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State of the Art: Literature from Where I Stand

Simone Inguanez

Panel: Writing from Where I Stand
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Ladies and Gentlemen, good afternoon and thanks for having me.

I feel greatly honoured to be the very first writer representing Malta at the IWP. I would like to deeply thank you and all the people involved with this program for your appreciation towards Maltese literature, and I congratulate you for your commitment to make this whole project work.

One can say a lot about the theme selected for today’s panel; I did not know where to start. But chance had it that where I stood this week was amid a very interesting exercise of collective poetry with six brilliant poets (including Chris Merrill), which demanded much time and energy from me. That way my paper had to be, by force, a brief one, and this afternoon you won’t have to listen to me for long.

Where I Stand …

Oh, do I stand? I picture myself swimming or dancing. Each time I turn (to myself), I’ve just moved. Like the nymph in my poems, I won’t stay put. Really, defining where one stands is a major task.

Yes, in ways, I am my old self – part woman part child – strolling round the coast, between the girl peeping and the old woman who sleeps sitting up. Whatever persona I take on, the identity from which I write will, naturally, always be that of a woman and eternal girl (I hope).

Many of my earlier works portray a process of coming to terms with femininity. They reflect a transition from girl to woman and, at times, back to girl. Often, they are monologues and close-ups of a female voice, accounts of the man-woman dance. I find these poems very “human.” Yet, though clearly feminine, they are never too far from the masculine. I find a lot of “melting” of feminine and masculine elements, animus and anima, yin and yang. These poems are also characterised by melting of eros (life and love and creation) and thanatos (death and aggression and destruction); the coming close and the moving away. And, as a student ably pointed out at a presentation I gave last month (as part of the International Literature Today Workshop), there is also some sense of angst with regard to origins and fertility.

My identity will also, always, be shaped by the Mediterranean – sea and land, and the whole legacy of the Mediterranean.

While I have travelled far and fallen in love with many places and their people (the unknown is, surely, very intriguing), my perception the unknown is bound to be fashioned by my own identity. I will, inevitably, always be in the way of its myth and its charm upon me.
Then, of course, there is personal baggage: my roots, experiences, concerns. Where I first stood was among my people. And now, my people stand inside my writing – starring both as themselves, and as very productive metaphors. My parents, grandparents, siblings, would-be siblings – they all people my poetry.

I also retell various cities and villages, ramparts, streets and alleys, bars. Again, where I once stood now stands inside me, and in my poetry. At the same time, I do not hold back from auto-criticism.

On the other hand, otherness gives depth to one’s definition. More than that, it is actually what makes definition possible. Identity and otherness are really one whole continuum. So, when my poetry “stands” in Paris and Tunisia, in Lodève and Naples, in Iowa, in Sarajevo, I find that the ultimate effect is further depth to my identity – both as person and writer. And, once more, otherness and unity melt, particularly in poems about war, poverty and so on.

I catch myself chanting the pictures I cannot paint, the melodies I cannot play, the affinities I cannot contain. I think this explains my fleeting images, my obsession with sounds and rhythm and my habit of switching tone and pitch from playful to intense, from bitter to sweet.

Italian art sociologist Francesco Lampara describes my poetry as minimalist and intimist at the same time. He explains he finds it minimalist in that I focus on ordinary and everyday objects, like things around the house, the cracks in the wall, the wobbly wardrobe, the forgotten contents of a chest of drawers. He finds it intimist in the attention I give to expressions of states of mind and of my innermost feelings. This is evoked, among other things, by smell, the sniff of the slipper under the armchair, the fragrance of grandpa’s fields; and by colour, the floor-tiles in a shade of milk gone bad, the pale white of death on the young woman’s face, the purple colour of grapes which stains the fingers.

Lampara goes on to describe my work as a poetry which searches, in resurrected memories, the traces left by the past. He speaks of a “here and now” immersed in some sort of temporal continuum where the past is brought back and the future is already partly concretized.

I write in free verse. I find this helps me achieve the fluidity and versatility I like. And I play with occasional rhymes, internal rhymes and false rhymes, alliterations, and so on. I also retain my minimalism when it comes to punctuation. I am reluctant to restrict the poetic encounter. I’d rather look at poetry as an open-ended experience for the reader.

I will say a few words about my literary backdrop. According to Maltese Professor Peter Serracino Inglott, it is my use of indirect illocution that he considers a development in the history of Maltese poetry. Namely, he finds in my poems the expression of an illocutionary force other than that expressed in my utterance, a force achieved by relying on shared background knowledge, principles of conversation, convention, and the ability of the addressee to make inferences.¹

Professor Serracino Inglott remarks that while the traditional Maltese poet spoke with the voice of someone who knew well who they were—Catholic, patriotic, upright—the contemporary poet is immediately recognizable on the scene by doubts assailing them in those same regards.

Speaking of contemporary literature, Maria Grech-Ganado, one of our foremost literary academics, herself a poet, who has also translated several writers of my generation and who in her seniority continues to have young blood pumping through her veins, comments:

Never has there been so much literary ferment in the Maltese islands since the sixties. The sixties had broken with the themes and influence of the first wave of national, religious and sentimental love, to replace it with a political and existential one which addressed these themes from a confrontational perspective.

Now, she adds:

Many of [the major names of the 60s breakthrough] don’t write anymore or have moved to a different form of artistic expression. [In the meantime] there is a growing number of young Maltese who have already made a name for themselves, despite the fact that it is extremely difficult for new writers to have prose published, and virtually impossible when they write poetry.²

Oscar Wilde once said “Flaubert did not write French prose, but the prose of a great artist who happened to be French.”

I am most confident that in Malta we have great artists who are producing great literature. It would be a real pity, not only for Malta itself, but also for the literary world, if we allowed language to be a barrier.

**Conclusion**

I like to believe that poetry can neither be created nor destroyed. It can be formed, informed, reformed (maybe). But, to me, it is in essence an energy. We simply choose the poems our poetry shall live in, picture the books where we would host our readers.

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