

Book Review:

“Imwejgiet” Antologija ta’ poeziji

Alfred Grech

Gozo: A&M Printing Press (2020); xxx pages

REVIEWED BY JOSEPH W. PSAILA

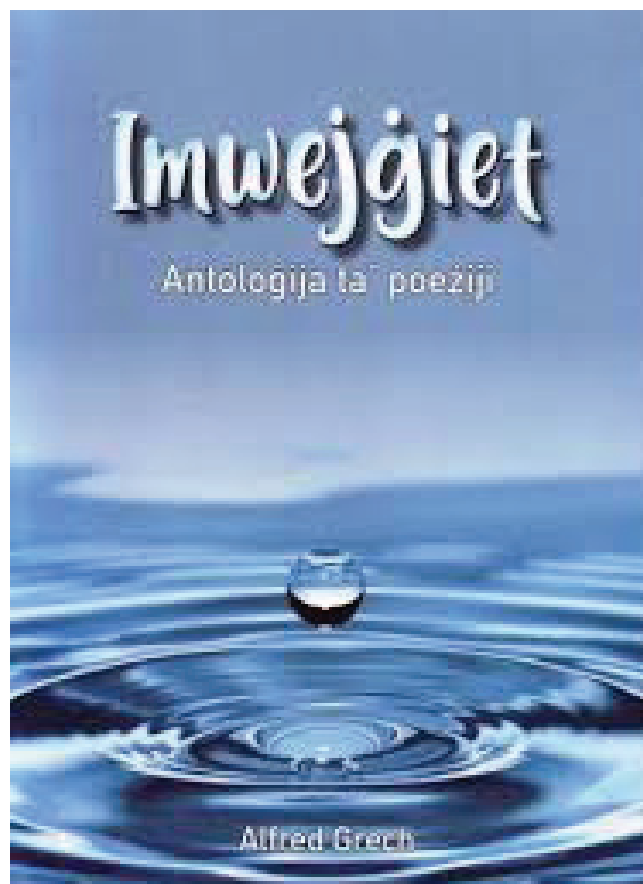
Utopian Moments of Love and Eros

Every poet has the good fortune of experiencing the utopian moment. It is that instant, preceded by thinking aloud and feeling the resonance in the articulation of an idea which carries him or her beyond the mundane prose of routine. Then, the indescribable instant happens all of a sudden, as W.B. Yeats puts it, “with a click like the closing of a box” and I dare add, like a jewel box. Subsequently, when that utopian moment is, in some degree, shared by the reader, then that indeed is added bonanza.

The poems of Alfred Grech in “Imwejgiet” are twinklings, - to borrow the expression of John Stuart Mill – “of feelings confessing themselves to themselves in moments of solitude”. This in itself, and by itself, is an act of fulfilment.

The poetry in “Imwejgiet” alternates between the traditional style and the projective verse which discards the inherited line, stanza and over-all form and attunes the syllable to the heart beat and the line to the way of the breath. Very often Grech enhances the rhythmic pulse of both the traditional and projective verse with rhyme, fresh metaphors and ambiguity which precludes the perusal of the lazy reader who, in our day, has been a discouragement to the fine art of poetry. In fact, writing and publishing poetry has become an act of heroism in a society riddled with indifference toward this art.

Indeed, the alternating of the traditional with the projective verse in “Imwejgiet” is an ingenious strategem since traditions, rightly or wrongly, have been going out of fashion. Alfred Grech never indulges in reckless experimentation, which as the phrase implies, is always a turning of a blind corner, even though this sounds in contrast with what some art experts maintain that it is recklessness which makes experimental art beautiful. This fluctuation of style has to be reconciled with the fact that Grech’s poetry is one of circumstance. He is a lump of clay kneaded by circumstance. (p.183) His poetry is inspired by external situations – from a



furtive glance to a beauty contest, from a rejected love to a broken relationship, from a panoramic view from the top of a hill to the tranquility of a hamlet where he gets imbued with the spirit of the place - and by internal psychological states – when even his thoughts are “coffins in a catacomb” or “Dead Sea scrolls waiting to be unearthed”. (p.94)

The poet experiences these circumstances directly and very often intimately. He muses under the pressure of reality – the pressure of an external event that arouses the consciousness for a lightning moment of emotion or for a prolonged mood of discernment. In this regard, there are instances in “Imwejgiet” which prove the axiom that “form is never more than an extension of content”. Such archetypal poem, in solemn hendecasyllable, is the elegy, “Għal Valerie” (p.75) which takes the form of a heart felt prayer lamenting the early death of the poet’s love. The order of the lines and words carries the intuition of this stark reality.

Most of the poems in “Imwejġiet” are a dialogue with a “she”: (hu u hi), he, the poet and she, his love; and at times (hu u hi, hi min hi), he and she, whoever she may be. An intimate tone of voice is characteristic of “modern” poetry, the speech of one person addressing another person, not a large audience. W.H. Auden in the “Poet and the City” has an admirable way of illustrating this: “Whenever a modern poet raises his voice he sounds phony. The characteristic hero of modern poetry is neither the “Great Man” nor the romantic rebel, both doers of extraordinary deeds, but the man or woman in any walk of life”. Alfred Grech’s poetry is basically confessional and he is not reluctant to expose himself, warts and all.

In these confessional dialogues, Grech reveals two contrasting traits, “love” and “eros”, and even if sex and love are ideally complementary, the poet is prone to separate them. As a case in point I will call this phenomenon, “the Petrarchan” trait and the “D’Annunzian” trait.

The Petrarchan and the D’Annunzian traits

Petrarch draws inspiration from all occasions and from various motives and relates them to his exclusive flame, to the sole image and only name of Donna Laura – a love which remained for him awe-inspiring even after her early death – and for whom Petrarch devotes the “Canzoniere”, a paradigm of love verses in European literature.

Such a love in Alfred Grech is epitomised in the poem ‘Għax Mieghi int Twelidt’, written some weeks after the death of Valerie: “You were born with me, and with me you live / partner of solitude, backdrop to my acts / I find you everywhere with every breath I take...” (p.83) This is the love whose very shadow the poet recognizes. He can distinguish the marks of her feet from a thousand others. (p.39) The poet’s yearning for this love transcends beyond the range of vision to realms where only true love reigns. (p.186) “For now, however, till heaven awaits us, I will draw with my fingers your beauty in the atmosphere”. (p.162)

There are, however, in “Imwejġiet” strong aspects of what I identify as a D’Annunzian trait. It is said that when Gabriele D’Annunzio published “Il Piacere” he personally took one of the first copies to his old friend Dott. Jacob Moleschott. Moleschott, held the book in his hand for some time for a quick glance at the pages with a discerning eye of a physiologist and

expressed an instinctive but literary criticism: “Odora di sperma,” he exclaimed with a smile.

There are in “Imwejġiet” many verses sprinkled with this odour and where eros bubbles on the surfaces of the poetic “ripples”, hence the title “Imwejġiet”. Eros is the power that can be felt in language when a word or a half-finished phrase suggests a thought but falls short of consummation. Grech makes use more than once of that ponderable word “rokna” and its plural “irkejjen” (nooks) related to the female body (pp 85, 191) : “When both of us got fed up of prying and had made the round of all the nooks... (p.85) He describes himself as an adventurer who plays with the edges of the flame, who fails to reason within the honeycomb of her lips which utter words like lighted match sticks; an adventurer who loses himself in her labyrinth, sliding along her pallid legs to find respite and slumber in the warmth of the temple... even though he acknowledges that on the morrow someone else will take his place.

Other verses of course, express moments of remorse for the poet is conscious that his life is on an equipoise between duty and indulgence and he yearns for an end to his foibles (p.61) to the point that he advises the reader to beware the snares of the harlot. (p.170) He has the feeling that he is waiting his time, trying to grasp shooting stars (p.187) and is anxious to pull himself out of the swamp and return to his true love. (p.186)

The attentive reader of “Imwejġiet” concludes with an inkling that the game is not much fun, after all.

Conclusion

In most poetry, and especially in love poetry and even more so in lust poetry, the words fail to describe the emotions for two principal reasons. One reason has to do with the “words” themselves, the inadequacy of “vocabulary” and the other reason has to do with the “wordsmith”, the poet himself. This latter reason has been brilliantly put in a nutshell by Petrarch: “He who can say how he burns, burns little.” With regard to the first reason, the vocabulary in such verses cannot cope with the circumstance and so the thoughts and feelings of the poet remain, to use a commonplace simile like the unfinished statues of the slaves of Michelangelo at the Accademia Gallery in Florence, powerful figures emerging from a block of marble still straining to free themselves from the enslaving stone.

However, in the case of poetry, is this a handicap or an enhancement?