

Living Life in a Language

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published in the London-based magazine Europa by European Alternatives, May/June 2008

In his introduction to *Out of Place - A Memoir* (2000), Edward W. Said observes that “Everyone lives life in a given language; everyone's experiences therefore are had, absorbed, and recalled in that language.” Then he goes on to acknowledge that “the basic split” in his life was the one between Arabic, his “native language,” and English, the language of his “education and subsequent expression as a scholar and teacher.”

I have difficulty recalling my childhood experiences in any particular language. Like an increasing number of Maltese people, I was brought up in what was in many ways a Maltese-English speaking environment. At home, at school and almost everywhere I went, the message I seemed to receive was that English was the better language and that Maltese was limited and unworthy of too much attention and respect. But Maltese, nonetheless, was everywhere.

Then, at the age of 15, I bumped into Oreste Calleja's *Erba' Drammi* (Four Plays) and I was fascinated by his creative, even transgressive use of language. Although I had spoken and been exposed to Maltese all my life, I had never come across anything quite so appealing, so refreshing. Somehow I could see myself in that fresh language and I decided I wanted to take that experience further. Today I can't see myself writing literature in any language other than Maltese.

Language and Literature

Maltese is the national language of the Maltese Islands. Maltese and English are the two official languages. When Malta became a member of the EU in 2004, Maltese became one of the official languages of the Union, the first one of Semitic, or more precisely Arabic, origin.

Maltese started as a dialect of Arabic in 870AD when the Aglabids invaded Malta and slowly developed into a unique language by creating its own forms and allowing itself to be strongly influenced by Sicilian, Italian and English. Maltese is spoken by the vast majority of those who live on our two inhabited islands. However, 61% say that they prefer to read in English. This is a complex issue, and, amongst others, it is a choice dictated by the quality and availability of translations.

But most Maltese literature is written in Maltese. Many would not even accept the idea that a novel written in a different language by a Maltese person in Malta or elsewhere can be considered a work of Maltese literature. Despite the obvious limitations of readership and the added problem that only 45% of the Maltese choose to read at least

one book a year for leisure, Malta has a small but healthy and thriving book-publishing industry.

Words and the Future in the European Union

Even though the new generation of writers is eager to distinguish the dynamics of writing literature, of re-describing the world by reconstructing language, from those of promoting the use of the Maltese language and acting as guardians of its well-being, writing in Malta today is intimately tied to questions of language. When Malta joined the EU in 2004, it opened up new possibilities for the consolidation and promotion of its literature in Maltese. However, we have not yet come to terms with this new situation and taken full advantage of it. Inizjamed, the voluntary organization that I coordinate, has been active on the local, Mediterranean and European level, but there is still no national strategy or local infrastructure for the promotion of Maltese literature.

In this both bleak and promising context, the proposals made by a group of intellectuals for intercultural dialogue, chaired by Amin Maalouf and set up at the initiative of the European Commission, make interesting reading. The document, published in 2008, and rather unimaginatively called “A Rewarding Challenge. How the Multiplicity of Languages could Strengthen Europe” argues convincingly that “efficient management of our linguistic, cultural and religious diversity would produce a reference model indispensable to a planet tragically afflicted by chaotic management of its own diversity.” The group believes that a common sense of belonging based on linguistic and cultural diversity “is a powerful antidote against the various types of fanaticism towards which all too often the assertion of identity has slipped in Europe and elsewhere, in previous years as today.”

At a time when populism and intellectual absolutism are back with a vengeance, Niccolò Milanese (“Engagement and the Arts in Europe,” *Europa*, March 2008) reminds us that “Europe’s identity is neither a blank page nor a pre-written and pre-printed page. It is a page which is in the process of being written.” It is “an endless process of self-creation,” the crucial word being “endless.” The EU document suggests two ways of anchoring linguistic diversity in a sustainable way in the lives of the people of Europe, its citizens, its peoples and its institutions.

1. The *bilateral* relations between the peoples of the European Union should hinge by way of priority on the languages of the two peoples involved rather than on another language. This means that every European language should have, in each of the countries of the European Union, a substantial group of proficient and highly motivated speakers.
2. The EU should advocate the idea of “personal adoptive language,” a kind of “second mother tongue.” Every European should be encouraged to freely choose a distinctive language, different from their language of identity and also different from their language of international communication. Learning that language would go hand in hand with familiarity with the country or countries

in which that language is used, along with the literature, culture, society and history linked with that language and its speakers.

In this way, every European language would have “a special place in the bilateral exchanges with all European partners; none would be condemned to disappearance, none would be reduced to the status of local dialect.” It is not difficult to see the great advantages of such an idea for small or lesser-known languages and literatures like Maltese and Estonian, or even Polish and Czech. The bilateral relations would offer great scope not only for literary translation projects but also for the better promotion of the different cultures with their fascinating cultural baggage.

Tending to the Imagination

It is hoped that many Europeans would opt for languages from other continents as their personal adoptive language, and not only languages of the EU. Moreover, it is important for both recent and second-generation migrants to maintain knowledge of their own language of origin. We have to gradually get out of this one-way relationship in which people from elsewhere are getting better and better at learning European languages, while very few Europeans take the trouble to learn the languages of the immigrants. The latter need to feel that their languages, their literature, and their cultures are known and appreciated by the societies in which they live; the approach based on the « *personal adoptive language* » could help to dispel this *malaise*.

Malta, like other EU countries, is receiving a progressively larger number and variety of non-European immigrants and is having difficulty dealing with this influx and making the best of it, both for the new arrivals and for the hosts. Maltese literature has a lot to gain, and in many ways, from this new phenomenon, and some Maltese writers are narrating stories that are shaping a new imaginary of our identity and of the world. But so much more can be done. “Europe should be open to others while not destroying their difference,” writes Niccolò Milanese. Those “who tend to the imagination,” like philosophers, writers and other artists, “have the responsibility for caring for the resources which hold our communities together.” They must be careful not to do anything that might prompt or encourage us to define ourselves “against” one another, to “foreclose difference too quickly.”

A respect for and engagement with linguistic diversity allows writers to constantly lose and find their place, for

Every language is the product of a unique historical experience, each is the carrier of a memory, a literary heritage, a specific skill, and is the legitimate basis of cultural identity. Languages are not interchangeable, none is dispensable, none is superfluous.

The document commissioned by the European Commission argues that to preserve all the languages of our heritage and encourage their development in the rest of the continent “is

inseparable from the very idea of a Europe of peace, culture, universality and prosperity.” It means that as writers, as human beings, we respect and seek to engage with those who live their life in each of these languages, with their cultures and their aspirations. It also means that we seek to share our words and our worlds with them.

30.4.08