
 You are both absolved.
 Cast out fear and live
 For he who believes in Me
 Shall not die.'
 At last,
 The prison bars are broken;
 The trial is over
 Now it is truly the beginning of Spring
 Fulfilled in the resurrection of our Lord
 With Whom we all rise from the dead
 Unto the Eternal Reality
 Of continuous Being
 In the Cosmic whole
 Of God's existence.

Balzan – 3.vi.71

ASH WEDNESDAY IN DUBROVNIK

Three of us from a gathering of scholars*
 Remembering the tragedy of Golgotha,
 Paid Him a hurried visit of courtesy;
 Met Him in the cloister
 Of the Dominican Fathers
 In the noiseless square
 Of sea-walled Dubrovnik,
 A city of churches and castles,
 The emerald of the Adriatic.
 He was alone; so were
 His disciples in white garb,
 Alone and very solitary.
 We knelt and prayed
 Out of the world for a few minutes
 At the feet of His cross;
 Ate His Flesh and drank His Blood
 From the hands of a dear friend,
 A White Father from Tunis,
 A man of God, dear Père Louis.

Then the three of us together
 Suddenly felt as if we carried
 On our own shoulders
 The Cross of Redemption;
 As if we carried on our hands
 The Crown of the Kingdom of Heaven,
 The kingship of Christ in exile,
 And then we felt spring up within us
 The fountain of life,
 Life Eternal
 As we prayed for our country
 And for Yugoslavia.

* * *

The sky over Dubrovnik,
 And wooded Lukrum
 And the thousand islands of the Adriatic,
 All the churches of Croatia,
 Joined us in our prayer
 For the restoration of the kingdom of God
 In Yugoslavia –
 Christ nailed upon the cross,
 Then Easter – risen from the dead,
 Freedom for Christ!
 Freedom for Man!

Hotel Excelsior (Room No. 209)
 Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia – 7.vi.71

*The 4th Congress of *Atlante Linguistico Mediterraneo*.

Z*

Z, Greek for life, defies the Tyrant's fists,
 The truncheons and the bludgeoning of his thugs,
 Fights and hits back, although with broken wrists
 To guard or save our freedom from 'big bugs'.

*After seeing the film named Z at a private show in the Renters' Cinema theatre
 in Zachary Street on the 19th July, 1971.

St. Paul's Bay – 23.vii.71

BEFORE AND AFTER

He was just Mr. Nobody before the General Election.
 Very few really cared for his insignificant existence;
 When the people's vote made him Minister, he was shown great affection
 By his one time enemies who fawn on him with servile insistence:
 'Tis by such ladder that careerists prosper and rise
 Till they reach the topmost rung – abject but wise.

St. Paul's Bay, 24.vii.71

PRAYER

Our Lady who are in Heaven
 Be also in my heart
 Now, at the hour of life
 As at the hour of death.
 Glory be to your Son
 And His Cross
 And to the Seven Swords
 That pierced your heart.
 As you grieved for your Son
 Hung like a criminal between two thieves
 Have pity on us, your children,
 Hung on the Cross of Life
 Attacked on all sides
 Round the clock, every moment
 By the enemies of your Son,
 The Wolves and the Hounds
 Snarling and barking at our feet
 Biting the flesh off the calves of our legs
 As they leap up our backs
 To tear us to pieces
 Nerve by nerve
 Bone by bone
 A mouthful of flesh and blood for empty stomachs.
 Christ have mercy!
 Mary have love!
 And you, my brother the warrior,
 Have pity and understanding
 For your brother running away from you
 To protect his children and wife
 From your bestiality!

St. Paul's Bay – 24.vii.71

THE 'BUONA UNIONE': AN EPISODE IN
 VENETO-MALTESE RELATIONS IN
 THE LATE XVIII CENTURY

By VICTOR MALLIA-MILANES

ON July 6, 1781 the *Buona Unione*, a relatively small, strongly built, two-masted coasting vessel, or *checcio*, flying a Venetian flag, arrived in the vicinity of Marsamxetto Harbour. It was under the command of the Venetian Captain Girolamo Padella. The vessel, chartered by some Tunisian merchants, had left Alexandria on May 12 with a crew of nine, Padella included, together with eighteen Turkish passengers, destined for Sfax.¹ It was carrying a cargo of two-hundred bales of linen, one-hundred sacks of rice, eight bales of wool and camel fur together with small quantities of other soft goods.² During the trip, on the 20th May, (i.e. eight days from *Buona Unione's* departure from Alexandria) plague broke out on board the vessel. Within nineteen days, four members of the crew and ten passengers breathed their last; the former 'morti in cinque soli giorni di male'; the latter 'morti in tre soli giorni'. They had 'diverse macchiature sparse per il corpo, e cancerenose'.³ The last to die was on the 10th of June. The vessel had tried to anchor first at the Island of Scrico, then on the 15th of June at Sfax itself, but was driven away as neither port had a Lazaretto to purge it from its contagious malady.⁴ At Sfax, strangely enough, 'due marinari mori' joined the crew.⁵

¹Archives of the Order of Malta (A.O.M.), Ms. 273, *Liber Conciliorum Status*, f.255.

²A.O.M., Ms. 6531, *Registro degli Arrivi di Bastimenti in Quarantena, sub die* July 6, 1781.

³Archives of the Inquisitor, Mdina (A.I.M.), *Lettere alla Segretaria di Stato*, Vol. V, *sub die*, June 14, 1781. ff. IIIv-112v.

⁴A.O.M., Ms. 273, *Liber Conciliorum Status*, ff.255-256. Paul Cassar, in his scholarly *Medical History of Malta*, (London, Wellcome Historical Medical Library, 1964), includes, in pages 287-288, a passing reference to this incident, apparently based on P. Doublet's *Memoires historiques sur l'invasion et l'occupation de Malte* (Paris, 1883; pp.73-79). Further investigations reveal that this source contains too many inexact and at times incorrect details.

⁵A.I.M., *Memorie*, Zondadari, Vol. 1, ff.211r-212v. On the same day of *Buona Unione's* arrival, another Venetian *polacca*, SS. *Trinità e S. Spiridione*, (Capt.