

## Encountering Malta II – British Writers and the Mediterranean 1760-1840: Literature, Landscapes, Politics – Conference Review

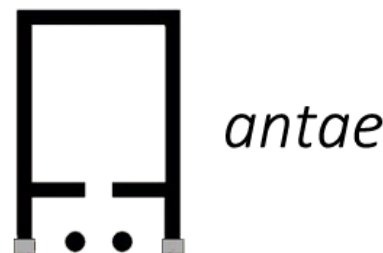
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**Encountering Malta II –  
British Writers and the Mediterranean 1760-1840:  
Literature, Landscapes, Politics – Conference Review**

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In January 2014, the Department of English at the University of Malta held the second in a series of conferences, entitled 'Encountering Malta II – British Writers and the Mediterranean 1760-1840: Literature, Landscapes, Politics'. The first, held in 2011 in conjunction with the School of English at the University of St Andrew's, Scotland, grounded itself within the same eighty year span, and had featured keynote speakers Professor Peter Vassallo and Professor Michael O'Neill. This series was inspired, in part, by the book *Encounters with Malta*—a work that details the interaction of various artistic figures with the Maltese archipelago over the centuries, as Dr Petra Caruana Dingli, one of the co-editors of the work, pointed out in the roundtable discussion on the first day of the event. This second two-day conference took place at the Old University Building in Valletta, Malta. It was a moderately paced event with a comfortable schedule that allowed for two keynote speakers and an intriguing variety of papers which attested to the tumultuous richness of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century period in question.

Given that the subtitle of the conference clearly defined the parameters of the time span for discussion, many papers were expectedly rooted in the chosen historical context, and concerned themselves with the politics of the period. Peter Vassallo, who was the first keynote speaker, set the tone of the conference with a paper entitled 'Romantic Fabrications of Napoleon'. While these fabrications know many origins, the focus here was on Lord Byron in the milieu he was writing. Strikingly, Byron emerges as a figure somewhat more politically engaged than some of his contemporaries. Indeed, the paper demonstrated how Byron pays tribute to Napoleon in poems such as 'Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte' at a time when many detached themselves from the Napoleonic cause following events like the September massacres. The role of literature as a force for political change, therefore, was brought to the forefront in Professor Vassallo's paper without the multifaceted and complex processes—in which literature could catalyse its political environment and vice versa—being eschewed. Consequently, the ambivalence in Byron's poetic tone was also noted, eliciting distinctions between literature and mere mythologizing propaganda. In fact, the paper allowed the literature itself to speak, explaining, for instance, how our reading of Byron's Ode is conditioned by the epigraphs from Juvenal and Gibbon that Byron adds to it.

Indeed, the relationship between politics and literature was incredibly prominent during this historical phase. As Peter Vassallo pointed out in his paper, Percy Bysshe Shelley was

not always too keen on Napoleon's ideology, but it would be disingenuous to say that Shelley kept himself aloof from it all. Indeed, this aspect of Shelley is what Jacqueline Mulhallen further explored in her paper, 'Political Shelley'. The influence of politics on the man seems inevitable when one considers that elements we now regard as essential to modern politics—like demonstrations, petitions, and logos—were developed shortly before his birth and were influential during Shelley's formative years. Mulhallen elaborated on how Shelley wrote about the political issues of his time, with a close look at how 'Ode to Liberty' and his dramas discuss the question of misgovernment, which was linked to the Irish movement in Britain and subsequently left behind a strong political legacy. Another, perhaps lesser known, political legacy was explored by Petra Caruana Dingli in her paper 'A Noble Aim: Henry Lushington and the Italian Question'. A member of the Cambridge Apostles, Lushington was an intellectual who became the Chief Secretary to the Government of Malta. He was also a friend to Lord Tennyson, who dedicated the second edition of his poem, 'The Princess', to him.

Evy Varsamopoulou's paper, 'A Grand Tour: Olaudah Equiano's Mediterranean Voyage' broached the historical and the political from the uncommon and oft neglected perspective of the slave. In fact, the Grand Tour was compared and contrasted to the Middle Passage and the unique nature of Equiano's position, as a former slave turned abolitionist taking part in a Grand Tour which was usually limited to the aristocratic and well-to-do European classes. This shed some light on Equiano's longing for home and what home might have meant for him. Varsamopoulou's paper was interesting to attend in its inherent unspoken questions: what is the Other's view of the Mediterranean, and why should a liminal perspective matter? Who has the privilege of writing perspectives, and what can people without privilege offer the Mediterranean?

Just as Varsamopoulou's paper explored this very particular perspective, Barry Hough and Maria Frendo's papers were informed by a rather unique, but this time interdisciplinary, perspective. Indeed, in "'Oppression's Ruffian Gluttony": How Coleridge's 'The Friend' Aided the Working Poor', Hough's arguments were generally informed by legal studies, more specifically late 18<sup>th</sup> century English Employment Law. Hough effectively explained how Samuel Taylor Coleridge aimed to reconcile the liberties of the individual with those of the state and the repercussions that this has on the working poor. The matter is best understood by the change of law in 1790, and it is through this that—aided with references to Coleridge's 'The Friend'—Hough draws significant parallels with the economic and legal situation today. Coleridge was keen to come up with a "counter-balance" as a prescription to the relationship between landlord and tenant. Despite recognising the importance of the state's role in regulating such relationships, Coleridge largely wished to privatise the solution to economic liberalism. He looked back to established laws prior to 1790 which talked about the "fairness" that must be evident in all transactions, but was

nonetheless open to a version of contract that is rooted in the conscionable dealing that might have precluded below-subsistence pay as “unfair”; this is why Hough drew the parallels he did with today’s economic and legal situation, where no such contractual fairness is either implied or in operation, and a contract is deemed viable and just provided that it is signed “freely” by both parties, however unfair it may be.

Dr Maria Frendo’s rich and itinerant paper, drawing on poetry and music, focused on the famous poem ‘Jerusalem’ (transposed into a hymn by Sir Hubert Parry) written by William Blake. Questions on the identity of the poet were raised, especially when compared with the political ideology of John Milton who—like Blake—aligns himself with Men of the Bible (already establishing links with a New Jerusalem). In fact, Blake is shown to be looking to Milton for visionary empowerment and England’s religious iconoclast ironically becomes, himself, an icon. Indeed, in contrast to Coleridge’s obsession with the law as described by Hough, Blake was adamant that liberty in the spirit of the Word was more important than that of the Law. Art is the language of vision for Blake because, for him and in contrast to other artists, it is not merely mimetic. Indeed, the music endows the text with mnemonic agility and re-creates the vision for him, rendering his questions not merely rhetorical.

The second and final keynote speaker, Professor Stephen Gill, delivered his paper at the start of the conference’s second day. Focusing on the figure of Wordsworth, he explained how William Wordsworth was not so much motivated to write from objects like archaeological ruins—as the Romantic stereotype suggests—but needed human figures to animate his imagination. Drawing on this, Gill then delved into Wordsworth’s tour of Italy, along with riveting anecdotal snippets, and ventured to ask why the poetic output of his much anticipated tour is relatively meagre. The conclusion, interestingly, took the form of the hypothesis that, by the time Wordsworth undertook the tour, new experiences were mostly, or perhaps could only be, filtered through Wordsworth’s English memories rather than taken as primal experiences in and of themselves.

Other papers like Sue Brown’s, for example, asked questions about more minor figures, like an old friend of Keats’s, in her paper ‘On the Trial of Joseph Severn’. She attempted to answer them from her own interesting hands-on research which took her from the Keats-Shelley house in Rome, itself testimony to the Mediterranean relocation of British writers, to several inconspicuous places in England. In Tim Fulford’s paper, the focus is Humphrey Davy and his tour of France and Southern Italy. This led Fulford to explore the political and scientific contributions Davy made in relation to these Mediterranean travels. Keeping to this biographical strand, Professor Carmen Depasquale went for the comparative approach and explored several travelogues written by French and Francophone authors in the final years of the Order of St John in Malta, her paper bringing to life a rarely seen snapshot of Malta at the time.

A more direct focus on the literature being produced at this time was to be found in Michael O'Neill's paper, 'Byron's Mediterranean Rhyming', which paid careful attention to style and poetic techniques, such as his famously favourite ottava rima in 'Beppo'. In doing so, O'Neill demonstrated how life is mediated into art without a necessary loss of life, while always maintaining a reluctance to moralise by focusing on that which is incorrigibly plural. Michael Scott, in 'In Praise of Limestone', focuses on Auden's poem of the same title and looks at it as a sequel to 'Tintern Abbey'. In 'The Reception of Dante and the Configuration of Europe', Mie Gotoh looked at the treatment of Dante's *Divina Commedia* in the nineteenth century, and Angus-Graham Campbell, speaking about 'Keats and the Mediterranean: Imagination and Truth', portrayed the Mediterranean as the spiritual home of literature in view of the poetry written primarily in Italy and Greece.

One of the most compelling features of the conference was its interdisciplinary output. Not only did it display the inherently expansive range that is to be found in the writings of the Romantic period, but also showed that, even today, much can still be said about and acquired through the study of these writers and their lives. Hough provided a reading of Coleridge deeply relevant to contemporary socio-economic situations informed by a capitalist structure, from the perspective of constitutional law, which is not something one usually associates with Coleridge; Fulford's paper on Humphrey Davey brought science to the fore; Frenedo's wide-ranging address provided an engaging reading of Blake that was enriched by making reference to the Hubert Parry's musical interpretation of 'Jerusalem'; and many of the papers were acutely historically aware and all writings, therefore, were never discussed in a literary vacuum.

Though one might think that a conference series entitled 'Encountering Malta' would have Malta at the core of its offerings, this was not the case. That being said, there were many papers that did discuss or link to Malta in one way or the other, and an effort was often made in the Q&A sessions to seize on any mention of the island. One might also wish a greater range than the period covered—though, as has been pointed out, the selected timeline afforded a great deal of variety still—given the richness of Mediterranean literary cultures. Next year's conference should dispel this concern, with the third event of the series being provisionally titled 'The Sea': as apt and open a subject matter as anyone could hope for, as the organisers themselves said, this time round, the range will be limitless, from Homer to Beckett and beyond.

As the conference came to a close, hopes for another equally well-organised event were already the subject of conversation. Mention must also be made of a poetry reading given by Gregory Leadbetter, who read out a selection of his verses, including a couple of poems

that were inspired by the Maltese landscape itself. Given the nature of such reviews, it goes without saying that there was much of the event that could not be covered here, nor given the truly critical appraisal that is deserving of both the papers delivered and the critically attentive audience that was present at Valletta. It can be said, however, that the conference continued to build upon the success on the first, and that the upcoming conference promises to be equally stimulating.