

IT-TFAL JIĠU BIL-VAPURI – or HOW TO DEPICT A COUNTRY THROUGH A NOVEL

by
OLIVER FRIGGIERI

Why should people take a novel seriously when it is formally defined as 'fiction', namely as the product of imagination, a figment of mental creativity? As a matter of fact, many do not, and it may be all due to the type of approach they have had to literature in general. Literature is frequently associated with the acquisition of competence in a particular language, whereas it is infinitely more than that, and it is not that at all if that is not just the minimum, the basis on which a whole edifice must be constructed.

I have been dedicating my life to writing since I was about ten or eleven. My earliest preference was poetry, which I wrote avidly, and regularly, and with an ever increasing desire to attain technical and logical coherence. Then, steeped in my philosophical studies, came literary criticism, which is supposed to be a science like any other, equally esteemed and equally abused since literary judgement of any sort and merit is supposedly an instinctive mood any reader goes through without conscious deliberation. The reaction of the reader is, of course, the things which concerns me most as a novelist.

Writing a short story or a novel came relatively late in my course of events, since I had failed to convince myself that fiction is worth taking seriously. My first lengthy narrative work must have been *L-Istramb*, a novel written in the late sixties, and published only in 1980 after having been forgotten, ignored and intentionally put aside by myself. Then other narrative works were published, but the question I keep asking myself is simple: how did it occur to me to embark on narration, when my choice was initially poetic and eventually academic?

As in all other instances, and as I suppose every writer firmly believes, in writing a narrative work one partly narrates him/herself and essentially narrates everybody else. Autobiography is only a bird's eye view of what is necessarily a common outlook. In any case this is to assert that narration is not what it seems superficially. It has nothing to do with story telling if not as a way of narrating a story. Anything is narrateable, and every word is reducible to a verb. Nouns, adjectives, adverbs, they are all dependent on doing. All verbs are then reducible to what philosophers call 'copula', the verb denoting being. Speakers of Maltese are privileged in this regards since Maltese, as a Semitic language, is based on verbs. Language is thus considered as an activity which gradually evolves into description, reflection and reasoning.

If there is something which I somehow regret is that I have not dedicated myself completely, exclusively, to novel writing. That is not a way of undoing what has been done over more than three decades, and if detraction is disgraceful, self-detraction must be much worst. So there it all stops, but when I look back and consider how gratifying the experience of writing novels and short stories has been, and how obvious it is that life is only a novel in search of meaning, then I become all the more convinced that story telling is the most fundamental instinct in humankind, and must therefore be reflected with equal priority in literature.

It would be very difficult for me to recall how each of my five novels has come through. A thought, an incident, a recollection, a meeting with a friend, anything would have prompted a novel to come to the fore. But from where? Again, this is the question here: where does a novel start from? Any answer would be incomplete and partial. The following comments are an effort in explaining what has prompted me in embarking on *It-Tfal jiġu bil-Vapuri* (Mireva Publications, 2000).

What can be savelly said is that the life of a novelist is best lived through exclusive loyalty to that choice: narration, only narration. Thus one thinks in terms of plots, people, actions, characterisation, and above anything else universal truths. A novel may look provincial, historical, tied to a specific time and place, but it is not if it really is what it pledges to be: a way of putting the shapelessness of life into shape, even though temporary and ephemeral. But then all literature is a way of illustrating how transient life is.

"Children come by ship"

It was the predicament of a young unmarried mother, irrevocably deprived of her offspring, which initially prompted me to start writing a long narrative work such as this. Susanna is shocked by what has happened to her, and her only refuge is the village parish priest, a saintly man ready to go through the whole tunnel just to help her. He does, and the price is what has always been since Jesus Christ, too high for a mere human being to bear, too true to be taken seriously. But that is how it is.

Dun Grejbel gives her all the moral and material help she desperately needs. He provides her with temporary refuge, manages to have her employed within a family unit, and gradually sees her through as she falls in love with a young man whom she meets in the luxurious house she knows too well as a maid. The real father of her offspring, however, is gone, and she will only meet him incidentally, in utterly different circumstances, in the last scene of the story, when it is too late for him to fall in love and simply impossible for her to be loved. So many authentic human efforts gone down the drain, so many good people destroyed through exhaustion of some sort or other. So much waste. But is it so?

Once again, in writing *It-Tfal jiġu bil-Vapuri* I have done by best to manifest concretely the conviction that life must be meaningful. A major proof of that must be that life is apparently, or so repeatedly and convincingly, absurd, cruelly absurd. Unwarranted absurdity. That is why it needs to be explained, to be put into shape. My novel takes many pages to explain what the relationship between meaning and the sense of void must be. Experience proves to be disgusting, but an inner call proposes hope. So judgements must be revised, and that is only possible through faith.

In reconstructing the past I had the present in mind. In any case experience has amply taught me that a novel is only about the past. It can be reduced to a very simple sentence: it was. But then it is up to the narrator to show that life is, and what is necessary is only unchangeable. Life must have significance, since it is made up of constants defied by so many variables. Our inner self demands it. Delusions prove it, since they emanate from what is ideal. Wishes are not futile. None can illustrate such principles better than characters in a novel, set against a background, confronted with various selves, including their own. The creative process is highly inviting, and writing soon becomes an exercise in self-explanation. If postmodernism needs a principle to rely on, this must be the one. At least this novel strives to illustrate it.

Life as depicted here is utterly cruel, even though perhaps equally intriguing, and I do not consider such an unredeemable situation as either excessive or outdated. So many things testify to the maxim that what is essential in existence cannot be changed or modified, and there is nothing which exemplifies this better than literature. It consistently dwells on a specific cluster of themes, which occur in every era, and are dealt with differently and not so differently. It is only technology which is trying to convince us that change is complete, and it must be evident to some of us, those who bother, that such a simplification is working havoc at all levels: educational, political, moral. Narrating the past, therefore, is no nostalgic exercise, no mere example of memory under duress. It would be a privilege if that were possible. If only literature could be an alternative to the vicissitudes of daily life.

Suffering is here set against an old background, and consequently the narrative unfolds itself into a colourful panorama of what village life must have been about eighty or ninety years ago. The past is always an 'intimate' experience to narrate, especially if it either touches on one's own early childhood or, better, precedes it. Recollection works a lot in the creative process of a novelist, but it is never sufficient. Like an antiquarian, a narrator needs anything which can be given value. Indeed, merit is in the eyes of the beholder.

Yet, that is not the central point of this novel which I once found myself writing almost without thinking beforehand about it, as it had normally happened to me. Some may look at it as a representation of the intricate dilemmas undergone by a highly sensitive priest. In any case, the concept of priesthood somehow coincides with sensitivity of a high order. Others will consider it as the reconstruction of the suffering which an unmarried young mother, immediately and irrevocably deprived of her offspring, has to go through, eventually to become an eternally "childless mother" in more ways than one.

A childless mother

A "childless mother": a paradox which I do my best throughout the whole narrative to prove its cruel coherence. On the other hand there is promise, and on the other there is what is normally termed 'reality', namely the perception of truth, the subjective reconstruction of the dictates of being. Do we not frequently wish life to have been different? Do we not plan things to work out perfectly? Do suffering and death feature in our ideal fabrication of existence? Why is it that our wishes and our opportunities are as a rule so distinct? In other terms, why does our daily news bulletin disappoint us? Why should it make us cry every day? If it does not, then that is an indication that apathy has taken over, and that is why a novel should offer an antidote. If a novel does not function as a means of promoting awareness, it fails by definition and in practice.

Susanna personifies good will, nobility of heart and endurance. Insignificance must attain its ethical value through her. We all recall the time when our mothers, prudent and discreet, used to convince us so easily that children come by ship. "Kif jġu t-tfal, mā?" - How do children come, mother? "Bil-vapur!" - By ship. We could suspect it was not completely true, but we still enjoyed being somehow cheated out of love. Fables tell the truth and mothers mean well in any case, but even that basic principle of life has to be proved. A mother is defined by nature, but she attains her dignity through self sacrifice. In this case, a woman's complete solitude is only relived by the benevolence of a great

common person, a humble priest whom I have liked to build into a hero, the epitome of worthy insignificance. And so he is doomed to fail and to rot in his solitude. He is simply a saint, the odd one out in the whole social structure. The system necessarily rejects him.

On the other hand, that same illusion, temporary though it was, may have been the cause of many untold sufferings. That is not the case here, because responsibility here lies elsewhere, and is not tarnished or reduced through ignorance. Certain pregnancies have actually meant a radical change in outlook towards life in general. Such situations are frequently thought to belong to history, and it is through such a reiteration that the present can be adequately narrated and hopefully explained. A novel is perhaps the most effective form to provide that, since it translates truths into particular situations.

Reconstructing the past

That is what I have actually tried to do in *It-Tfal jġu bil-Vapuri* (Mireva Publications). The novel is intentionally set in the early decades of the twentieth century, an obscure and fascinating, uninspiring and ambiguous period which can be somehow understood in terms of its apparent unchangeability. The novel aims at proving that permanency is inherent to human nature, and history and development can never prove stronger or more decisive.

Truth, immoveable, steadfast, eternal, as opposed to reality, transient, evanescent, deceptive: on the basis of that sharp contrast, which so frequently evades us, a story could be constructed which manifests how simplistic our judgement of life frequently is. That is why a novel should delve into the complexity of things, never, however, to get complicated itself. Simplicity, structured, well defined, logically built, is perhaps the most difficult style to be attained by any writer after decades of experience.

The context of a novel is the embodiment of its key motive. I have done my best, in terms of reading, consultation, and visitation of actual places and environments, to adequately arrive at a proper image of what life must have been so long ago. It was a really enjoyable trip, I must admit, equally heartbreaking. At the end of it all, a novelist finds himself asking himself: which century is this, here and now? That is what is most rewarding in the creative process of a literary work. In no way is it distinct from the real act of breathing air. Life is one, and writing is a rendering of that oneness.

In *It-Tfal jġu bil-Vapuri* the challenge of constructing the proper context was made up of three places: a valley, a rich country villa, a detached village. In discovering the details of such spots it became all the more evident to me that the real atmosphere I was searching for was internal. It must lie within the person, and it is the soul itself. That is why arguments and actions are viewed as variations of one simple fact. Thinking properly and doing are aspects of one selfsame reality. Traditions are equally important in properly portraying an era. They have to be illustrated in terms of their individual and social functions.

The rational, structured development of dialogue is perhaps more inviting than the formation of what is commonly known as the plot, the sequence of events. The distinction between factual sequence and literary sequence is now well known in the field of literary criticism. Any competent story teller, starting with our own mother, must have been aware of it from the very start. Otherwise reproduction and creative narration will not be distinct at all. They are, and profoundly so. A novel as I see it is mainly effective through its structure. That is how it moves readers, and makes them think and formulate their own queries about being.

However, the reconstruction of a historical context, though a major component of this novel, is not the main motive. I actually wanted to portray the image of a young girl who early in life becomes a victim of prejudice and rigid judgements, and of a heroic and saintly priest who lives his Christian life to the full only to be - consequently, as a necessary matter of course, I mean - vilified, formally condemned and forced to leave both parish and country.

Dun Grejbel's downfall is complete, his humiliation irrevocable, his solitude total. So is his integrity, unimpaired. Again, human conjecture is set as diametrically opposed to divine truth. Power, any type of power, is again understood as the negation of truth. Somehow betrayed by his own good will, this unique man now understands that his priesthood means being able to perceive truths through personal contradictions and misunderstandings. All the other characters are cut to size, reduced to their normal human dimension, since they are on the other side of the fence.

What has made me write this novel must have been the conviction that the Catholic priest is a hero in modern society. By all criteria, he is an exceptional exemplification of what most people want to be, but will never succeed in being. As I proceeded with the writing I became aware that in most cases I only managed to interpret his efforts as useless and unfruitful, but likewise heroic and valid since they imply the exertion of a high degree of human endeavour, both physical and moral.

This type of priest is essentially a thinker, and in the better sense, transcendental, a person who employs thinking only to defy thought, to prove its finiteness. That means that truth, namely God, can ultimately be reached only through a poetic process. The goal of concept is sentiment, and the ultimate stage of eloquence is silence. All the characters in this narrative eventually beg their leave, as their efforts are exhausted, and the reader finds him/herself alone.

It-Tfal jiġu bil-Vapur seeks to show that a priest is necessarily a poet, a disturbed soul in search of sense and significance; both are here possible, but never completely accessible. Hinted at, perhaps, through glimpses. The world I depicted is therefore inevitably hostile to him, even though deliberately welcoming, embodying a choice which challenges the basic inclination of human nature: power.

Tradition has therefore its sort of ambiguity, even though it is supposed to guarantee stability and certitude. If seen in the light of his essential definition, the priest must be superior to the change of time. So is he here. The man is drained, but his inner strength remains intact till the end.

Dun Grejbel: the form of his name is the Maltese diminutive of "Grabiel". In Hebrew the name means "man of God". He is indeed. The priest: why do we need to put him right in the centre of our arena, or else decide we can do without him? I trust my novel provides a very clear answer,

Quote:

If a small thing has the power to make you
angry, does that not indicate something
about your size?

- Sydney J. Harris