

An interview with Ġorġ Mallia about his verse

An interview by Patrick J. Sammut with Ġorġ Mallia, about poetry in general and about his verse in the book *My love had eyes of blue and dreams*, published in October 2019. This interview first appeared in *Il-Pont*, Number 54, October 2019.

Where and when is poetry born?

I can only speak for myself at this point, since I'm donning the hat of poet and momentarily discarding the one of critic. For me, poetry is born of an urgent need to externalise feelings. I only write verse when I'm gripped by intense emotion of one type or another... love, or sadness, or despair. There are no in-betweens in my case. The words just well within me and need to be let out. It rarely takes me a long time to pen poems, even the longer ones. They're a burst dam, if you like, with words just gushing out of cracks and falling into place beyond my control. I do a modicum of cleaning up and correcting after a poem is fully written, but rarely change a lot. And I have not written a lot, and write in spurts. I might easily not write a single poem for ten years, then write five in one month. I am dictated to. I am not the one who dictates to my verse.

Utility and futility of poetry today, both to people who write it and people who consume it. Your reactions?

Well, futility comes from the fact that a lot of people misunderstand what poetry really is and so shy away from it. This might be the fault of having poems that are inadequate to a certain age and culture being rammed down the throats of children in schools. It is difficult to conceptualise the beauty that can be poetry if you had to study verse you barely understood, let alone felt, for an examination. But the utility, for those who read poetry for the pleasure of it... or for the emotional and intellectual content, as well... for those, there is an affinity with the poet... a link that cannot be broken, funnelling feelings and thoughts directly from one to the other. For the poet, that link with



The collection, published in 2019

the reader is all essential once the poem has been penned. The need to write does not depend on the need to be read, but that is value added... it's a way of reaching out within a society of peers who feel what you feel and think what you think... even if they don't normally, but do as they read your charged words.

What do you think about poetry as a multisensual experience, but also as a sensual creation?

I think I've already answered this in part in the previous two answers. Poetry is not purely cerebral, it is indeed multisensory, using the power of words that scan, and the creation of imagery, to impinge on all the senses of the reader. Logically, the sensual can be an intrinsic part of this, but is not all of it. The poet gets through to all the senses through the emotions triggered by how well the words come together and what they signify. Logically, not just to the poet, but also within the parameters of the interpretation of the reader.

Your new book reflects the belief that poetry is primarily a very strong cry of happiness/love and of pain? This depends on the choice and strength of the words used by the poet. Your reactions?

Logically, not all poetry is like that. My verse is lyrical, and, yes, taps into love and pain, with the very clear link between the two at times. Happiness too, at the height of it, though my tendency is to write more when the feelings are negative... or there is emotion that is tinged with sadness. Words need to reflect the feelings. This might seem logical, but isn't always so. The sound of the words, their meaning, the way they interact with each other, the analogies, the metaphors, the similes and other imagery, the way the verses scan and (at times) rhyme... the rhythm and the lilt and song of the poem... all of those need to fit perfectly within the emotion and thoughts that the poet is trying to convey. One slip up in any of these is all that's needed for verse not to work.

Is poetry medicine for both the poet and the reader?

Since my poetry is predominantly lyrical, and is an externalisation of intense emotion, there is a healing element in it. It acts as a valve that can ease the strong pressure in the chest that massive feelings bring. If the reader identifies with the words and content of a poem, yes, undoubtedly, that release is also there for those who read and feel.

What do you think about the autobiographical and the universal in your poetry?

My poetry is only autobiographical, but the



Gorg Mallia

way that my readers have reacted to it... indicating very clearly how much they identify with and internalise what they read, makes it adopt a certain amount of universality. I never think of the reader as I write, but am extremely happy when the reader materialises after the poetry is written and published. The reader is not essential to the poem, but is massive value added. The reader creates another dimension, because the words have not just been externalised, they have also reached out.

Do you write your poems when Muse calls and leave them as they are, or is there a second moment when you reread and refine them as a final product? Is this refining phase an advantage or a disadvantage?

As I said, I do go over the verse once it's written... often quite a bit later, but I've always found that the changes I make are minimal. It's rare that I rewrite. I touch up, yes, sometimes remove a word that makes a line clunky or is an obstacle to rhythmic flow... but rarely more than that. I like the sound of my verse to be clean with a flow that is not interrupted. That's where the revision phase comes in handy.

Who reads poetry today, both locally and abroad? Are you optimistic or pessimistic about poetry's readership/audience?

Beginning with the Maltese... we are not a reading people, and of all the things we don't read, poetry is the least read by the general public. But that means that those who do read poetry are poetry lovers, meaning there is a fulfilment to the writer that comes from appreciation by those who understand. I think on a more general level, the same applies abroad, though there are a lot of poetry journals and poetry societies in places like the UK and the US that promote the genre. But I don't know enough about them to talk about them here. I just wish we could instil in our youngsters a poetic culture that does not include exams. I remember teaching poetry at Form five level in a beautiful garden, and playing hard rock to the students to give them a contemporary treatment to a poem we were studying ("The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner"). I remember getting students to bring plastic cups to school so they could clip-clop on the wooden desk tops to the sound of "The Charge of the Light Brigade"... and I meet many of them, decades later, who tell me they remember those poems with fondness. That is the way to go.

Am I right in saying that 'My Love Had Eyes of Blue and Dreams' is monothematic? What about your poetry as a kind of 'striptease' of your deepest emotions?

Oh, undoubtedly. As I wrote in the blurb on the back of the book, almost all the verse in my book stems from lovers I've had... written for them, or about them. And at times, because of them. A recent breakdown of my second marriage pushed me to the edge of a poetic cliff, for example, where it was impossible for me not to write. There are no holds barred. The soul is stripped bare for all to see. The verse in my book was written for and about people who have now moved out of my life... and I felt that they now belonged to the public, which is why I have published them for the first time. And they span forty years of my life. The first poem was written when I was 21. The last just a few weeks ago at the venerable age of 61. But there's a bridge of emotion that links them together and defies the years that have passed.

Some speak of poets as the conscience of a whole nation. What do you think of the poet's involvement at a socio-political level? Are there limits to such complicity?

All artists are like that. Or at least they can be. Their ability to put thoughts and feelings into words that can be understood and felt (or, for the same reason, to put paint to canvas, or drama on a stage, etc) makes them very powerful communicators of, at times, abstraction. The soul of a nation is a collective. It is a huge melange of traits that cannot be "represented", but strands of it can be sifted and placed in front of a public in a way that concretises the abstraction. However, my own verse is not intended to be a "conscience", unless it's a very intimate one that can reach into a reader's soul and drag emotions out. I have my cartoons for the socio-political communication... so in my case, I distinguish among genres and what I use them for. So, yes, there are limits, imposed by the artist him or herself. There is also an ethical line that is personal to the artist and which is not crossed only because the artist decides this to be the case, or through pragmatic choice.

How does this poetry collection differ from your previous non-academic publications? I feel that the opening dedication is powerful: "Dedicated to those for whom these poems were written... even those who, in the end, did not deserve them." Your reactions?

Well, I think my dedication actually says it all. I don't think there is a need for explanation. Poems can be a beautiful bouquet of flowers that can be rejected and flung back in the face of the suitor. Hence the dedication. The difference between my poetry and my blogging, for example, is minimal, because in both cases I use words to elicit emotions. My children's books are, of course, different, as their function is different. But the one collection of "stream of consciousness" stories I have published ("Żagħżuġħ bla isem") also has the sound of words at the core of it, even if the point of the stories is psychological analysis of characters within a thematic context. I have written a very few stories of that type since the book was published in the early eighties. Perhaps an extended version of that book should be my next literary publication.