

Self portrait

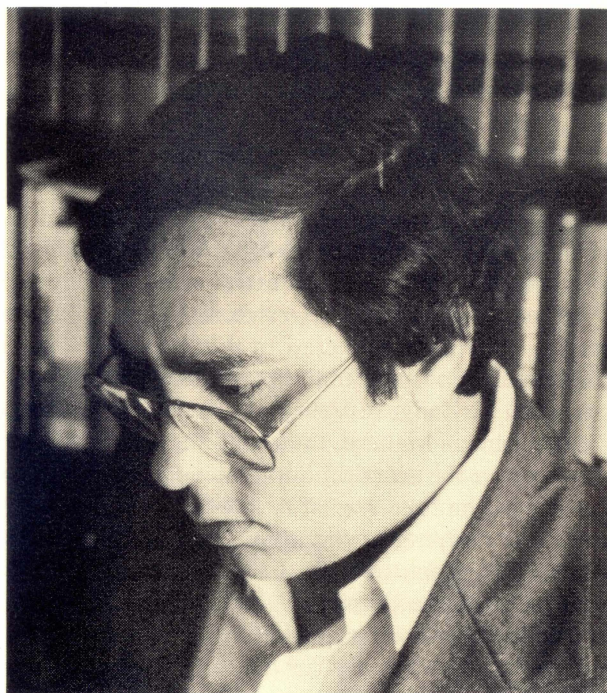
OLIVER FRIGGIERI

Literature has always been considered as one of Humanity's most significant ways of expression. It has its own language imposed, so to say, upon or alongside the generally known language spoken and written according to the universally acknowledged norms. Literary language, therefore, constitutes a vehicle largely different from all the other lexical, syntactical and idiomatic patterns which characterize popular communication. This difference stems from a unique urge, deeply rooted in the spirit of mankind itself and gradually discovered and developed by an individual normally known as an 'author'.

What follows should be taken only as a more account of facts and opinions, and in no way as an exercise in self-indulgence or an attempt to evaluate and to assess the merits or otherwise of the same facts and opinions. I started to discover this urge within myself when I was about ten years old. I felt the inevitable need to sit down and write what I experienced within my soul in certain conditions of my early life. At times it was during the school lessons, and this was something which contributed to a great extent to the fact that I did not always follow the normal curriculum and frequently found myself looming in the dark on the eve of examinations. As time went by, I learned how to detect the intimate relationship which binds a school lesson with an "unwritten" extracurricular experience. The book gradually took the image of a faithful transcription of existence itself. As soon as I discovered the deep relevance of education in its formal structure, I also started to conclude that before getting myself to write I had to read a lot, talk, think and censure my own external and internal perceptions.

The environment of Floriana, where I was born on March 27th, 1947, worked a lot on me. I still remember the peaceful life of our street, almost at the lower end of Floriana, and the eagerness with which my parents, Charles Friggieri and Mary Galea, greeted my first efforts in verse. Floriana, especially the part called Balzunetta where my family lived later on, was much different, more colourful and characteristic. The impact of that period is something I tried to exploit to the full in my short stories and novels.

The school environment may easily conduce the student to believe that there is a sharp distinction between experience and the written word. One of the earlier challenges faced by a student is to recognise the real relevance of literature to life itself, especially to life's most intricate and paradoxical moments. I wrote verse whenever I felt the urgent need to do it.



In pensive mood during the Eighties

Verse soon became my main passion and its technical formation presented itself both as a linguistic pleasure and as an efficient sort of psychological therapy. I published many "poems" since I was a student at Floriana's Government Primary School, and as time went by I acquired a better awareness of how easy it is to compose verse on the basis of one's technical preparation, and how difficult it is to create a real poem which is valuable for its unique originality. My obsession with the idea that literature is a very difficult job enabled me to get acquainted with the most elementary principles of literary criticism. I had already fallen in love with the Maltese language, and reading Maltese literary books was my exclusive hobby. Verse continued to be the form of my expression on particular occasions, and gradually I understood that external occasions had to be transformed into internal ones if they were to animate the creation of a poem. Motivation was to be studied, analysed and then translated calmly into a new pattern of words and related devices.

When I entered University in 1964 to join the B.A. (General) course I decided to study subjects which I could make full use of in my efforts to discover Maltese culture. I had a sterling opportunity to appreciate the great wealth of European classical and romantic poetry. It soon became relatively easy for

me to conclude that before embarking on my own literary plan, I had to get a wide knowledge of tradition both as a sequence of developments and as an enormous anthology of famous writers each having his distinguished individuality. I soon learned that what gives merit to one's literary output is the distinct character which forms a clear-cut difference between one's work and everybody else's. The absolute search for innovation and the continuous process of experimentation seemed to be the two fundamental points of departure of every creative act. The University course provided me at least with two important sources of inspiration: philosophy and European literary history. The first one, which I still consider to be indispensable in the formation of a true writer and which I would like to see included as one of the major subjects taught in our secondary school system, proved to be an enormous revelation of the hidden mechanisms of the intellect and of the conceptual achievements of famous thinkers. Reading philosophy entailed the knowledge of a thoroughly different language of the mind, and it led to the analysis of the mental faculty in relationship to persons and things as translatable into concepts. On the other hand, the knowledge of the history of literature provided me with the necessary consciousness of art as an incessantly nervous process of regeneration, and as a series of conflicts between an age and another. Whilst the appreciation of famous works had to lead to admiration (or imitation), the awareness of one's own personality was meant to lead to a recognition of the potentialities of the self, that is to creativity. Imitation is cultural and is based on wide knowledge; creation is individual and stems from the urge to discover the inner and the outer selves, and consequently to explain the inevitability of the resultant conflict.

My early poetry included in *Dhahen fl-Imhuh* (1967) combines at least two different attitudes. It strives to be inquisitive and analytical in the light of the modern European poetic experience, and at the same time it seeks to reduce concepts into images of a particular type. The loss of the self in search of ultimate truth, the sensation of a penetrating, profound relationship among apparently distinct objects of knowledge (persons, places, things) and the need to find a proper form of linguistic expression within and outside the known schemes of verbal communication are perhaps the main features of my contribution to that shared anthology.

Most of the poems in *Dhahen fl-Imhuh* were written during my years at the Major Seminary. Silence, meditation and detachment (from the self and from society) are their psychological framework. When I left the institution in 1967, I was already thinking of the possibility of shifting to another literary genre and the vague idea of *L-Istramb* (started



With Karmenu Vassallo at Haġar Qim in Summer of 1963

in 1970, re-elaborated at least three times and finally published in 1980) already loitered in my mind, more as an experience rather than as a fully fleshed narrative. I was already in contact with the more important writers involved in the foundation and in the organisation of the 'Moviment Qawmien Letterarju', informally set up in November 1966 and officially founded in January 1967, and as soon as I decided to quit my studies for the priesthood, I joined the Movement and became an active member. The relationship between the new literary awareness I obtained at the University and the innovative plans of the Movement was too clear to be missed. Together with my colleagues I tried to work hard towards the creation of a public consciousness of the need of relating literature to social experience and of understanding the significance of literature in a civilised environment. Whilst still a seminarian I published an article called "Ghandna Qawmien Letterarju?" in *Il-Haddiem* (2/8/66, p.5). I was instinctively pleased that a few months later my friends founded the "Moviment Qawmien Letterarju" which was to be a pressure group as well as an intellectual society of

great importance in the renewal of literature and in the radical examination of social and political structures. As a matter of fact, the Movement's influence soon transcended the defined limits of literature and reached the political field as well.

On the other hand we were (and I am still) conscious that local society does not grant Maltese the real role it deserves as a major vehicle of education and of socio-cultural expression. The holding of the "Kampanja Lsien Malti" and the launching of *Saghtar* are perhaps the two main achievements of the Movement which had the most lasting effect on society at large. Alongside these activities I realised the need of communicating directly with the people through the papers as well as of dedicating myself to literary research. My articles on *L-Orrizont*, *Il-Hajja* and *In-Nazzjon Taghna* were my efforts towards the formation of a proper social and literary environment. It was really a period of intense activity. *Il-Polz*, more than ever before, became a platform from which ideas could be transmitted with the certainty of being read, discussed and quoted. Literature did not mean any more a private act of sublimation, but was transformed into action, a kind of behaviourism totally accountable in front of the people. Controversy assumed a positive character, at least as a necessary phase; I, like my friends, was aware that literature is ultimately produced only in a state of tranquillity.

As years went by, the group realised that the ideals it had fought for had either been attained or been taken over by others. The Movement soon became a conscience which goes beyond its official structure. However, activity of a different nature went on, such as the launching of the first exhibition of Maltese books at the National Museum (1972), the placing of a commemorative plaque at the Upper Baracca Gardens, Valletta in honour of Ruzar Briffa (1972), and the publication of collective anthologies containing works by the Movement's members.

My first book of literary criticism *Kittieba ta' Żmienna* (1970) was the result of my initial efforts to investigate the nature of Maltese literature in general and of a number of Maltese authors in particular. From the very start I had in mind the idea of discovering in a methodical manner the history of local literature through the appreciation of individual writers. As time went by I became more aware of the fact that literary criticism is a professional branch of literature which could only be dealt with academically. Eventually I could only define it, in its multiformity, as the science of art, the technical reconstruction of a text, or of a series of texts which, chosen and analysed, form a literary period. I had the opportunity of delving into the problems of criticism, as exemplified by the classical and modern European traditions, when I started my research for



In Piazza Duomo, Milan, with wife and daughter, during my stay in Italy for a period of study and research

the M.A. degree. The thesis *La Cultura Italiana in Dun Karm* (1975) was the result of my research in literature as a history of culture. The Maltese version of my Italian original text was later published as *Il-Kultura Taljana f'Dun Karm* (1976), whereas the Italian original text was published in Florence with a modified title, *La Cultura Italiana a Malta – Storia e Influenza Letteraria Stilistica attraverso l'Opera di Dun Karm* (1978). The volume is no. 142 of a series called "Biblioteca dell'Archivum Romanicum", founded by Giulio Bertoni, which includes works about Europe's most famous authors. It was obviously a great satisfaction to me to see the national poet's name included in that list.

I proceeded in the same field of research when I started my studies for the Ph.D. degree. My thesis *La Cultura Italiana del Romanticismo e la Poesia Maltese* (1978) seeks to prove further my fundamental principle that Maltese literature, written in a language of Semitic origin, is an offshoot of Italian literature, both historically and culturally, and that its scientific study presupposes a profound knowledge of the Italian thematic and formal models as developed in the peninsula and in the Island. It follows that a fundamental analysis of the intrinsic nature and historical progression of Maltese literature can only be adequately conducted in a comparative manner. Since Comparative Criticism, which goes back at least to Croce, Arturo Graf, R.M. Meyer, Ernst W. Merian-Genast and others, is a major trend in modern criticism, I could combine a choice necessary for local purposes with a methodology which is also typical of any contemporary critic. I understand that a history of Maltese literature which may merit international appreciation can only be conducted on these lines which integrate the particular experience,

isolated and relatively restricted, of a small Island with the vast experience of the outside world. In this case the "outside" point of reference is immediately Italian and mediately European. During my period of study and research at the Catholic University of Milan (1977) I had the opportunity of discussing the Maltese phenomenon with various leading scholars of that institution. Eventually I was invited to deliver a lecture to a group of students on this subject and I could further see for myself which are the points of reference which may give international relevance to the discussion of a small literature.

The first volume of *Storja tal-Letteratura Maltija* (1979) is a Maltese translation of a substantial part of my work, duly adapted to assume the character of a history of culture. It is perhaps Prof. Giorgio Santangelo who sums up best what my work seeks to do: "attinge il valore di una storia della cultura nella quale si risolve, desanctisianamente, in storia civile e morale del popolo maltese." Indeed, the birth of Malta's literature in Maltese is just one prominent aspect of a nationwide consciousness brought about through the contacts with the Romantic revival. In the various critical studies I have published abroad as well as in the papers with which I participated in international congresses I always made it a point to stress this continental character of the Maltese experience. I am happy to recall that as a member of the "Association Internationale des Critiques Littéraires" of Paris I am regularly provided with the opportunity to present critical information about Maltese literature to the foreign scholars who constitute the Association.

At the same time I sought to go on producing literary criticism of a different pattern. My essays in *Ir-Ruh fil-Kelma* (1973) give an exclusively thematic significance to a set of Maltese literary works. I intentionally eliminated any analysis of a technical nature, bearing in mind only the psychological identity of the chosen authors. *Saggi Kritici* (1979) is a collection of studies which integrate in one whole different approaches of criticism. The shifting of emphasis may be obvious enough to the more informed reader. I adopted this multiple attitude not only when investigating individual authors, but also when writing about more general themes, such as "Sexual Attitudes in Maltese Poetry" and "The Historical Evolution of the Maltese Novel". I am also convinced that Structuralism is a discovery of paramount importance in the history of criticism. In *Fl-Gharbiel* (1976) eight poems and one line by Dun Karm are cut in pieces from an exclusively linguistic point of view; all works are treated as autonomous entities which exist as objects in themselves. I tried to give sense to their semantic character through the dissection of their technical components. In other words, meaning becomes a series of sounds, or

better, sounds create a meaningful context. This approach is adopted also in numerous studies I was invited to write as introductions to books by individual authors.

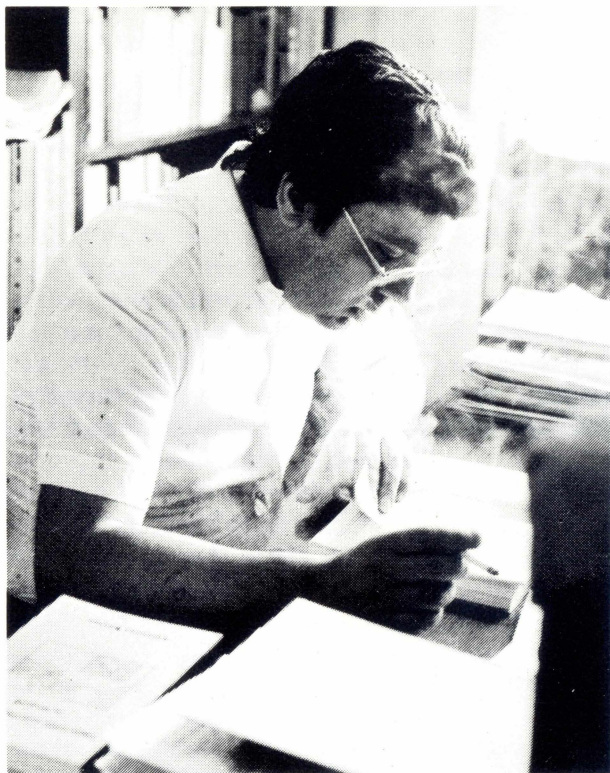
Dun Karm is the poet to whom I dedicated a great deal of my efforts. *Dun Karm – Hajja u Karattru* (1971) was meant to be a brief introduction to the artist from a purely human point of view. For its second edition (1980), rewritten, enlarged and readapted, I chose a different approach and inserted two previously unknown documents. The collection of his Maltese poems (*Dun Karm – Il-Poeżiji Migbura*, 1980) was a very difficult job demanding great patience, attention and consultation. I was fortunate enough to find myself collecting his works after having studied him critically. In 1978 I had also tried to assess the characteristics of his poetic images (*Mekkanizmi Metaforiċi f'Dun Karm*), and consequently I could feel sufficiently familiar with at least the known component of his identity and adequately confident in the possibility of unearthing the unknown one.

I consider the publication of critical editions one of the main duties of a critic. This may be all the more so in the case of a literature like the Maltese one which, for historical reasons, still suffers from the disadvantages of the past. In 1974 I edited Rużar Briffa's later poems, and in 1975 I presented G.A. Vassallo's *Il-Gifen Tork* with an introduction and a set of notes. In 1980 I was invited by a Scottish publisher to edit a modern anthology of Maltese poetry (*Cross Winds*), and at the moment I am working on two other anthologies, one for Malta and another one for abroad.

One normally tends to distinguish between one literature and another. Actually there is only one literature, a universal phenomenon in which different countries participate in their own way (tradition, language, imagery, local background). There are

Official launching of the anthology of Maltese poetry in English, *Cross Winds*. Seen in the front row are the late President of the Republic Dr Anton Buttigieg and Dr Konrad Hopkins, publisher





more elements which relate a literature to another than elements which separate and distinguish. The basic characteristics of art are human and universal, and not local or national. Therefore the knowledge of literature is never restricted to the knowledge of a particular one; all others are intimately related and show points of contact which far transcend geographical or conventional barriers. This awareness has been confirmed by the fact that translations are considered indispensable for the completeness of literature.

My translations are motivated by a desire to widen the confines of our literature and to introduce into Maltese the techniques and the conceptual achievements of other countries. I have translated from English (*Għajn ix-Xemx*, 1971, by F. Ebejer; *Hrejjeġ għat-Tfal*, 1974, by Grimm and Andersen and others; *Jum Sabiħ tar-Rebbiegħa*, 1981, by C. Kosmac; *Valanga*, still unpublished, by B. Vishinski; from Italian (*Il-Hanut ta' l-Argentier*, 1981, by K. Woytyła) and from Latin (*De Arte Poetica*, 1975, by Horace). These translations have enabled me to see from within the real structure of a work and to proceed gradually towards the "transposition" of its form from one language into another. Translation is a clinical enterprise and carries its grave risks. There are works, especially in the case of poetry, which should never be translated, but in most cases works live on and find new forms of existence. Perhaps this exercise fills the gaps in the life of a writer; it may occupy his time between creation and reflection,

providing him with a valuable programme of training and experimentation.

The narrative genre is the one which suits me best for the expression of the innermost feelings about life. *Stejjer għal qabel Jidlam* (1979) and *Aktar stejjer għal qabel jidlam* (1983) try to detect the poetic character of insignificance as manifested in the deeds and ideas of "common" people. Suffering is looked at from the point of view of the sufferer and not as an indifferent object of observation. Ideally it is relived and not described. The stories are intended to sublimate what is normally ridiculed, underestimated and ignored. The Christian core is found through the discovery of the distance between the hidden logical truth and the absurd facade of daily routine. In this context heroes are the people who fail in terms of the acknowledged norms of public success.

The two novels *Il-Gidba* (1977) and *L-Istramb* (1980) have both been published in Yugoslavia, the first one in Serbo-Croatian (*Laz*, 1983), and the second in Slovene (Baruhove Zagote, 1983). Both indicate my favourite trend in the field of narration. It seems obvious that the novel is the most important literary genre of this century. The technique of both novels seeks to integrate monologue and description, the poetry of little experiences and the boredom of life in itself. Both Natan and Baruk are engaged in a thorough search of their inner self, tattered and perhaps lost in spite of their continuous efforts to assert themselves according to their own personal criteria. On the other hand, society, basically Maltese, is the indiscrete legislator. Its laws are rigid and its prejudices supreme. The conflict between the individual and the group resolves itself into a story which takes two opposite, at times paradoxically parallel, directions, the private and the social ones. Both, however, suffer from the same restrictions since even the individual who yearns for authenticity is himself the product of the same environment.

Il-Gidba is an exposition of marriage as a private and as a social contract, whereas *L-Istramb* is the internal journey of a young man towards a mysterious land which manifests itself in three forms: God, love and the land. Both novels are related to each other. They are only partially or initially autobiographical, and basically are an imaginative reconstruction of various elements put together as in a collage. I really believe that there is no such a thing as fiction, and that the creative faculty can only be so up to the extent of reassembling and reorganising known empirical and intellectual data. Reality in the strict sense and imagination are only two variations of the same experience: consciousness.

Oliver Friggieri