

Mosaics: A symphony of multilingual poetry

Marija Grech

At a poetry reading in the courtyard of an old theater in the heart of the 16th century fortress city of Valletta, an old and somewhat decrepit well-known Maltese poet gets up to read a poem. "This was written by a friend of mine ... a young poet who unfortunately could not join us today," she says as she rustles the unfolded papers in her frail hands. Apologizing in advance for any mistakes in pronunciation she may make, this frail figure of a woman proceeds to read out a highly rhythmic set of verses that jump comfortably and neatly from one language to another.

This was my first encounter with Antoine Cassar's Mosaics. While most of us speak and use one, two, or possibly three languages in our day-to-day life, this 29-year-old poet not only speaks five languages fluently but also writes multilingual poetry. His sonnets, which he has dubbed 'Mosaics,' are

written in a combination of English, French, Italian, Spanish and Maltese - a language which is itself a mixture of both Latin or Romance languages, as well as the Arabic or Semitic tongue.

Moving from one language to another while still maintaining a coherent sense and meaning, these poems are inherently different to previous examples of multilingual poetry such as the 'macaronic' verses of T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound, where one language provides the main framework of the text which is then peppered with the use of other languages.

As the poet himself explains, in the Mosaic "there is an attempt to balance the use of each of the five main languages as equally as possible, such that no single tongue takes prominence over the others, each one forming an integral part of the poetic fabric."

Born in London to Maltese parents in 1978 and spending his childhood and teenage years



Photo by Anne Cechu

Antoine Cassar in his home in Luxembourg

traveling between England, Malta and Spain,

Cassar's upbringing may be said to have been ideal for a multilingual poet in the making.

Already fluent in a number of languages, he studied modern languages for his undergraduate degree at the University of Durham, and moved to Spain after graduation to begin a PhD in medieval romance literature and to research the origins of the Spanish sonnet. He now lives in Luxembourg where he works, very aptly, as a Maltese translator for the European Commission.

It is this very sense of being in-between languages that Cassar's poetry reflects. As the poet himself notes, his first attempt at multilingual poetry was the result of his experience one day on the Spanish metro after having recently moved back to Malta and reacquainted himself with the Maltese language. "In the metro, in the crowds, amid the heavy traffic, as usual I could hear phrases in various languages floating around in my head, but this time they included the Semitic structures and consonant sounds of Maltese," he recalls.

"Seizing their rhythm as best I could, I sat down and attempted to combine each utterance in a logical sequence, exploiting their sounds whilst still trying to maintain a serious tone."

Thus was born his first Mosaic, *In città* - a poem that expresses the sense of meaninglessness felt in the vastness of a big city and the poet's guileless delight of rural life.

It was a few years after penning this first poem that Cassar began to write Mosaics regularly. Although he still writes monolingual poetry occasionally, it is the form of the Mosaic that he finds most exciting and challenging.

"Why the fixation with one as opposed to many?" he asks. "I have always been fascinated by the music of words as well as with the crossing and blurring of frontiers, and thus, with the desire to take advantage of the phonetic nature and literary allusions of different languages."

However, the use of so many languages in one set of verses may be said to limit the readership of these poems, with their very originality and strength also proving to be their one main constraint.

Not that many people are fluent in all the languages the poet uses, especially Maltese - a language which is spoken by some half a million speakers worldwide.

Although a translation in English is included with each poem, as Cassar himself acknowledges, "some of the meaning may be lost on the reader" as a result of

insists that any such gaps in meaning should not necessarily prohibit the more linguistically challenged of us from enjoying these Mosaics. "How often does one read or listen to a poem and understand it completely?" he asks. "In my reading experience, I find that if a poem offers all its connotation, undertones and beauty at one go, its taste will soon be forgotten ... The multiple levels of a poem should pique and stir the reader's curiosity, slowly but surely bringing them deeper into the text."

Indeed the deeper significance of these poems may be said to lie not simply in the more traditional meaning of the individual words or verses, but more specifically in the play with sound that the movement from one language to another generates and exploits.

As the poet explains, "the mosaics are designed not so much to be read but to be heard."

"I would like to think that any listener with a general sympathy for

languages can appreciate the meaning channeled by the sound," he adds. "The flavor and sentiment of the poem should ideally be conveyed by its music rather than by the ink alone."

It is because of this importance allotted to the sounds of the poem that Cassar would like any future collection of his work to be accompanied by an audio recording that would allow the reader to listen to the musicality woven into the verses.

As of yet Cassar has published a number of his poems in an anthology of Maltese verse entitled *Hbula Strati*, and two of his Mosaics have been included in the May edition of the Italian journal *Nuovi Argomenti*.

A handful of Mosaics can also be read and listened to online at www.hbulastirati.info, and www.muzajk.info.

Like any other poet, his dream is to eventually publish a book internationally, but modestly insists that, for now, "it is still a little early."

C'est la vie

Run, rabbit, run, run, run, from the womb to the tomb,
de cuatro a dos a tres, del río a la mar,
play the fool, suffer school, zunzana dđur iddur,
engage-toi, perds ta foi, le regole imparar,

kul u sum, ahra u bul, chase the moon, meet your doom,
walk on ice, roll your dice, col destino danzar,
metro, boulot, dodo, titla' x-xemx, terġa' tqum,
decir siempre mañana y nunca mañana,

try to fly, touch the sky, hit the stone, break a bone,
sell your soul for a loan to call those bricks your home,
fall in love, rise above, fall apart, stitch your heart,

che sarà? a ira! plus rien de nous sera,
minn sodda għal sodda nigru tigrja kontra l-baħħ,
sakemm tinbela' ruħna mill-ġuf mudlam ta' l-art.

C'est la vie

Run, rabbit, run, run, run, from the womb to the tomb, / from four to two to three, from the river to the sea, / play the fool, suffer school, the wasp goes round and round, / get involved, lose your faith, learn the rules,

eat and fast, shit and piss, chase the moon, meet your doom, / walk on ice, roll your dice, with destiny dance, / metro, work, sleep, the sun rises, you get up again, / to say always tomorrow and never tomorrow reach,

try to fly, touch the sky, hit the stone, break a bone, / sell your soul for a loan to call those bricks your home, / fall in love, rise above, fall apart, stitch your heart,

what will be? it will go well, nothing more of us will be, / from bed to bed we run a race against the void, / until our soul is swallowed by the dark womb of the land.

* the name of a Maltese children's game

Azul

Azul, te quiero azul, azul como la mar
tal-Qrendi. Vieni, scendi, porte-moi sur les ondes,
entre acianos marinos, lej l u nhar, near and far,
take me down, let me drown, sa għerq iż-żerq tal-fond...

Blanc et noir? J'en ai marre!   qu'on me laisse choir!
Azul. Not grey, nor blond, no soggy northern pond,
saphir, kahlani nir, tout  tre, ne rien avoir,
in quel regno di quiete my subprimordial bond.

Azul, azul del sur, blu dipinto di blu,
la mer, cette grande lumi re, toi la vague, moi l' le nue...

O to be who I was, who I was to be me!
O for my wretched soul to dissolve into the sea!

Familja, meta mmut, la tixhtunx fit-tebut:
remmduni, u xerrduni fil-baħar ta' Haġar Qim.

Blue

Blue, I want you blue, blue like the sea / of Qrendi. Come, descend, take me on the waves, / among marine cornflowers, night and day, near and far, / take me down, let me drown, to the root of the blue of the deep...

White and black? I've had enough! O may one let me fall! / Blue. Not grey, nor blond, no soggy northern pond, / sapphire, indigo blue, to be entirely, to have nothing, / in that realm of silence my subprimordial bond.

Blue, blue of the south, blue painted blue, / the sea, that great light, you the wave, I the naked isle...

O to be who I was, who I was to be me! / O for my wretched soul to dissolve into the sea!

Family, when I die, throw me not into the coffin: / make me ash, and scatter me in the sea of Haġar Qim.



The sea of Qrendi, that inspired Antoine Cassar's poem 'Azul.' (Agencies)