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Maltese literature in the language of the other: a case study in minority literatures' pursuit of 'majority'

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ABSTRACT. This paper explores some of the difficulties faced by so called minority literatures in attracting both popular and critical notice, particularly in view of the fact that recourse to the vernacular can foreclose dissemination of works in significant markets. The consequence, it seems, is that minority literatures are in effect compelled to negotiate the encounter with readerships in those markets in the language of the other. This compels a number of difficult choices which can take on a distinctly ethical and/or political character, and which hinge on further complexities involving issues like translation, nationhood, and otherness. Those difficulties and choices are explored, in the paper, through a discussion of the specific challenges of Maltese literature: a case study that, in the context of the paper's concerns, takes on particular significance in view of the unceasing debates within Maltese cultural history on the tensions between insularity and openness, authenticity and hybridity, identity and otherness, peripherality and majority.

Key words: Maltese literature, minority literatures, postcolonialism, translation, otherness.

RESUMO. A literatura maltesa na linguagem do outro: um estudo de caso das literaturas minoritárias em busca da 'maioridade'. As dificuldades enfrentadas pelas assim chamadas literaturas minoritárias para chamar atenção crítica e popular são investigadas, especialmente porque o recurso à língua maternal local poderá barrar a disseminação de obras literárias de mercados literários significativos. Parece que as literaturas minoritárias são obrigadas a negociar o encontro com leitores nos mercados caracterizados pelo idioma do outro. Várias escolhas significativas devem ser feitas com características éticas e políticas distintas, ligados, frequentemente, a outros fatores complexos que envolvem questões de tradução, nacionalidade e alteridade. Nesse ensaio, analisam-se essas dificuldades e escolhas por meio de uma discussão sobre os desafios específicos da literatura de Malta: um estudo de caso que toma significados particulares diante dos debates incessantes no contexto da história cultural maltesa sobre as tensões entre a insularidade e a abertura, entre a autenticidade e o hibridismo, entre a identidade e a alteridade, entre a periferia e a maioria.

Palavras-chave: literatura maltesa, literaturas minoritárias, pós-colonialismo, tradução, alteridade.

Introduction

Positioning Maltese nationhood, literature, and minority

The cue for my essay is the article published by Professor Godfrey Baldacchino, *A Nationless State? Malta, National Identity and the EU*, in the October 2002 issue of *West European Politics*. A fair paraphrase of this paper could report that what is raised by Professor Baldacchino is the question of whether Malta's treading of the stage of international diplomacy and politics risks being tripped up by the precarious nationhood of the Maltese. In other words, the appurtenances of statehood which Malta undeniably enjoys cannot quite extenuate those forces which, so the argument goes, inhibit the Maltese people from fully becoming the Maltese

nation. For it seems that just as it is possible to have a stateless nation – a predicament familiar to generations of Jews, as to the Kurds or the Palestinians – it is equally possible to have a nationless state – a rather less recognisable set of circumstances that is perhaps most singularly exemplified by the Vatican but which also, it appears, is not alien to the Maltese experience. Indeed, the potential for 'disjuncture' between statehood and nationhood, which is most commonly realisable in the situations experienced by "nations in waiting", 'proto-nations', 'nations without states' or 'non-state nations', can also tend towards "the existence of statehood without a defined sense of nationhood" – and it is this which "the Maltese Islands", as "pioneers in imaginative statecraft",

arguably exemplify (BALDACCHINO, 2002, p. 193-195).

Quite how irrepressible, among the Maltese themselves, is the awareness of the tenuousness of Maltese nationhood remains a complex question. One fancies that addressing it adequately would depend to some degree on overcoming a temptation towards denial. For there is bound to be some resistance from certain quarters to any doubts that might be cast on the processes by which disparate Maltese collectivities, identities and behaviours could coalesce into nationhood, this last being ever a mysterious (or at least paradoxical) entity to the extent that it transcends collectivities, identities and behaviours while yet being entrenched in them. Yet the anxieties about the nationhood of the Maltese, insofar as its achievability, nurturing and survivability are concerned, are hardly recent. One would surely not need to rehearse Malta's long and involved history, or its seeming fatedness to being perennially and disproportionately subject to massively redefining circumstances emanating from without its shores rather than from within, to demonstrate that. What is rather more interesting for this context is the suspicion that even after the diverse, difficult and well-chronicled postwar achievements in sovereignty, there continues to nag within the Maltese a keen sense of the vulnerability of their nationhood. This is in line with the fact that "a tangible demonstration of the relative absence of a national conscience would be the indifference, if not outright hostility, to political sovereignty" (BALDACCHINO, 2002, p. 193-194), and also with the intuition that despite all temptations towards denial, Maltese awareness of the tenuousness of Maltese nationhood is in fact, at least in some circles, very acute. In this respect, Rev. Professor Peter Serracino Inglott's pointed and eponymous question in a 1988 essay, *Was Malta a "Nation" in 1964?* (the latter being the year when independence was secured), is significant. It serves as a kind of prelude to Baldacchino's own investigation, which in its turn acquires its urgency on the strength of its contemporaneity to Malta's accession process to the European Union. Tellingly, neither essay assumes that Maltese nationhood is a given, but Serracino Inglott's is probably the more sanguine:

Nationhood is not constituted, in my view, by the existence of a collection of cultural traits, relics, and themes, but rather by the existence of a corporate subject ready to accept the challenges of making history, rather than merely recalling it or posing as a worthy object for ethnographic study [...] There are

three remarks concerning the Maltese situation in 1964 which seem to me to be particularly relevant to answering the question as I have interpreted it - that is, as the question whether (in the light of subsequent rather than preceding events) in practice rather than by proclamation, the people of Malta in 1964 could be said to have intended to pick up a definite role in the world-system. These remarks suggest that the answer should be a clear 'yes' (SERRACINO INGLOTT, 1988, p. 368-369).

The three remarks invoked have to do with (i) "the basic structure of the 'development plans' launched by successive Maltese Governments after 1964 [being] radically altered by the popular response" (ii) the fact that the intense, almost **two nation** party division did not, for all the **exacerbated differences**, escalate into any internecine conflict militating against Malta "firmly assum[ing] the mantle of nationhood in 1964" or thereafter, and (iii) the linguistic landscape in Malta, which reflects the possibility that it may well be 'a sign of attained nationhood' for a people to have 'decided to define by itself the cultural conditions which will allow it to be what it wants', as is indeed suggested by the expression of national identity [being] much more definitely shown in the conscious adoption of, say, bilingualism or trilingualism by all the citizens of a State such as Malta, rather than by any exclusive emphasis on the Maltese language (SERRACINO INGLOTT, 1988, p. 369-371)¹. Each of these remarks invites, of course, extensive discussion, but what is perhaps most crucial here is the clarity with which, for Serracino Inglott, the answer to the question heading his essay should be in the affirmative. Baldacchino, reviewing the impact of "a local form of bicomunalism based on political ethnicity", comes across as warier:

In this incessant, internal struggle for loyalty and support, Maltese nationalism has lost out. The notion of the nation as an 'imagined community' [see Anderson, 1983] becomes relevant. National symbols remain significant in their absence and, where identified, are quickly taken over and co-opted by partisan and/or religious motifs. A brace of poets and writers have struggled for some years to raise the spirit of nationalism, but their message has fallen on deaf ears and reads strangely hollow. Some academics have sought to emphatically announce the cultural maturation of Maltese nationalism [...]. But is not this more properly appraised as an exercise in wish-fulfilment? Is this not part of the unconscious obligation to defend and justify nationalism, especially *de rigueur* in newly independent states? The alternative explanation propounded [...] is that

¹ See also Pirota (1987).

the battle for the definition of Maltese national identity has yet to commence. Malta may be an 'old nation' in a cultural sense, but politically this nation does not manifest itself, whether to the inside or the outside world (BALDACCHINO, 2002, p. 198).

A full analysis of the implications of these views would perhaps be more properly the prerogative of historians or anthropologists. In this context, where what must remain uppermost is the cultural and, more specifically, the literary dimension to what has been staked out above, there are two factors that could be stressed. These, together, can serve as a point of departure for any discussion concerning the prospective positioning of Maltese literature locally and especially abroad, and hence of how in this respect the Maltese experience provides a case study in how so called **minority literatures** (to use a term legitimated in various critical fora) might go about attaining their **majority**, or the recognition of having **made it**, whatever that might mean.

Does nationlessness imply literaturelessness?

The first point related to the above is that, significantly, the collection of essays in which Serracino's Inglott's paper was published also included an essay by Professor Oliver Friggieri on the theme of *The Search for a National Identity in Maltese Literature*. The essay confirms, exhaustively and documentingly, that Baldacchino would later be correct in his comments on Maltese writers' struggles to raise **the spirit of nationalism**. Indeed, Friggieri shows that these efforts involved more than a **brace** of writers and that the effect did not inevitably tend towards hollowness. Friggieri's essay arrives as confirmation and a symbolic instance, as it were, of the ineluctability of the literary's coextensiveness with the historical, the political, and the putatively national, but also as an important document in its own right, especially because it is a clear statement on the continuing relevance to Maltese literary consciousness of the nationhood issue. It leaves little room for doubt about how formative that issue has been to the Maltese literary imagination:

The literary experience, stretched over such a long period, can, therefore, be considered from different angles. It can be evaluated as a coherent movement of self-consciousness which led the Maltese to affirm their identity and to seek the means to guarantee constitutional emancipation. It can be also looked at as a strategic instrument of opposition to the colonial Government, or as the portrayal of an alternative way of thinking and being under a foreign rule. On the other hand, it can be considered an intriguing example of the dynamics of history

since, while the Maltese writers decided to make use of the traditional Italian culture to give shape to and enrich in form and content the emergent Maltese literature, they found themselves exposed to the influences of British culture (FRIGGIERI, 1988, p. 309)².

From this there develops the salience of the second factor that is worth highlighting, and which follows on from the suggestion made at the beginning of this essay that Malta and the Vatican both instantiate (though of course differently) the condition of the nationless state. Now what is surely intriguing about any instantiation of that condition is that whereas a nationless state would presumably grow from a singular configuration of cultural, historical, political, legislative and diplomatic processes, the peculiarity of its experience would tend to be not so much a function of the accretion of those processes as of what remains unrepresented among them or by them. Baldacchino's article reinforces this point:

The political and ideological apparatus of any [nationless] state will certainly endeavour to promote the notion that the nation does exist – even though that may be an exercise in the construction of a fallacy (BALDACCHINO, 2002, p. 193).

In other words, the nationless state is likely to find that its unsettledness and unease about itself is given expression not in the processes which determine it, in political fact and within the practice of international law and diplomacy, as a state, but in the less magniloquent though almost certainly more trenchant discourses that variously witness and give vent to the sense of a **fallacy**, or incompleteness, at the heart of the therefore delusive fullness of that determination. It is my belief that this incompleteness will become apparent through the curious disparticipation that must always be at play in any nationless state. Here I am using the term **disparticipation** after Zavarzadeh and Morton (1994), but in a recontextualised sense, to suggest a certain indifference within the people of any nationless state (and even more troublingly, perhaps even an alienation from or, worse, a despising) in regard to the very structures and practices through which nationhood and national identity might be built up, enhanced, reflected, and ongoingly addressed. Again, historians and anthropologists would need to intervene to assess this claim and its relation to the ever evolving Maltese discourse on nationhood and nationlessness (which interestingly,

² Professor Oliver Friggieri's work makes up arguably the most distinguished, eclectic and prolific corpus of any Maltese writer; it is also the most widely translated.

and as if in confirmation of Baldacchino's thesis that Maltese nationhood is not a given, is a discourse which will simply not go away). For my own part, the claim leads me to the crux of the reference, above, to Friggieri's essay, and the realisation that the existence or otherwise of such a disparticipation might usefully be assessed on the basis of the evolving relationship between the Maltese and their literature. The viability of this mode of investigation emerges because, as we have known at least since the German Romantics and as Friggieri's essay itself makes clear, literature can be a powerful articulation of struggles concerning nationhood and national identity. On this basis it is pertinent to note that a nationless state will very probably have a precarious literary tradition; the Vatican, for instance, which in this specific context functions as a negative and particularly idiosyncratic benchmark, has none at all. It therefore seems to follow, even if the neatness of the syllogism might be somewhat suspect, that if there truly is a crisis in the national identity of the Maltese then it must be one reflected in an analogous crisis of Maltese literature and of its reception. And I think that will need to prompt the acknowledgement that any such crisis in Maltese literature had better be brought to analysis, not least because if one is to be promoting something it is best to be aware of anything which might subvert the promotion. But I think that anybody who is Maltese will also have a stake in any review of the state of Maltese literature, not least because they might well find their alleged disparticipation in all that is nation-defining allegorised there. And, as we shall see, the Maltese experience offers some intriguing cues for reflections on the generality of **minority literatures** staking of a claim on **majority**.

The otherness of Maltese literature: limitation and opportunity

How, then, should one approach the contemporary state of Maltese literature in the light of the above diagnosis? There are some alternatives which instantly come to mind. I shall outline some of these alternatives but shall not be pursuing them here, as what I should rather like to do is to go on to explore a different line of investigation. Hence I shall not be bemoaning the routinely deplored reluctance of the Maltese to actually **read**. I shall just say on this that while it is true that a national literature will have some difficulty entrenching itself in the consciousness of a population which does not generally lay much store by reading, any concerted initiative in favour of Maltese literature has no

choice but to conduct its activities on the assumption that there will be some significant take-up, among the Maltese themselves, of the texts it will be promoting both locally and abroad. Another thing that I shall not be doing is to investigate the question which I think does bear much urgent investigating; this is the issue of how the people of an arguably nationless state are supposed to go about laying claim to a **national** literature – or, rather, a nation-defining literature. For surely the claim on a national literature of a people who are not assuredly a nation cannot help being somewhat tenuous. In other words – and assuming that Baldacchino's diagnosis is not far off the mark – those who would want to promote Maltese literature could well find themselves, through their very good intentions of making our **national** literature better known abroad, revealing that literature's evocations of our nationlessness. As we shall see, this might not in itself be a bad thing, and may indeed turn out to be a defining experience that helps renew our literature.

There is one other thing I shall not be doing here. That is to assess the health of contemporary Maltese literature. It is normal, whenever that sort of scrutiny occurs with other literatures, for pessimism to result. After all, when literary traditions take a good hard long look at themselves they tend to find scarce reason for self-congratulation. In postwar English literature, for instance, it was for a long time the norm to lament a supposed decline from the achievements of the Moderns, as indicated in a number of critical surveys in the seventies and eighties (see, for instance, BERGONZI, 1979 and McEWAN, 1981). Curiously, however, and almost as if to prove that the grass does seem greener on the other side, vitality and innovation are quite frequently noted when the scrutiny occurs through the gaze of the other. The French critic Christine Joris (2001), for example, commends the dynamism that she regards as having energised English narrative over the last decade or so. Maltese literature, for its part, will need to steel itself to the possibility that the experience of the gaze of the other might prove traumatic. For apart from its own doubts about itself, which every literature is bound to feel, Maltese literature will experience also the other's temptation to be condescending. Quite evidently, it cannot boast a Dante, a Shakespeare, a Cervantes, or a Proust; more crucially, perhaps, it cannot boast a very extensive range of lesser lights. So what can it possibly offer to the reading of the other?

Let me make one thing clear, lest it appear that I am urging despondency or seeking to provoke those

whose contribution to and investment in Maltese literature have been considerable. I happen to think that the difficulties caused by any perceived lag in what is happening here and what is happening elsewhere may be less of a problem than it is sometimes made out to be. For if Maltese literature is to gain a presence for itself, it must do so on the strength of its very difference from what other literary traditions are doing. This, after all, is the age of the celebration of difference. It is easy to underestimate just how much of a resource this difference could potentially be in literary terms. Thus, while it is understandable that we might wish to look to recent Maltese narratives like Trevor Zahra's *Is-Seba' Trongiet Mewwija* (1994), Immanuel Mifsud's *L-Istejjer Strambi ta' Sara Sue Sammut* (2002), Alfred Sant's *La Bidu la Tmiem, 1599* (2001) and Guze Stagno's *Nbid ta' Kuljum* (2001) in order to demonstrate a local awareness of postmodern poetics as delineated by critics like Linda Hutcheon (1988), we might in that very moment be overlooking the fact that the difference **and** interest of contemporary Maltese literature must surely lie in its inscrutability to accepted critical categories. The obvious resource, for instance, of looking at Maltese literature (and, indeed, minority literatures generally) in terms of postcolonialist criticism is inadequate if it fails to recognise that the alterity to the West which is a condition for the expressibility of and amenability to postcolonialist thought (as it has been promulgated, among others, by Edward Said (1978), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Jacqueline Rose (1996), or Homi Bhabha) is only problematically detectable here. Similarly, the attempt to read postmodernistically that which is arguably negotiating the Modern at the same time that it is negotiating the postmodern may well be misguided. Additionally, the kind of 'incredulity toward metanarratives' which is a defining feature of the postmodern (LYOTARD, 1984) is, in my perception, not conspicuously manifest in the Maltese islands. And a literature which is written in these spaces of divergence from contemporary orthodoxies cannot but fail to be intriguing. Consider these conundrums: in the time of postmodernity, Maltese literature is not entirely postmodern; in the space of post-coloniality, Maltese literature is not entirely postcolonial; and Malta itself, the place to which this literature **belongs**, is by some accounts not entirely a nation. The Maltese, then, do have something to bring to the notice of the other, and that is the very peculiar, very unique writing born from these experiences of non-conformity, non-identity, non-affiliation and

general disparticipation. These experiences tend to crystallise in the fact that, to deploy Baldacchino's very effective formulation, "Malta's unitary, national identity appears to be ultimately anti-nationalist externally and proto-ethnic internally" (BALDACCHINO, 2002, p. 202). Any literary scholar would be intrigued, and lots of readers should be interested. If there is a crisis in Maltese literature, it is perhaps because of the reluctance to recognise this fact and to act (or write) upon it.

It is this which brings me to the central issue here. That is precisely the question of how to go about bringing contemporary Maltese literature to the notice and scrutiny of the other. It is of course, not simply a question of 'have literature, will export', even if the cynicism of that stance does suggest something crucial which will have to be admitted: namely, that at stake is a situation impinged upon by the hard realities of marketing. This demands the readiness to think of texts in Maltese as, not to put too fine a point upon it, a **product**. This **product** will have to be approached with all the lack of disinterestedness which an aesthetics-minded disposition would seem to forbid. But even if this is accepted, and we know that for many it will go against the grain, a problem immediately arises. How is the other to read Maltese literature? Given that foreign readers are not going to be learning Maltese in droves, it appears inevitable that the encounter of the other with the literature of the Maltese cannot but occur, in fact, *in* the language of that other. Translation, in other words, must be the destiny, the strategy, the medium, and the basis of opportunity for Maltese literature that is promoted abroad.

Of course, this is not an entirely attractive course, for reasons which I shall acknowledge. Let us first admit, however, that the problem is urgent. If that urgency is doubted, it might be as well to bring to mind the other's probable perception of Malta's participation in literature. This might well tend to focus not so much on **Maltese literature** as on **Malta in literature**. Hence the interest in novels like Thomas Pynchon's *V* (1963), Anthony Burgess's *Earthly Powers* (1980), or Leonardo Sciascia's *Il Consiglio d'Egitto* (1963). Hence, also, the significant interest in the stays in Malta of a number of canonical figures, including Byron, Walter Scott, John Hookham Frere and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (see, as a guide to representations of Malta in the work of foreign writers, BIANCHI, 2000). What remains to be done, now, is for the Maltese to follow this up with initiatives that can make Malta impinge on the literary other in another way. For

after the other has read Burgess and Pynchon on Malta, or at a different level Nicholas Monsarrat (1973) and Joanna Trollope (1997) and Trezza Azzopardi (2000), is there anything literarily **Maltese** for the other to read?

I have already spoken, above, of one of the factors which complicates this availability: the possible bashfulness of the Maltese about bringing their texts to a reading by the other. The other factor, of course, is the linguistic one. Conversations with a number of writers and critics of contemporary texts in Maltese have shown me that they differ on the nature of a Maltese national identity; they differ on what constitutes such an identity (if indeed it does exist beyond the ubiquity of such signifiers of Malteseness as *pastizzi*, *kazini* and *bradelli*); and they differ also on the robustness of Maltese literature and the various ways forward. They tend to share, however, the view that the one thing that distinguishes Maltese literature is the fact that it is written in a language which, though it is always already marked by alterity (through the conspicuous influences of and borrowings from the language(s) of the other), is somehow uniquely and definingly our own. I think this is an understandable reaction. The view that nobody is going to jump into the linguistic breach to safeguard Maltese unless the Maltese undertake that themselves is doubtless true – and Maltese writers are right to feel protective of Maltese. But this is not something that justifies the lack of a concerted (and I shall explain later what I mean by **concerted**) programme of translations of Maltese texts into other languages. Nor can we continue to think that the lack is compensated for by the fitful existence of a few works by Maltese writers not written in Maltese. This, incidentally, can become a very intriguing issue when in question are works like Francis Ebejer's *Requiem for a Maltese Fascist* (1980) or Vincent Vella's *Inside the Horse* (1993), which as it happens explore with power and sensitivity, in a language which is **not** Maltese, the very issues of non-affiliation, non-identity and disparticipation that, from the start, have exercised this paper, and which, we should remember, Ebejer (1989) himself addressed in his *The Bilingual Writer as Janus*. For are not both those novels founded on the predicament of a character torn between conflicting loyalties to the language of the homeland and to that of another nation? All of this does seem to suggest that Maltese literature, if it is to be attended to elsewhere in an enhanced and promoted way, might need to compromise on that which makes it most distinguishingly itself: its language.

The compromise can occur through immediately writing in the language of the other or else through seeking translation into the language of the other. Maltese writers who are serious about promoting their work abroad must indeed face up to the fact that the encounter with a more international readership cannot but occur in the language of the other. This recalls the experience of many postcolonialist writers and literatures around the world. The literature(s) of the **subaltern**, to use the very influential term employed by Spivak (1988a), can apparently not avoid collusion with the language of the other if they are to find a voice and a space for themselves and for what they speak of. In the process, of course, there arises the risk of assimilation, of disparticipation from that from which they emerged from and an increasing acceptance of the conditions imposed by the other. A short quick list of writers and critics, both past and present, caught up in this dynamic will confirm this: Joseph Conrad, Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, Ben Okri, Julia Kristeva, Slavoj Žižek: the list is potentially endless and startlingly catholic. The truth is that what inevitably results in such cases is further proof of what Homi Bhabha has convincingly demonstrated: the ineluctability of the experience of hybridity for writers who are postcolonialist or who have to resource in some way the language (and with it the structures) of the other. Without this kind of hybridity, a literary tradition might well remain integral, but if we are to be brutally honest it will be, to all intents and purposes, a mute integrality. It will, in fact, be a **monolingual** integrality, exacerbated by the fact that this monolingualism, so jealous of its authenticity, of its singularity, is so circumscribed, so impenetrable to the other. And that, as Serracino Inglott intuited in his third remark on the Maltese relation to language and the benefits of **non-monolingualism**, would hardly be indicative of “attained nationhood” (SERRACINO INGLOTT, 1988, p. 371).

This is not to fail to acknowledge, of course, the fact that any opening up can be painful and traumatic. I am reminded of the momentous sentence which resonates throughout Jacques Derrida's book *The monolingualism of the other, or, the prosthesis of origin*: “I only have one language; it is not mine” (DERRIDA, 1998, p. 4). Derrida's sentence arises, among other things, from the fact that while the language in which he writes is French, the sense of affiliation to everything which that language represents is troubled by an irrepressible sense of alterity, arising from his roots as a Sephardic Jew born in 1930 in colonialist Algeria to a family which,

partly because of the events of that troubled decade, imparted to him a Francophone monolingualism. Those who write from a subaltern literature share with Derrida the trauma he speaks of. For even if they are not monolingual, it is almost as if they are. The encounter with the other's reading occurs not in their language, but mediatedly, in the language of the other – and therefore always other-ingly. This is different to the experience of writers from less subaltern literatures, who, when their works are translated, can allow themselves some complacency at having acquired an extended audience without having had to renege on their own language. It is as if writers from subaltern literatures are, to all intents and purposes, monolingual **in a language which is not their own**, their literary persona dependent on translation and constrained to come across in the language of the other deigning to give them voice in the readership markets which **matter**. Perhaps, therefore, writers from a subaltern literature cannot but experience a degree of disparticipation from the language which is strictly their own, and (dis)affiliation in regard to the one which is not theirs but which has brought them to the notice of the other.

As a means of exploring this further, it may be pertinent here to recall the terms in which Louis Althusser speaks of the process of interpellation, of being positioned as a subject by the discourses of institutional apparatus and their attendant ideological loading. One of Althusser's examples of that positioning refers to a policeman hailing, interpellating through his position of authority, a **subject** in the street (ALTHUSSER, 1971). Now it could well be argued that a **literary tradition** can, like a subject, be interpellated, in its case by another **translating** tradition with the ability to draw on a greater canonical authority, on its greater claim on **establishedness**, or hegemony. For this, of course, is the bottom line conditioning the necessity of the kind of translating which gives greater voice to subaltern literatures: that a literature dependent on translation for voice-ing is constantly mindful of its subject-edness, of its interpellatedness. And the factor on which to focus here is that which has been brought to light recently by Etienne Balibar in *Droit de cité* (1998) and *Nous, citoyens d'Europe?* (2001). Balibar (2001) draws attention to a startling assumption of Althusser, one which has remained largely unremarked. It concerns the fact that the language of the one doing the interpellating is assumed to be the same as that of the one who is interpellated. But what if that were not the case? What if the interpellated subject attends only

imperfectly, because it occurs in an unrecognised or uncomprehended language, the very act, structure and end of interpellation? Would it not be true, then, that the interpellated's sense of disaffiliation in regard to the discourse of authority is all the stronger, and perhaps that the **denegation of ideology** of which Althusser speaks is scarcely gnostic? That would occur because the interpellating comes across always already as other-ing, reminding all that is subaltern of its place, and stressing that disaffiliation (in regard to the self-same as well as the other) is inescapable.

This disaffiliation, however, should perhaps prompt resourcefulness rather than merely rankle as a reminder of dispossession and disinheritance. Indeed, the sense of a particular and ineluctable alterity which has always already been there in the work of Derrida goes a long way to explaining why he has insisted, time and again, on the maxim *plus d'une langue*, which in French can mean 'more than one language' but also 'no more of one language' (DERRIDA, 1995). For Derrida, of course, is disingenuous when he claims monolingualism; he could not have written as he has on Husserl, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Celan, Kafka, Shakespeare or Joyce had he been truly monolingual. The monolingualism he speaks of is predicated on everyday linguistic transactionality; the suggestion, however, is that the **writer** must be alive to the undesirability of any puristic dedication to monolingualism founded in a cult of authenticity – including, surely, linguistic **authenticity**. Here it is worth remembering the all too often neglected alternative title to *Monolingualism of the other*, which is *The prosthesis of origin*. Poststructuralists have in fact been at pains to indicate the essentialist dangers of appeals to authenticity. What is original and/or natural (or native) is always already irrecoverable and/or beset by what is foreign (see WILLS, 1995). Prosthesis, or the dependence of the integral on that which is foreign, is unavoidable.

Conclusion

Minority literatures and strategic otherness

What are the implications of this for contemporary Maltese literature, and beyond that for minority literatures intent on their **majority**? My personal feeling is that it is true (even if only paradoxically true) that the most effective way for a subaltern literature like the Maltese to assert itself is through a presencing in the language of the other. It seems a simple truth, but there is no doubt that many will rail against it for reasons which may range

from the purportedly patriotic (or nationalistic) to the purist. There will be aversion to the notion of anything integrally Maltese (if such a thing could exist on an island whose very history is a prolonged and dynamic experience of hybridity) being prothesised by what is foreign. And it is certainly true that it is at least arguable that some things are beyond translation, that translation might impair or misrepresent what is essentially Maltese, and that this intrinsicity ought to be safeguarded. There are, however, a number of possible responses to this. One of them is the glib Derridean rejoinder that that which is most resistant to translation is that which it is most necessary to translate. Another is that the experience of translated literatures is exhilarating and enlightening for so many readers that it is hard to see why it should be resisted by the Maltese. Yet another is that, as has already been seen above in the context of references to Serracino Inglott's paper, what is being envisaged here, in its relation to plurilinguism, could actually be a sign of **attained nationhood** rather than an exacerbation of any national dis-identity. My own opinion is that anything which is authentically and identifyingly Maltese – assuming that we believe in national identity at all, a belief which would certainly need problematisation on the basis of reference to all the relevant studies, from Herder to Deleuze and Guattari (1986), which it is impossible to cite here – is something that is for that very reason worth communicating to the other. And it is also true that if Maltese literature is to strategically gain a voice in the language of the other, even if just through translation, it must occasionally also be discussed in another language, in 'the languages of criticism'. That, too, is attainment of **majority**³.

There are just a few things to add; indeed, three in all. The first is that we cannot not recall the resources of **strategic essentialism** spoken of by Spivak. This is described by Spivak as a **strategic** use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" in an attempt "to retrieve the subaltern consciousness" (SPIVAK, 1988b, p. 205). Strategic essentialism therefore refers to a protracted and very canny deliberateness on the part of the subordinate (or the subaltern) when it comes to celebrating, if need be with a calculating stridency, that which is distinctively singular and differentiating. Through such means, that singularity can be brought to the attention of a hegemonic discourse that might otherwise easily

ignore it. The experience of other subaltern literatures has shown us, in ways too varied and complex to detail here, that this strategic essentialism **can** be communicated in the language of the other. It can lead, indeed, to minority literatures pursuing their **majority** through **strategic otherness**. Even according to the lessons of postcolonialist theory and practice, therefore, Maltese literature, as just one such minority literature, cannot postpone the encounter with the language of the other if it is to assert its voice. It will be following in the wake of other subaltern literatures which have already assayed that encounter, and, as I intimated before, if there is a crisis in Maltese literature it must lie in the belatedness of this effort. Those Maltese authors who have sought to respond to this surely need to be commended.

The second point concerns the fact that it seems to me that a very concerted effort is needed if Maltese literature is to open to the language of the other. It cannot be satisfied with a few individual success stories of Maltese writers finding translators. I think that what it needs to look to, over the long term, is a sustained and coordinated effort at seeing a worthy and representative range of Maltese literature achieve translation. Unless it is going to merely dabble, it will therefore have to think in terms of equivalents to a project which, in the UK, occurs every ten years, Granta's *Best of Young British Novelists* – and resist predictable sneers about an overreaching fatheadedness. For there can be little doubt, to anybody mildly familiar with the rigours of international publishing, that if the presencing of Maltese literature in the language of the other is to be as significant as it needs to be, it is mainstream publishers in mainstream markets who will need to be targeted. Such targeting will probably need to be aggressive, even shameless. The alternative of piecemeal initiatives, tentative marketing and occasional but all too rare breakthroughs is not going to take Maltese literature places. It will keep it more or less where it is already. That implies hard choices. Tough decisions will have to be taken in terms of putting together a cadre of works for an assault on international readerships. The editing of the works in question will be an invidious task. Editors and translators will have to be identified and made to deliver. Contacts will have to be pursued, links forged, funds found. It is therefore not too fanciful to surmise that a Maltese writers' collective (or some equivalent) will have to act as a midwife to a **Maltese Revival**⁴. Such an initiative has to be

³ For a useful and more nuanced investigation of the difficulties involved in an analogical situation – one which related to circumstances obtaining within Turkish writing in Germany – see Weidauer (2003).

⁴ Currently, the organisation which has gone furthest in this kind of initiative is Inizjamed: see <www.inizjamed.org>.

convinced, utterly, deeply, against all the odds and against all expectations and scepticism, that what it is setting out to do is not impossible. If it does succeed it is this, to my mind, that the Maltese postmodern will have been about. The postmodern, Lyotardian lessons on the recognition of art in the mode and tense of the future anterior, of the learning of the rules of what will have been done, will in the Maltese context have been tied to the experience of just such an initiative. It will be a daunting experience, but it is also exciting and achievable.

It is this achievability that brings me to my third and last point, which indeed returns me to the issue of nationlessness, or at any rate disparticipation. I cannot help being struck by how odd it is that no such initiative has been properly tried before. Indeed, perhaps one indication of how truly nationless the Maltese can be is that the effort so quixotic when it is in actual fact so necessary and so timely. It represents, as it were, an obvious next step for Maltese literature. Yet the sense of the quixotic nature is a further sign of the disparticipation spoken of earlier. I think anybody who is Maltese will know what this translates into. Let me, in fact, use Maltese at the last: it is the idea that *Għax hawn Malta dejjem l-istess nibqgħu; qatt ma naslu* [Things will remain what they are in Malta; we're never going to get anywhere]. That kind of thinking, which will not be unknown to **minorities** everywhere, suggests that a **Maltese Revival** must, in time, founder. It has it that if we do make the grade, *jekk naslu* [if we get anywhere], it is through individual making good rather than by dint of a more collective attainment in which the nation can feel it is participating and that it can identify with. How's that for disparticipation in the nationless state? Thus, if the initiative succeeds it will be through managing to overcome that kind of disparticipation, the very disparticipation which ironically is perhaps as essentially Maltese as Maltese itself. It therefore is truly odd to think that as we all wholeheartedly participate in wishing for such an outcome, we are at that very moment also asking it not to be too Maltese. Some otherness, some foreignness, was clearly always going to be vital.

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