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A Place in the Mediterranean

Adrian Grima argues that Maltese literature should write and promote itself locally and internationally as a literature of the Mediterranean and serve as a hub for literary activity in the region. This requires a long-overdue injection of public funds and the establishment of a Maltese Literature Centre and allows Maltese writers to engage with new audiences.

Malta's new wave writers are successfully introducing Maltese literature to new audiences in Europe and the Mediterranean, and there is a slow but steady increase in the number of works of literature in Maltese that have been translated into English and other languages. But while most new EU member states (and non-EU European countries) have established centres for the promotion of their literatures abroad and have allocated the necessary human resources and funds, Malta still lacks a strategy, let alone a Maltese Literature Centre, and voluntary organizations and institutions have to struggle to find the funds and other resources to participate in EU-sponsored literary projects.

In November 2005, the [Literature Across Frontiers](#) (LAF) three-year project part-funded by the EU Culture 2000 programme, together with its Maltese partner, the voluntary cultural organization Inizjamed, organized a symposium in Malta on the international promotion of literature. Malta joined the project on the initiative of writer and translator Maria Grech Ganado, who came into contact with LAF at a literary festival in Finland and was determined to make the project available to other Maltese writers and stakeholders.

At the end of the "Re-Visions Symposium on Literary Exchange in an Enlarged Europe" the 40 writers, literary translators, publishers, editors, organizers of literary festivals and representatives of literature organizations from 16 European countries who met at St. James Cavalier passed a resolution about the translation and promotion of Maltese literature abroad. The resolution was accompanied by an excellent draft survey on the "Promotion of Literature and Support for Translation in EU Member States in Central and Eastern Europe" prepared by Alexandra Büchler, the ever-resourceful director of LAF at the Mercator Centre, University of Wales, a valuable document for those who may be entrusted with the drawing up of policies and structures for the translation and promotion of Maltese literature. "From what we have seen so far," wrote Ms. Büchler, "it is obvious that even the smallest new EU member countries give some 20,000 - 30,000 EUR a year and that ALL have a scheme of some sort, except for Cyprus" [and Malta].

The Resolution called on the Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment and the Ministry of Tourism and Culture of Malta to take concrete steps to promote Maltese Literature abroad. "This requires a commitment on the part of the Ministries concerned to establish the necessary support framework for the professional promotion and translation of Maltese literature into other languages and for the translation into Maltese of literature written in other languages." In this context, "support for co-operation projects in the field of literature is indispensable."

The Resolution, which was sent to the Maltese authorities by Alexandra Büchler, Maria Grech Ganado Adrian Grima, and Immanuel Mifsud, on behalf of all the participants, called on the two ministries concerned to establish *a policy with respect to Maltese literature* and to *coordinate their initiatives* related to the promotion (and translation) of Maltese literature abroad. In Malta, although the promotion of and support for literature are strictly speaking the responsibility of the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, two important national institutions, the Book Council, which organizes the Book Fair and runs the National Book Prize, and the

National Language Council, with its Technical Committee for Literature, are appointed by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment.

The LAF survey attached to the Resolution identifies the following *minimum resources* made available for the promotion of national literature in the new member states:

- the employment of a person to focus on this area on full time or part time basis
- travel costs for writers and translators to be able to accept invitations to international events
- a translation fund
- promotion costs - production of printed material
- a website to serve as an important point of reference for the promotion of literature
- staff travel costs
- project costs (e.g. translation workshops)

The names of some of the institutional partners in the Malta Re-Visions symposium are an indication of the national structures that other European countries have set up to promote their literatures: Centre for Slovenian Literature, Books from Lithuania, FILI - Finnish Literature Information Centre, Fund for the Promotion of Icelandic Literature, Latvian Literature Centre, NORLA - Norwegian Literature Abroad, Polish Book Institute, Ramon Llull Institute (Catalonia), and Welsh Literature Abroad.

A Multimillion Publishing Industry

The 40 participants of the Malta Re-Visions symposium met to discuss policies, practices and structures that encourage and enable the circulation of literary works and mobility of writers; representation of small-language literatures on the international scene and obstacles to their greater dissemination; promotion of literature and the work of literature and translation centres; networking, exchange and cooperation; vehicles for publishing literature in translation; and public support for literary exchange and translation. The symposium was organized in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment of Malta, the British Council (Malta) and the St. James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, and also received support from the Ministry of Tourism and Culture and Casa Rocca Piccola. The Malta Council for Culture and the Arts, which is meant to “encourage” Maltese Literature through its “Cultural Support Program,” to quote from its website (www.maltaculture.com), chose not to support this international project.

According to Alexandra Büchler, who has strongly supported Malta’s participation in the three-year LAF project right from the start, “Literature in translation is part of a multimillion publishing industry, yet it often cannot exist without subsidy and concentrated promotional effort on the part of non-commercial cultural organisations. Instead of diversity, globalisation has paradoxically brought greater homogeneity to the international book market, and programmes such as Literature Across Frontiers can help counter this trend.”

And yet, although policy makers and stakeholders are well aware of what is going on in other relatively small European countries, Malta still lacks a strategy to support and promote its literature at home and abroad, even among the Maltese diaspora. Websites like maltapoetry.com (run by *Poezijaplus*) and letteraturamaltija.com are good points of reference but it will take more than a virtual presence to boost our contemporary literature (and culture) in an increasingly competitive and demanding world. The only policy official document that I know of that deals with literature at any length is the now outdated *Cultural Policy* compiled by Mario Azzopardi (2001). The document had successfully proposed the establishment of a National Book Council and one of its many proposed functions was to “Explore both local and foreign means through which Maltese literature can reach out into the international market by means of translation schemes of both local and foreign works.” The Council was

eventually set up in 2001 and has worked hard with limited resources to strengthen the National Book Prize (formerly the Literary Prize) and the Book Fair. However, with its current organizational setup, it cannot possibly focus also on the international promotion of Maltese literature. The total dedication of volunteers is meant to support, *not* substitute solid structures with paid professionals.

The *Cultural Policy* also urged the authorities to “Explore both local and foreign means through which Maltese literature can reach out into the international market by means of translation schemes of both local and foreign works.” (This is also mentioned in the 2002 Council of Europe Report on Cultural Policy in Malta compiled by Anthony Everitt. Note B. 6.15.) The document proposed that Maltese literature should be promoted through “(i) an agency which publishes information and biographies in Maltese and English and which ascertains the marketability of the local literary product; (ii) improved sustenance of writers through the creation of transitional allowances such as working and travelling grants, sabbatical leave for authors and funding of literary research; and (iii) the creation of a Translators Association.”

None of this has been done, though, possibly because many local politicians and perhaps even some cultural administrators, unlike their foreign counterparts, view literature (and culture in general?) as a drain on public finances rather than a *vital* asset. So while the literatures of other EU member states, even the smaller ones, are quickly establishing themselves as forces to be reckoned with in the international market, attracting foreign attention and investment and injecting their communities with the kind of quality culture that makes a country attractive to project writers, investors, cultural operators, and business people in general, Malta sits on the fence and hopes that some of its more enterprising citizens will do alone and against all odds what specially designed national structures with the necessary resources are doing in other countries.

As Immanuel Mifsud said in a letter to *The Sunday Times* (May 15, 2005), Maltese literature *is* being translated into various languages and published in prestigious collections abroad, but “unlike their European counterparts, local authors have no backing whatsoever from the state and they have to rely on the goodwill of fellow writers and friends to have their work translated, promoted and published abroad.”

Mifsud said that he “had personally presented the previous Minister of Culture [Mr. Jesmond Mugliett] a detailed dossier of what the so-called small EU member states, like Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have been doing in their quest to have their literatures spread among other European countries.” But in Malta, he wrote, there seems to be “a grievous lack of vision of how to tackle things related to literature and translation.”

At the Re-Visions symposium, one of the six Maltese speakers, Dr. Ġorġ Mallia, who had just been appointed president of the National Book Council, noted that sadly the Book Fair organized by the Council had, along the years, lost the word “International” from its title. “The Council I chair will try to bring that word back. Book fairs can be a great opportunity for cultural and literary cross-fertilisation [...]. Perhaps twinning with some of the larger book fairs in Europe can bring about the bridging that is so lacking right now in so much except for symposia like this one. The National Book Council can build bridges too by liaising with other National entities that propagate the book, creating opportunities for writers to meet and talk and become aware of each other’s contribution to national, and possibly international, literatures.” (Proceedings downloadable at inizjamed.org)

Engaging with New Audiences

The issue of promoting Maltese literature abroad through translation is not a peripheral one; it’s not only about selling Malta. Because Maltese writers live and write on the periphery of

the huge European (and Arab) literary worlds, and therefore “find themselves marginalised from literature’s most prominent markets;” and because their works cannot become “literature” without an audience and much more, writers cannot but agree with Ivan Callus that “the next frontier” for Maltese literature “must be a coordinated (rather than piecemeal or individual) effort to find a presence, through translation, in the consciousness of foreign readerships” (*Orbis*, January 2004). Dr. Callus acknowledges, like few others, the plight of the Maltese writer when he states that for Maltese works a certain kind of visibility is possible only through translation. “Maltese writers *cannot* just write or cultivate solitude,” as Maurice Blanchot would suggest, because they “must chase, if what is in view is a readership that is not only local but a broader-based one heartily admitting them to the ranks of *Weltliteratur*, after encounters that might see them translated from a language that is both their opportunity but also their limit.” For Maltese writers, then, “a presence elsewhere is not only consequent upon the disciplining of their craft or the pursuit of their art, or upon such practicalities as finding an agent or working with a publisher’s editor, but, and at least as crucially, upon making sure their encounters lead somewhere.” For the Maltese writer, writes Callus, “writing is just the start and, indeed, perhaps the easy part.”

Apart from writing, if they want to engage with a readership Maltese writers must be able to type, set, market, distribute, and promote their work. They are often their own promoters and reviewers, their most valuable readers and critics. When they struggle through the various stages that take a set of words in a mind all the way to a book on a shelf in a bookstore, they come face to face with the “absence” of Maltese literature, of a substantial reading public that ultimately creates a literature, with an almost complete lack of critical appreciation of the work, with the often stubborn indifference of publishers, distributors, and booksellers who are meant to deliver, in the widest sense of the word, their books. Like a letter that never reached its destination and was never read, Maltese literature is caught between the essential solitude of its writers and the absence of its readers.

But despite the general lack of institutional support, and thanks in part to interest and support from abroad, things are moving. Maltese writers and literary critics are regularly invited to important literary events in the Mediterranean, Europe and beyond. In recent years, Midsea Books has published a number of translations of books of Maltese literature into English, from classics like Ġużè Ellul Mercer’s *Leli ta’ Haż-Żgħir* (1938) to Immanuel Mifsud’s *KM* (2005) and more recently *Happy Weekend* (2006). During the Re-Visions symposium, Inizjamed presented its series of six small books of Contemporary Maltese Literature in Translation published in collaboration with Midsea Books. Established writers like Maria Grech Ganado, Victor Fenech, Joe Friggieri, Mario Azzopardi and especially Oliver Friggieri, have had their work published in English and other languages in Malta and abroad, including Arabic. And thanks to LAF and Inizjamed, in 2006 books of Maltese literature in translation were present at major book fairs in Prague and Istanbul.

But Malta needs a longterm strategy that is accompanied by a concerted effort. As in other European countries, the injection of public funds will be crucial. When Inizjamed organized its LAF weeklong residential Translation workshop, with writers from five European countries, the support of the Ministry of Education was vital. As was vital the support of the British Council (once again) in the LAF Sealines Valletta residency held in October with writers from four European countries and the participation of Clare Azzopardi in the LAF Sealines Riga residency in August (partly supported by the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts).

A Place in the Mediterranean

Perhaps it’s about time more writers and other stakeholders started seeing our literature as a “Mediterranean” literature. At the Re-Visions symposium, Guðrún Sigfúsdóttir spoke about the thriving book market of Iceland, a small nation with a population of about 290,000 people

that publishes, translates and sells an extraordinary number of books for its size. “Regarding the promotion and publication of Icelandic books abroad, the situation has changed dramatically since foreign publishers really became interested in Icelandic books about two decades ago.” Peter Höeg’s *Smilla’s Sense of Snow* and Jostein Gaarder’s *Sophie’s World* “created an interest in Nordic literature and Icelanders made the most of it – the interest these books generated meant that foreign publishers became very attentive when we presented our authors at book fairs.” According to Guðrún Sigfúsdóttir, with a solid infrastructure for the translation and promotion of its literature already in place, Iceland made the most of the success of “Nordic” literature in general: it saw itself and represented itself as a literature of its region. “The success of Nordic authors has influenced the success of Icelandic authors. You could say there’s been a definite breakthrough in that regard.”

Maltese literature could do the same if it redesigned itself as a hub for Mediterranean literary activity and if it wrote and sold itself as a literature of the Mediterranean. With its ready access to English and other international languages like French and Arabic (besides Italian and Spanish), Maltese literature could become, in the long term, a regional focal point and it could take advantage of the successes of other literatures in the region. To do so, however, it would have to rethink its relationship with the cultures and literatures of the region. This is what the organizers of the *Vers International Poetry Festival* (MCCA, 2004) and the *Malta International Short Story Festival* (National Language Council, 2005) tried to do.

When Inizjamed and the British Council organized the Klandestini 15-month multilateral creative writing project for emerging writers in the Mediterranean (writing in Maltese, Greek, Turkish, Italian, and English) in 2003-04, they not only showed how good ideas can attract funds and human resources, but also that more lasting results can only come from initiatives and strategies that look beyond the one-off, short-term project or event. Moreover, the presence in the Mediterranean over the past 10 to 15 years of migrants from African, Asian and Eastern European countries has exposed us to new languages, new cultures and new opportunities. And we ought to make the best of this new, not always unproblematic phenomenon, especially in areas such as literature, with its ability to tell stories in powerful and revealing ways, and literary translation.

If Malta has never submitted a project proposal for literary translation in the Culture 2000 programme of the EU, that must mean that the infrastructure is missing and public funds have to be made available if we want to make the best of our human resources and take full advantage of the fact that we are members of the EU (with an officially recognized national language). Moreover, our little, resourceful archipelago lies at the heart of one of the most popular, and populated regions of the world: there’s a big audience out there and it’s about time *we* started reaching out to it.