

LAMARTINE'S IMPRESSIONS OF MALTA

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ALPHONSE Marie Louis de Prat de Lamartine (October 1790 – February 1869) was one of the outstanding French poets of the Romantic movement, the first of the truly important ones. A native of the town of Mâcon, he was descended from a family of Franc-Comtois landowners. Lamartine was a versatile figure who was not only a creative writer but also a noted statesman and orator. He was educated at Lyons and later at the Jesuit *collège* at Belley, where he spent the years from 1803 to 1807. In June 1820 he married at Chambéry a young Englishwoman named Anna Eliza Birch, whom he called 'Marianne' and who was a person of some means. Shortly thereafter he left for Naples, where he served as an attaché of the French Legation. Also during the 1820's he served in the French embassy in London and in Tuscany. King Charles X in 1825 bestowed upon him the cross of the Legion of Honor, a distinction the recipient shared with another Romantic writer, Victor Hugo.

After the July Revolution of 1830 and the fall from power of the Bourbon dynasty in France, Lamartine abandoned his career in the diplomatic service, although he was to return to politics later and was virtual dictator of France briefly after the July Monarchy was overthrown in 1848. In June 1832, accompanied by his wife and only daughter Julia and a large retinue, he embarked upon a leisurely tour of the Near East. This excursion, which lasted sixteen months, took the poet to Malta, Greece, Syria, and Palestine. The entire journey is well described in Lamartine's first prose work, entitled *Souvenirs, impressions, pensées, et paysages pendant un voyage en Orient* (1835). Of particular interest here are some of his comments on Malta which are presented in translation from the French work and compared with material in the same writer's *Correspondance générale de 1830 à 1848*.

Early in preparing for his trip to the East Lamartine knew that he would take in Malta. From Marseilles 20 June 1832 he wrote to Pierre Jean Ronot, a close friend, that his intention was to visit Constantinople, Jerusalem, Lebanon, Egypt, then winter in Smyrna. In the spring of 1833 he would visit Greece, then Malta and Sicily, returning to France via the Adriatic and Venice. This order he was to change quite a bit. Perhaps it will be of interest to note that while Lamartine at this time allowed for

possible poetic inspiration, he declared that he did not plan to write up his trip. Back in France, his economic resources much depleted as a result of his travels, he did not hesitate long when his publisher, Gosselin, proposed an attractive price to print his travel notes.

When it appeared, the *Voyage en Orient* was a record of events, sometimes disconnected descriptions, and random ideas, a book in which the poet made entries almost each day as the things he discussed occurred. Here, as is usual in his works, what happened, incidents, what he saw, were apt to inspire meditations and elicit precious personal opinions. Hence the reader, then as now, learns both what Lamartine did or witnessed and how he reacted. We learn, to take an example, that the Bourbonist convictions to which Lamartine still paid lip service did not prevent his deciding that the English, who had wrested Malta from Napoleon, were a horde of interlopers. While he was prepared to admit that these interlopers, viewed as a whole, were an admirable ethical and political unit, he did not consider them a sociable one. He looked upon them as vain and went so far as to claim that their sole concern was with externals. Happily, he had a chance to discover that there existed remarkable exceptions, to say the least. Sir Frederick and Lady Ponsonby, Sir Frederick Hankey and family, Mr. and Mrs. Nugent, a certain Mr. Greig, and John Hookham Frere, author and former minister to Spain, were to be remembered as persons who, during their week in Malta, received the Lamartines 'less as travellers than friends'.

Of what he saw Lamartine was above all displeased with the government he discovered in Malta, which actually was to be replaced only a decade later with the liberal constitutional system. Lamartine's own political views at this time had started their move toward ever more dominant liberalism. Thus one notes not without interest that the visitor considered British rule in Malta harsh and repressive. He was not consistent on the matter, however, and in one place wondered in print how anyone could regard the contented natives as slaves.

Having put in at Malta instead of going directly to Constantinople, Lamartine had the ill luck to have his ship, the *Alceste*, quarantined, a measure imposed because the dread cholera epidemic then on the march across Europe had already reached France. Lamartine wrote at once to the French consul, M. Miège, an old friend, asking how to proceed to have the quarantine raised. Governor Ponsonby raised it, and in a most curious manner – the *Alceste* was accorded war vessel status, and the seclusion period was thus reduced, by administrative intervention, from ten days to three. In the meantime the Lamartines and their suite were permitted to venture about, even close to shore, in boats at dusk. Hence it was at its

crepuscular best that the poet previewed Malta and found himself comparing it, thus revealed, to the Bay of Naples, Seville, Cordova, Grenada.

Free soon to move about as he chose, Lamartine was not disappointed. With the islands, and with the principal one most of all, he was enchanted. His observations and impressions are at all times those that would occur to a poet, whether the inspiration was Valetta's heteroclitic appearance, the Grand Master's palace, Saint John's Cathedral, the harbors, the arid rural areas, or the people and the unusual social complexion. An article's narrow limits do not permit one to quote all that Lamartine wrote about his Maltese visit, so let us choose several remarks more or less at random. For example, those that concern Saint John's, which 'has all the character, all the seriousness that one might expect in such a monument in a place like this: grandeur, nobility, wealth. The keys to Rhodes, carried away by the knights after they had been defeated, hang on either side of the altar, a symbol of eternal yearning or forever disappointed hopes. A superb vault, painted in toto by Calabrese, a work that modern Rome in its best artistic periods could show with pride'.¹ The writer seems to have been unaware that the turbulent Mattia Preti, or Calabrese (1613-1699), was himself a Knight of Malta.

He seems not to have known either that Michelangelo da Caravaggio (1573-1610) was not only a brilliant painter but could also claim membership in the order. 'In the Chapel of the Election, one picture alone creates an effect upon me', he continues. 'It is by Caravaggio, whom the knights of the time had summoned to the island to paint the vault of Saint John's. He assumed the task, but his wild, irritable, untamed nature won out. He dreaded a work that would demand time and departed.' Lamartine could have added that while in Malta this artist was imprisoned in connection with a quarrel he had with another knight and that if he departed, it was because he had a chance to escape to Sicily. Let us return to Lamartine's account, however. 'In Malta he left his masterpiece, *The Beheading of John the Baptist*. Were our modern painters who seek Romanticism with rules instead of finding it in nature to see this extraordinary picture, they would realize that someone had beaten them to their so-called invention. In it one beholds fruit born on the tree and not an imitation moulded in wax and painted with mural colours. An animated picture, artistic poses, depth of feeling, realism and dignity combined, bold contrast and yet unity and harmony, horror and beauty all at the same time. Such is the painting. It is one of the finest I have ever seen. This is the picture that the artists of the current school are looking for.

¹ The sentence fragment, so typical of this work, is Lamartine's.

There it is, it has been located, they need search no more.'

On 24 July 1832 Sir Frederick Ponsonby, who had returned to Valetta from his estate, received the Lamartines at the Grand Master's palace. The French poet admired this British public servant and was at the same time impressed with the simple splendor of the palace itself. His impressions, here as elsewhere, have been transmitted to us as mere notes, such as 'beauty of the whole and nakedness of useless decorations outside and in; vast rooms; long galleries; austere paintings; a wide, pleasant, sonorous staircase; a *salle d'armes* two hundred feet long containing armour from every period of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem's history; library of forty thousand volumes where we were received by the director, Abbé Bollanti, a young Maltese ecclesiastic just like the Roman curates of the old school...'

Less awesome structures had their appeal too, particularly when bathed in the quiet, serene light that made each and all spectacular. 'Arab mores like the speech, and Spanish houses like the attire', Lamartine generalized in one of his earliest letters home. In the *Voyage en Orient*, he told his readers that each house had the same basic exterior, adding that each 'looks as if it had been built not stone by stone with cement and sand but as if it had been carved alive and upright out of living rock and set down on the earth like a block that had come from its bosom and as enduring as the earth itself. Two wide, handsome pillars stand at the two corners of the façade. These rise a mere two and a half stories high. At this point an ornate cornice carved out of the brilliant stone crowns them and in turn acts as a base for a rich, massive ballustrade which extends the whole distance of the top and replaces those roofs' which, monstrous and hideous, ruin the horizon of European cities.

Lamartine describes other characteristic architectural details as well, such as the steps leading up to the doors and on and around which the natives met and conversed as in a *salon*. These doorstep assemblies presented Lamartine with a chance to describe the Maltese people as well — all so alike, all so handsome to our poet, who, bent on local colour, cast an envious look at them as his boat sailed about the main port and its environs. To describe one such scene, he asserted, was to describe them all. Once more random notes constitute the description. 'One or two men clad in white jackets, with dark faces and African eyes, a long pipe in hand, lie stretched out, without a care in the world, on a cane divan beside the door. Standing in front of them, their elbows propped gracefully against the handrail, three young women in various positions silently watch our bark go by or smile to each other at how odd we look. A black dress which stops at their calves; a white bodice with wide, loose,

pleated sleeves; their heads adorned with black hair; and over their shoulders and heads a silk demicloak like a dress which conceals half of their face, one shoulder, and the arm that holds the cloak. This cloak, made of a delicate cloth inflated by the breeze, takes on the shape of a skiff's windfilled sail and within its capricious folds now hides, now reveals the mysterious countenance that it envelops and that seems to escape it at will. Gracefully some raise their heads to chat with other girls leaning over the balcony above, tossing them pomegranates or oranges. Others chat with young men wearing long mustaches, thick black hair, tight short jackets, white trousers and red belts. Seated at the top of the stairs, two young abbés in black garb and wearing silver-buckled shoes converse in a familiar manner and play with wide green fans, while at the bottom of the last steps a handsome mendicant monk, his feet bare, his brow pale, shaven, and white, no hat on, his body wrapped in the heavy folds of his brown robe, leans like a statue of Mendicinity at the entrance to a prosperous, happy man's house, and looks with a detached eye at this picture of contentment, ease, and pleasure. One floor up, on a wide balcony supported by beautiful caryatids and covered with a calico veranda ornamented with shades and fringe, one sees a family of Englishmen, those fortunate, inscrutable conquerors of presentday Malta. There are a few Moorish nurses with sparkling eyes and dark, leaden skin who hold in their arms those handsome children of Great Britain whose blond, curly hair and pink and white skin resist Calcutta's sun just as they do that of Malta and Corfu. Looking at these children under the black cloaks and burning gazes of these half African women, one would compare them to exquisite white lambs hanging from the breasts of desert tigresses. On the terrace there is another scene, one the English and Maltese divide up among themselves. On the one hand you see a few island girls holding guitars under their arms and strumming a note or two of an old national air, wild like the climate. On the other, a beautiful young Englishwoman, leaning with a melancholy attitude upon her elbow, contemplating with indifference the spectacle of life passing by under her gaze and idly turning the pages of the immortal poets of her country.' This last remark and others concerning the British strike the reader all the more when he recalls that Mme de Lamartine was English and even translated some of her husband's verse into her native tongue.

As we have noted above, Lamartine, with occasional reservations, was pleased with Malta. As he declared at his departure, 'We arrived in Malta unknown, but it is not without regrets that we see its white walls vanish in the distance beneath the waves. To us these houses, which we looked at indifferently a few days ago, now have faces and can speak. We know

the people who live in them, and from the top of those terraces kindly looks are watching the vanishing sails of our two ships.' Julia de Lamartine's ill health (she was to die on the trip abroad) had detained the travellers a while, but when at last they put to sea on 1 August, Governor Ponsonby had extended a further kindness, that of having them accompanied on the next step of their journey by an English frigate, the *Madagascar*, the second of the two ships mentioned in the passage just cited. Lamartine's intention being at this time to proceed to Greece, an escort was welcome protection from the Greek pirates then devastating the coast and islands, and in several letters home the poet records his gratitude toward the governor.

It should be mentioned in conclusion that M. and Mme de Lamartine had not seen the last of Malta. In 1850 they were to visit the Near East once more, this time in connection with an immense venture to restore the poet's almost vanished wealth. Lamartine's hope was to exploit lands that the Turkish sultan had awarded him, but his plans miscarried. Related in *Nouveau voyage en Orient*, this second trip eastward has little detail about places visited earlier, such as Malta. However, the second day at sea, his route well in mind, the writer could anticipate seeing 'the white spots of the rock of Malta' again. From aboard the *Oronte*, somewhat later, he observed the island as the ship took on coal, noted that little had changed since his previous visit, praised the British improvements he could see, but did not step ashore. On the return trip aboard the *Mentor*, the travellers anchored a short while at Valetta but an epidemic in Malta plus sickness on board conspired to keep them on their ship. The *Nouveau voyage en Orient* ends on an abrupt note as Lamartine narrates an old companion's death aboard ship just out of Malta, the dismal burial at sea when no port would permit the ship to land, and the disconsolate travellers' arrival back in France.