

## Portrait

# RUZAR BRIFFA

Ruzar Briffa (1906 – 1963), born at Valletta, is one of the more important romantic poets of Malta. His lyrics translate personal sorrow into a universal vision of human suffering and express in a sentimental way his attitude towards life seen as a difficult condition in which man is solitary and largely unable to understand himself and be understood by the outer world. He succeeds in blending together daily experience and a basically negative intuition of life. His vast medical experience, especially with the lepers, is the most significant point of reference of his inspiration and one can hardly distinguish the medical doctor from the poet in him. Briffa is always conscious of suffering as the supreme adventure of existence.

Most of his works fall into a pattern which recognises two major dimensions, time and space, within which life, and subsequently poetry, must inevitably evolve. The time dimension insists on aspects which indicate retirement (the evening, the night, winter, bad weather), whereas the space dimension depicts a solitary world where man becomes fully aware of his natural inability to go beyond the limits imposed by existence itself. Silent gardens, cemeteries, lonely streets, abandoned places such as churches and the vast seas, form one whole environment which is actually a figurative rendering of his constant psychological condition.

His best poems, such as *Il-Għanja ta' l-Imnikket*, *Il-Kotra u Jien*, *Nofs in-Nhar Sajfi*, *Metamorphosis*, present man in relationship to himself, deprived of illusions, incapable of self-deception (ultimately reducible to the belief that wordly happiness is possible). Melancholy is almost a natural state, and stability an unattainable desire. Briffa is eminently the artist of anxiety.

The love theme plays a central role in his poetry. *Il-Għanja ta' l-Imhabba* (1927), *Lin-Namrata* (1931), *Wahdieni* (1933) and *Għanja* (1933) may in some way be associated with his first marriage to Constance Winifrid Dunn who died in 1950 after having been married to him since 1933. On the other hand, the gentle and equally remote figure of his mother Govanna, as depicted in *Lil Ommi* and *Lil Ommi – Omm Int Le Taf*, both written in 1928, is a source of great, even if at times indirect, inspiration. The poems reveal the timidity of an eternal son in front of a woman who alone can give the poet refuge and self-confidence. The theme of a return to the womb appears in two of his later poems, *Ilbierah* (1960) and *Ilbierah Dhalt*. His second marriage to Louise



Ruzar Briffa

Attard Bajona in 1952 gave him the tranquillity he craved for throughout his previous life, but in 1961 he found out that he was fatally sick and died two years later.

His last poem *Il-Ballatella tal-Funtana* (1962) is not very different, poetically and psychologically, from his very first known work in Maltese, *Lacrymae Rerum* (1924). Both are expressions of a solitary soul in search of unattainable inner peace. His whole poetic life is characterized by a deep sense of frustration and an almost innate inability to come to terms with the conditions of existence.

Love and faith are both translated into poetry as if only these two dimensions can render life meaningful. Sorrow is frequently associated with love, and faith is seen as a way of giving significance to suffering. Ultimately these two aspects form a psychological condition typical of his search for a level of being which transcends common reality. Love is transformed into a discovery of the inner self, and faith assumes the character of another crucifixion.





Ruzar Briffa with his second wife, Louisette Attard Bajona

Alongside the personal *angst* of his own experience there is a whole background of sickness and deprivation revealed to him through his work with the lepers. The poet and the medical doctor constitute one unique personality which manifests itself in a way of behaving (as a man he was extremely kind and sympathetic) and of writing poetry (as a poet he depicts life as tormenting).

Briffa (far right) during a day out in the country with other members of "L-Ghaqda tal-Malti"



He himself declared in 1945 that poetry is not a pleasurable job but rather another sort of suffering. He used to think out his poem for a very long time, for months and perhaps for years. Then, all of a sudden, he felt a great urge to write it down immediately. Even his method of creating verse is parallel to his more known aspects of behaving as a man. Timidity, solitude and fear from the more external aspects of life are not only patterns which describe the real substance of his poetry, but also features which form his definition as a man. As a romantic in the truest sense of the term, biography and verse are always interchangeable and only as phenomena do they appear as distinct and separate.

The cause-effect relationship between sensation and inspiration is intentionally developed to the full, and as poetry acquires its relevance primarily as another document of human expression rather than as a realisation of an aesthetic principle. On the other hand, poetry creeps in when universal relevance is attained. Briffa's continuous challenge as an artist should therefore be evaluated in this respect, that is as an effort to transcend autobiography and reach out for what is probable and necessary to all humans.

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