

THE MCA NEWSLETTER



Malta
Classics
Association

THIS ISSUE

3 The Finest
Language

5 Hlief Memorji u
Dellijiet

6 The Power of the
Classical Word

7 Q&A with
Dr Irene Salvo

From the HONORARY PRESIDENT

Of the semantic shadows of the Classics

Michael Zammit

The mantric verses from the as yet unpublished,

Shades of Silence
From
The King's Joker Fragments

K.
where I ran in the open soiled spaces
of all that is everything that is not,
that I might retrieve Eurydice's eye sockets
and settle down and lie in their expanse
withholding all that will never enter the heart;
burning with tears that slide down
the face of each night
that my blazing ardour could access
to contract Satan's realm

(M Zammit; *Shades of Silence*, unpublished)

These repeatable verses are meant to ever so slightly graze 'the face of each night' spent roaming the creation – 'Satan's realm' – trying to burn a trail that might lead the errant seeker out into the open, as time-honoured speech and the so-called Classics have striven to achieve.

Magical mantra recitation stands proud in the deep silence, there where the Classical tongues (be they Sanskrit, Ancient Greek, Latin, or indeed Semitic Arabic and Hebrew) merge and fuse into the universal ability (though individually wielded) to harness, modulate and articulate being human itself, as gathered in all its creative powers that specifically differentiate (in order to make sense of) the (or some) world.

Proclus' Commentary on Plato's *Parmenides* therefore opens with a request:

I pray to all the gods and goddesses to guide my mind in this study that I have undertaken – to kindle in me a shining light of truth to enlarge my understanding for the genuine science of being; to open the gates of my soul to receive the inspired guidance of Plato; and in anchoring my thought in the full splendour of reality to hold me back from too much conceit of wisdom and from the paths of error by keeping me in intellectual converse with those realities from which alone the eye of the soul is refreshed and nourished.

Thus, on a recent night while walking on the cliffs close to home, I happened to look up, peering into the crystal-clear Mediterranean night sky to see the sparkle of the planets and the well-defined *Via Lattea* heaving with stars shooting, whizzing remotely in their ancient past times and ever so distant locations, and humming. 'The gods and goddesses' then stopped me in my tracks and seemed to overwhelm me in the virile darkness of the depths of a space which claimed everywhere, both within and without.

Awestruck, a clear feeling from childhood was recalled and the question announced, still present, burning with expectancy and unaltered in its urgency: *Why? What does this spectacle mean to summon? Indeed, what does it mean?*

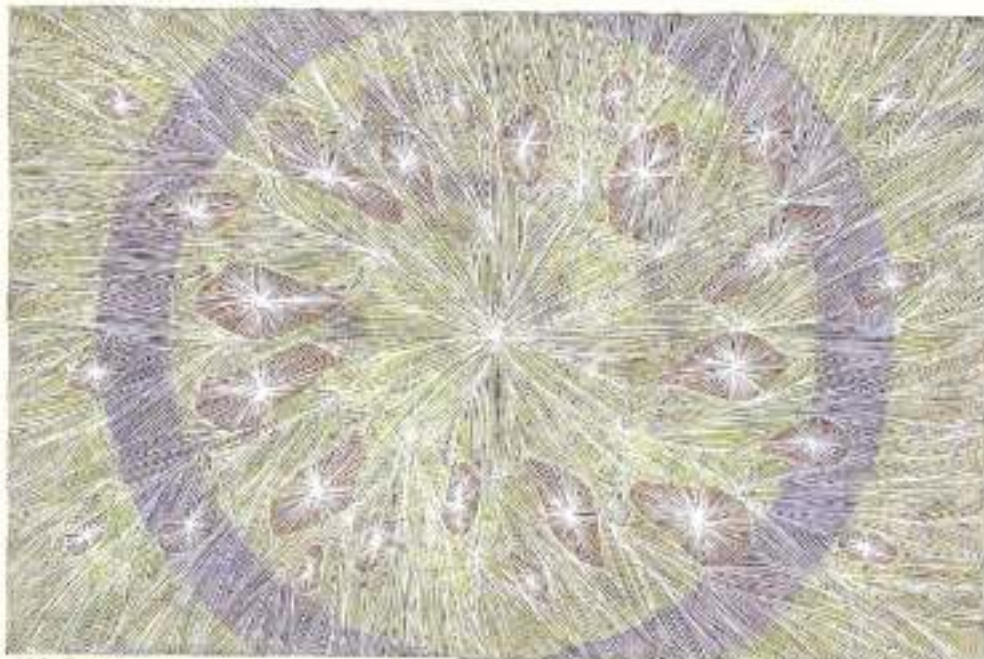
To his disciple Eustochius, who was with him during his last moments, Plotinus said:

I am trying to make what is most divine in me rise back up to what is divine in the universe.

Plotinus speaks about the ensouled aether, the cosmos brimming with spiritual beings, the soul flowing from *Nous* that in turn emanates from the *One* ... and the being is silenced as the rapt attention embarks on a voyage to investigate these questions born from the childhood of humanity.

One knows then, *I* knew then, that the very centre of my being, the centre of each and every being, and indeed the very centre of the Universe is *One* and the same. Euclid's *semeion* (the seed, unfortunately translated as a mere 'point') is indeed the *One* single centre (as Plato would certainly have known) from where absolutely *all* circles, all *mandalas*, arise and flourish; be they circles of meaning, value, *aretê* or whatever.

Find the *One* centre of any circle, in your being, and you effectively gain access to all the *mandalas* that exist and that don't yet exist. Suddenly there is being embraced and embracing ... *mu-habb*.



The Ring Mandala
W. H. DRISCOLL,
PRIVATE COLLECTION

the Finest Language

Martin Bloomfield

So, what's the oldest language, and what's the finest language?

The oldest languages in the world, obviously, are lost in the mists of time. Neanderthals, whose oldest bones date back some 430,000 years, would have employed a series of languages before being superseded by *homo sapiens* 40,000 years ago, who, in turn would necessarily have evolved many different languages until we reach the point where texts on leaves or carvings on monuments and in caves can be identified as languages.

The megalithic temples in Malta, the world's oldest freestanding buildings, must have employed people with a reasonably sophisticated language, and the Pyramids and Sphinx of Giza (2,500 BC) would have needed a fine language for overseeing their construction and use, evidenced from the hieroglyphic remnants of their spoken word.

Today, Greek is acknowledged as the oldest language in Europe, spoken some 3,400 years ago. Tamil is recognised by some (mostly Tamils) as being the oldest in the world, dating back some 5,000 years and currently supporting many daily newspapers and speakers in India, Sri Lanka and Malaysia. Others point to Sanskrit as the oldest at 7,000 years; a language which has inspired European languages and is still the official language of India, used today for ritual purposes, although it can boast one newspaper and one radio programme and some daily speakers.

So, what about the finest language? If we adopt as criteria: firstly, a precise grammar and rules of pronunciation in order to ensure a universal discipline free from the corruptions of time, and secondly, simple basic root words that can give flexibility in a changing world, the prize would then go to Sanskrit.

An example of change in the English language would show that the language of Shakespeare's time, 400 years ago, is generally comprehensible to most, though some words are redundant in current speech or meaning. Chaucer at 600 years ago needs a commentary to give a fuller meaning and Beowulf's English at 1,000 years belies comprehension entirely, except to linguistic experts.

Words that are not based on fundamental roots change in meaning: an English student, looking for his pencil eraser, might say 'Who has nicked my rubber?' An American student, overhearing this, would take a fundamentally different meaning from this question.

The Sanskrit language is one which appears to be not subject to such corruption, with the result that Sanskrit spoken 2,000 years ago would be understood by a Sanskrit speaker today. This is due to it having been codified by the master grammarian, Panini, making it immune to the degenerative changes that naturally occur in other languages. The grammar has been described as perfect; the alphabet has nine specified vowel sounds, five mouth and tongue positions which govern the

five families of consonants, all based on a full understanding of the anatomy of the mouth. Sanskrit's huge vocabulary has a simplicity about it due to words being derived from a small number of roots. The principle is that an understanding of these roots gives meaning to all the words derived from them. Further rules govern the development of these roots into words and the words into sentences, giving maximum flexibility with precision of meaning.

Here are some previously published examples of this flexibility of root development: in Sanskrit, *āsana* means 'posture' or 'seat', and *da* means 'one who gives', so that which relates to your posture or gives you a seat is *āsanda*, which is the word for a 'chair'. Another neat word is compiled from the Sanskrit for lightning, *vidyut*, which also does for electricity and electronics. The word *patram* means 'leaf', which may be used for writing on, and it also does for 'letter'. So together they make *vidutpatram*, electric letter, or email. Add to that the word *aniṣṭa*, 'undesirable', and you get *aniṣṭavidyutpatram*, undesirable email, or spam. *Calini* is a good old Sanskrit word meaning 'filter' or 'sieve', so your Sanskrit spam filter becomes *aniṣṭavidyutpatramcalini*!

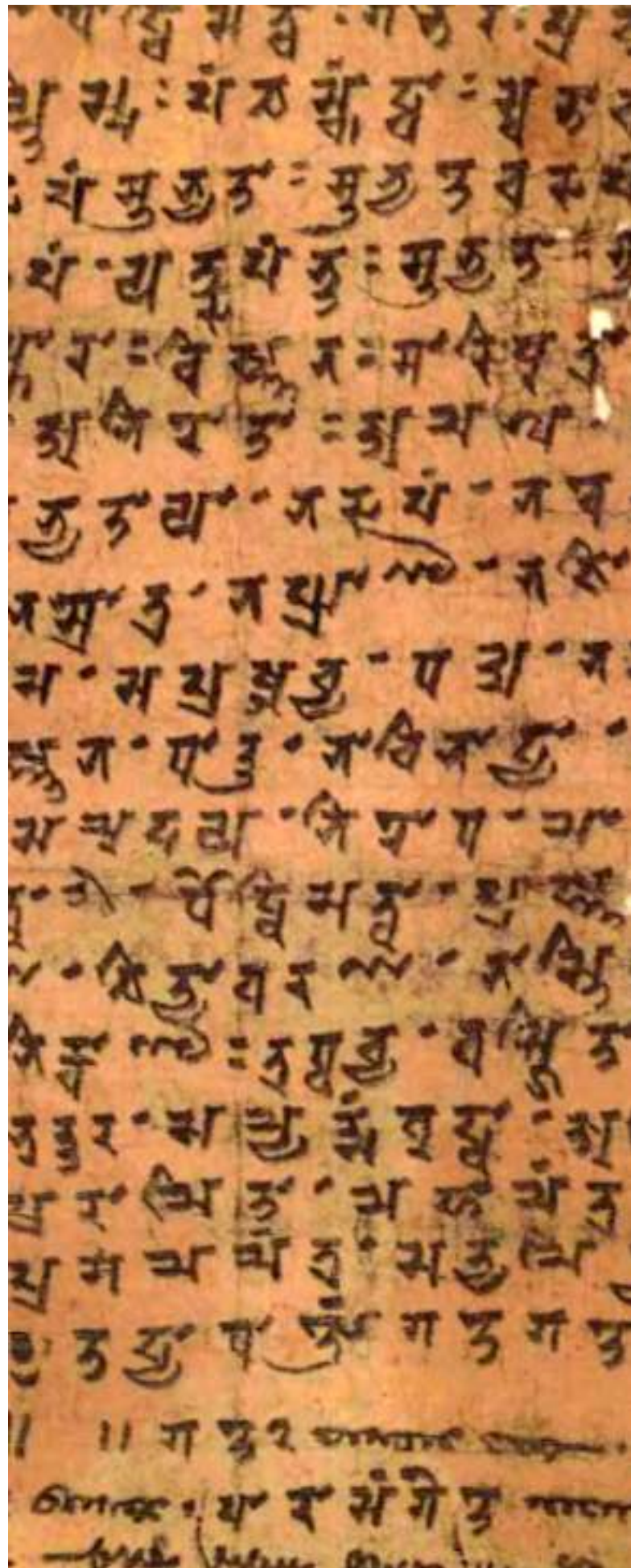
No other language has such a fine mechanism, maintaining a purity whilst being incredibly adaptable.

Sanskrit wins my vote as the finest!



Panini, ancient Sanskrit philologist, grammarian, and a revered scholar in ancient India.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Hlief Memorji u Dellijiet

In this month's issue we are meeting Andrew Debono Cauchi, a 2nd year student of Classics at the University of Malta. Andrew's volume of poetry **Hlief Memorji u Dellijiet** was shortlisted in the 'National Book Prize - Poetry in Maltese' category.

We already know Andrew because he prepares the page 'The Power of the Classical Word'. It is now our turn to ask, 'Does the Classical Word have any power on your poetry?'

Word etymology fascinated me from a very young age. Studying Classical Greek and Latin has deepened my knowledge of where the words we use, both commonplace and technical, come from and how their sounds and meanings have been shaped throughout the years. I often find myself choosing one word over another by referring to the etymology, even if only for the sake of curiosity. Thus, the Classical Word does have power over my poetry, although I think it is not a question of a greater Semitic or Romance influence.

How did you start writing poetry?

Some years back, having returned home from a very long and difficult day, I remember being demotivated and tired, but somehow, this strange rain of words was pouring down in my head. It felt bad to let it go, so I started writing. When the rain of words calmed down, a poem was formed on the page and I haven't looked back since. Naturally, there is still much work to be done (and it shall remain so for as long as I continue to write), but I still have the date of that day and keep it in my own way every year.

How do your poems develop?

Something has to hit first. It could be anything – someone's stride or a facial feature, the way a sign stands out on the road, the clatter of cutlery. Sometimes I look for the stimulus, other times it looks for me. Then, I start writing without giving much thought. When some form of poem emerges and I'm happy with the draft, I stow it away, leaving what I remember from its sounds

echoing in my mind. A few days or weeks later, I pick it up again and start editing. This part of the process is usually more logical in style, and (hopefully) leads to the poem.

Why is poetry your preferred medium?

The form of a poem enables me to transmit my mental images and experiences into sound with old or new meanings through literary devices. I hate using exuberant and rare words in my work. The sublime is already sublime and needs no further effort to become so. On the other hand, I feel it is the natural aptitude of the poet to express the innermost profound experiences using everyday words. Thus, poetry gives me the opportunity to fuse the simple with the profound, the evident with the mysterious. This stimulates me very much.

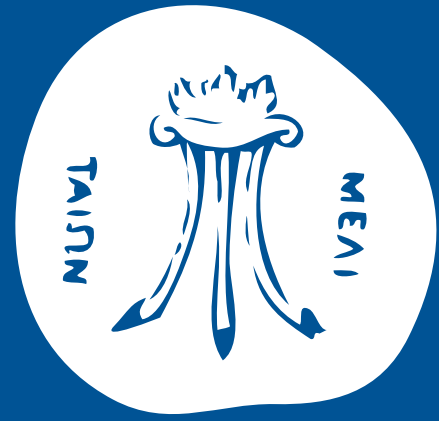
Do you have any favourite writers?

I believe every writer has something true and wise to say to me, but perhaps some writers have shaped me more than others. Apart from Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Vergil, Horace and practically every Classical author, I am very much influenced by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda and Gabriel García Márquez. In the Maltese language, I find the work of Alfred Sant and Walid Nabhan particularly thought-provoking.

Do you see your poetry in translation?

Having a translation of poetry ultimately means that more will be able to read it due to its availability in another tongue. Thus, I see my poetry in translation only if it can serve to transmit the love of poetry further to other youths and aspiring poets, and to encourage them to take the step of writing and sharing their words.

the power of the **CLASSICAL WORD**



photography

noun //

The act of capturing a situation or scenario in human life with the use of a camera.

From the Classical Greek φῶς (phos) meaning 'light' and γράφω (grapho) meaning 'write' or 'describe'.

virtue

noun //

A positive character and personality trait in the context of human morality and/or social behaviour.

From the Latin *virtus* meaning 'goodness' or 'virtue'.

normal

adjective //

Used to describe a being or situation which is usual, expected, or compliant with an accepted model.

From the Latin *norma* meaning 'standard', 'pattern' or 'square ruler'.

technology

noun //

The development of practical and everyday life, especially industrial, applications of scientific theory.

From the Classical Greek τέχνη (techne) meaning 'craft' and λόγος (logos) meaning 'reason'.

poem

noun //

A literary work structured in verses containing poetic devices such as metaphors and imagery.

From the Classical Greek ποίημα (poiema) meaning 'work', 'instrument' or 'poem'.

language

noun //

A communicative system consisting of conventional sounds (speech) and symbols (writing).

From the Latin *lingua* meaning 'tongue', 'dialect' or 'language'.

Q&A

with Dr Irene Salvo

MCA STUDENT, SANSKRIT, SUMMER & AUTUMN 2020

What is your profession and what are your interests?

I am an ancient historian with expertise in Greek religion. My research focuses on how humans interacted with the divine and how the body/mind relationship affected ritual performances. I am also interested in Oriental philosophies and in their practical benefits for clearing our constant flux of thoughts. I lead a project on students' mental and emotional health.

Why did you take up the MCA invitation to study Sanskrit language and culture this summer?

I encountered Sanskrit for the first time when I was sixteen years old, I bought a Sanskrit-Italian dictionary to learn the language, but certainly you cannot learn Sanskrit alone! It remained a dream that I had finally the opportunity to realize when I read about the MCA course. I practise yoga and I realised that I cannot fully understand Yoga philosophy and Hinduism without knowing the language.

Can you say anything significant about the effect of coming in touch with the Sanskrit language?

There are two kinds of effects, in my opinion. One is an immediate effect: after Maria Zammit's lesson I felt energized and with a fresh mind. A long-term effect is that what you learn in a Sanskrit course stays with you over time. Moreover, it is playing a role in my academic research as I intend to pursue comparative studies between ancient Greece and India.

Do you think Sanskrit is for everyone?

Sanskrit is for every person who is searching to grasp a deeper understanding of internal and external worlds. The language offers you a light to see beyond everyday difficulties and problems.

