

FERNAND GRECH AND HIS SON
FRANCOIS-DIDIER, FRENCHMEN OF
MALTESE ORIGIN

by

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At last, I hope I have fulfilled, if only to some extent, a promise made to myself some time ago, i.e. to try to bring to the attention of my compatriots, and others as well, if possible, the achievements of two men, father and son, of Maltese extraction; and, in so doing, to prove beyond doubt that our people, if given the opportunity, can make good, and earn a name for themselves, nay, even become famous, and accepted as such, by the wide world.

It so happened that late in 1968, the Council of Europe sent a French expert to advise our Education Department as to the establishment and the future expansion of a new section, that dealing with educational documentation and a Teachers Centre. I was detailed to collaborate and to supply the necessary information; and thus I came in daily contact with the gentleman in question. One fine day, whilst discussing certain aspects of Maltese life, M. Leherpeux told me that one of his dearest friends in Paris was a gentleman of Maltese extraction, who had occupied a very high position in the French Treasury, and who was the son of a very well-known poet and Member of the Académie Française. I guessed, and guessed rightly, that he would be the son of Fernand Gregh, about whom I had heard some time in the 1950's, and in whom I was still interested, especially, as at the time, I was still the Honorary Secretary of the Akkademja tal-Malti (Maltese Academy). The gentleman referred to was Francois-Didier, the son of Fernand. Further, as in the near future, there was the possibility of my paying a visit to Paris, in connection with the same project — this time on a U.N.E.S.C.O. fellowship — I expressed my wish to meet him in order, mainly, to get to know more about his father.

During the said "tour" I did go to Paris twice, and during my second visit I had the pleasure of meeting Francois-Didier, who, very kindly called for me at my hotel and drove me to Orly, from where I had to fly to Geneva, in order that we might have some time together and to talk about his father.

But I wou'd like, first of all, to say a few words about Francois-Didier himself, who, in his own line, i.e. Economics and Finance, had

reached the very top, and had earned many well-deserved honours, in which we, Maltese, although very indirectly, share as well, since the Greghs are proud of their origin and never hide it.

Francois-Didier was born in Paris on March 26th, 1906, when his father was 33 years old. He attended the Lycée Janson — de Saily and the Faculty of Law and Letters of Paris from where he obtained the Licenciante in Law and Letters, and later the Doctorate in Law. Later still, he attended the Ecôle Libre des Sciences Politiques and obtained the Doctorate in Economics and Finance; only twelve candidates were approved in the final list, Francois-Didier being placed second, whilst first was Maurice Couve de Murville, who years later, was appointed Prime Minister of France by General de Gaulle.

In 1930, Francois-Didier obtained employment with the French Treasury as Inspector of Finance; in 1935, he was appointed Comptroller, and in early 1943, after he had escaped from Occupied France (4.12.42) he was made Director of Revenue by the National Committee of Liberation in Algeria. After his return to France on August 27th, 1944, and up to June, 1949, he was one of the Directors in the Ministry of Finance, in charge of the national estimates. Then, in 1949, he became a Director of the Credit Lyonnais, a post he occupied until 1953; in that year he was sent to Washington D.C., in the United States, to be given the post of Director of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Later, (9.5.1955) he became Joint Secretary of N.A.T.O. for economics and finance, and on September 15th, 1958, he was promoted to the rank of Deputy Secretary General with the additional responsibility for the co-ordination of defence. In 1959, he was back with the French Treasury, having been appointed Inspector General of Finance, a post he kept until 1967, ie. until he was superannuated.

A man, with so distinguished a career and who had worked so hard in a very difficult field for the land of his birth and during such a tumultuous period of history, could not but be singularly honoured; in fact, he was made Commandeur de la Legion d'Honneur; Grand Officier du Nichan Iftikhar; Commandeur de Ouissam de Saint — Sava; and Officier de L'Ordre de Leopold.

On 10th July, 1947, Francois-Didier married Mlle. Adé Barbier; they have no children.

Francois-Didier's sister is named Geneviève; I do not know whether she is still married and has children, or even whether she is still amongst the living. My enquiries in Paris have not proved fruitful so far. Fernand's brother, Henri Charles, had only one son, André, born in 1902; as far as I am aware he is also childless. So it seems that the Greghs' direct line will be extinguished with the death of Francois-Didier and André Gregh.

As I have already hinted, Francois-Didier's father was in his time as well known, both in France and elsewhere, as his dynamic son; of course, not in the same field of activity; in fact, in something, so to say, diametrically opposite, i.e. in the Arts as opposed to the Sciences; although one must quickly add, that if Fernand made his mark in poetry, literary and dramatic criticism, et similia, yet he also harboured in his heart a love for Mathematics which is, at least a distant relative to Economics and Finance, since they involve so many monetary calculations! One may point out as well another considerable difference between father and son: Francois-Didier, to a great extent, had his bed laid for him and his path of progress greatly smoothed, since his father could afford to send him to the best schools and colleges, nor was he hampered by any financial, and as far as I know, by family or other worries, whereas Fernand was troubled since childhood with a weak constitution mainly due to a poor digestive system which resulted in migraine and moreover, had to fend for himself and earn his living ever since he reached the age of manhood.

It was due to his ill health that Fernand's parents first sent him to the Pension Jeannin in Bois-Colombe, where they hoped he would recuperate; later he was a full boarder at the Lycée Nichelet in Vannes, and in 1881 he was accepted as a student at the Lycée Condorcet. Fernand's parents were not rich and the schools Fernand was sent to were the best they could afford. On the other hand, the atmosphere at home was highly intellectual, which certainly bore its fruit in Fernand; he also inherited from his parents a good ear for music; this shows clearly in his verse.

Fernand, Charles, Felix was born on October 14th, 1873, the first of two sons — their only — to Charles, Felix, Francois Gregh and Charlotte Elisa née Bonnard, ten years younger than her husband, and who, in time, was divorced by him. Charles Felix then contracted a second marriage with a certain Madame Monchaux. Both Fernand and his brother Henri Charles were always very affectionate towards their mother, and loved and respected her until her death on April, 18th, 1922.

Louis, Charles, Felix was born in Philippeville, Algeria, in 1842; at first he remained a British subject (like his father, Calcedonio who had been born in Malta on September 2nd, 1816; he had emigrated first to North Africa and later moved to Paris, where he even fought on the barricades). On October 14th, 1899, he changed his nationality and became a French citizen; he continued to live in Paris where he died on January 21st, 1915, at the age of 73.

The Gregh family, both during its stay in Algeria and the first years in France, remained catholic in faith as well as British in nationality. But in time they seem to have lost their religious belief and to have felt a

greater attachement to the land of their choice and which had become their home. They followed in the trend of secularization and liberalism, verily a tremendous wave which engulfed France; there is some hope however, that before his death Louis Charles became reconciled to the Church, as we read that he was buried in the parish of Rambouillet.

Fernand remembers some of his relatives saying that his great grand mother (i.e. either the mother of Marguerite Mizzi-Grima, who later married Calcedonio, and who was related to the then well-known soprano Borghi-Mamo, or Marie Baldacchino who married Rosario Gregh, Calcedonio's father) was one of the young Maltese ladies who on the 12th June, 1798, went down to the Marina in Valletta, to welcome Napoleon Bonaparte when he disembarked there at the Barriera, to occupy Malta and to kick out the Order. One wonders whether the seed of the Gregh's sympathy for things French lay in the distaff side of the family! However that may be, when Calcedonio emigrated to Algeria, he did not only retain his British allegiance, but was also appointed British Consul. He was fairly well-educated, and managed a good business as armourer, a business which at first was lucrative, but later on declined and necessitated the move to France.

As far as I know, no one has researched to find out when the Maltese surname *Grech* became changed into *Gregh*. Fernand was asked to throw some light on the matter and his reply was that in Calcedonio's passport the surname was registered by the Maltese authorities as *Gregh*. He also relates that during one of his early visits to Rome he was presented by Primoli to the ex-Empress Eugenie; as she was somewhat hard of hearing, she misunderstood the surname and thought that Fernand was a Greek poet and addressed him as such. Fernand adds that he left the matter at that, to the amusement of those present.

Fernand's father was a musician — a good performer and a composer of considerable merit; in fact, amongst other works he composed the music for *Le Presumtif*, an opera buffa in three acts, the librettists being Alfred Hannequin and Albin Velabrigue; also that for *Un Lycée de Jeunes Filles* — 3 acts and 4 tableaux, words by Alex. Bisson; he put to music Fernand's poem *Avant Printemps* and wrote the music for the piano of *L'Oiseau Moquer*. It seems that Fernand's mother was also a talented musician — his father got to know her when he started giving her piano lessons — so Fernand could not escape inheriting a musical ear.

It was with the help of Charles Bonnard, his future father-in-law, a well-to-do saddler and a fairly well-read man, that Louis Charles could open a music shop in Paris, at 10, Rue Chaussée d'Antin; when he got married to Charlotte Elisa, they lived there, in a small flat with a somewhat low ceiling, over the shop; there, Fernand and his brother were born;

there, they met the musicians and the librettists with whom Louis Charles collaborated and worked. As I have already pointed out, although the Greghs were not affluent, yet they lived in an environment which reflected the many changes, both political and social, which were taking place in France.

Fernand recalls that he was only 3 years old when his mother pointed out to him George Sand (or as was her real name, Amantine Dupin); most probably she was returning home from the Office of the "Republique Francaise", the newspaper published by Leon Gambetta with whom she collaborated during the last years of her life. He remembers her as a fat woman of a rather darkish complexion. She was well-known for her emotional and socialistic novels, her numerous articles on the social question, her eccentricities as regards dress and other rather mannish habits, as well as her many love affairs, mostly remembered, perhaps, that with the great composer Frédéric Chopin and that with the poet Alfred de Musset, both of whom, for a time, she loved and mothered. Most of her lovers were "romantics" of the School of Victor Hugo.

Fernand's relatives also took him to see the funeral of Victor Hugo, one of the greatest French literary geniuses. At the time, Fernand was only twelve, but he never forgot his feeling on seeing the coffin of the great man pass through the Arc de Triomphe. Evidence of how indelible this impression was on his mind and heart are the various critical works he later wrote (1905, 1933, 1953) on this great giant of French Romanticism.

It seems that during his childhood Fernand was brought up in the catholic faith; like most French children he made his First Holy Communion and was confirmed in the Faith; commenting on his first Holy Communion, he says that it was a "moment vraiment unique". It was certainly fortuitous, but even on such an occasion Victor Hugo was brought to his attention, for the Abbé de Bonfils, a lover of poetry, transcribed in Fernand's little prayer book the following lines from Victor's Hugo's:

"Oh! bien loin de la voie
Où marche le pécheur
Chemine ou Dieu t'envoie!
Enfant! garde ta joie!
Lis! garde ta blancheur!"

In his early manhood Fernand lived amongst the young intellectuals of Paris — rebels, agnostics, mystics, individualists, socialists, extremists in politics, either to the right or to the left. and in spite of their idealisms,

in a sense also sensualists, and attracted by the form and beauty of the idea rather than the intrinsic value and content of the idea itself; as for instance, Charles Maurras, who advocated the re-establishment of the Catholic Church, but at the same time did not believe in God, or was at least in doubt about his existence. We can get a very good picture of the atmosphere then prevailing from the novels of Emile Zola and Marcel Proust, both of whom exerted great influence on Fernand; in fact he sings in this vein:

“Nous allons caresser des seins, baiser des levers,
Et nous allons sonder vos infinis, beaux yeux
Dont sous les units de juin, le front battant de fievres,
Nous cherchions le mirageaux etoiles des cieux,

Quand sur le pont, aux bruits alternatif des voiles
Ou le vent tour a tour muert et renalt, — au ciel
Nous regardions sans fin osciller les etoiles,
Selon le bercement du roulis eternel”

This is Fernand in his search for God:

“C'est une de ces nuits d'été prodigieuses
Oú l'on dirait que dans l'azur, en points de feu,
Les étoiles, au fond d'ombres religieuses,
Dessinent vaguement le figure de Dieu.

O splendeur! La forêt bruit, le vent s'élève.
L'air frais, par les volets ouverts, vient essayer
L'extase humide et tiede a mon front plein rêve:
Je prierais, cette nuit, si je savais prier.

Mais quel Dieu? Je n'en sais aucun que ne rejette
Mon instinct d'amour tendre et d'âpre vérité.
Nul Dieu n'est assez sur pour mon âme inquiète,
Nul Dieu n'est assez bon pour cette nuit d'été.

Un oiseau chante au loin, seul, perdu comme une âme.
Une étoile pâit, triste, au bas de la nuit.
Oú se cache le Dieu que mon instinct réclame,
Et qui luit dans tout astre et parle dans tout bruit?

Ah! peut-etre est-ce toi simplement, Ame humaine,
Ame en qui l'univers s'esprime en ce moment;
Dieu, c'est peut-etre un nom de cette âme qui mène
Le monde douloureux au bonheur, lentment.

Dieu, c'est peut-etre un nom de ce desir immense
Qui se cherche et qui fait le monde en se trouvant,
Se satisfait en l'homme aujourd'hui, recommence
Demain, toujours, au coeur de l'univers vivant.

Ah! qu'il naisse, ce Dieu, qu'il se hâte, qu'il vienne,
Lui qui sera le joie avec le vérité!
Ah! depuis si longtemps qu'il aspire et qu'il peine,
Le monde, par les maux soufferts, l'a mérité!

— Je reve seul sans fin dans la chambre endormie,
L'âme silencieuse et vague, et triste un peu.
Une autre ame est eparse au loin dans l'ombre amie.
Que veut — elle? Le monde est — il en mal de Dieu?"

Later still, he again asks: "Dieu, existe- il?" "Non", he replies, and he addresses this: *Au Dieu Inconnu* —

"Mon Dieu, — quel soit l'Etre ou la Chose que nomme
Ce mot si clair jadis et pour nous obscurci,
Mais qui, dans la ténèbre où nous errons ainsi,
Reste le plus doré sur les lèvres d'un homme, —

Toi que mon coeur d'enfant sage et simple adorait,
Au temps de mains, le soir, jointes pour la prière,
Que mon esprit laissa, dans sa marche, en arriere,
Sans remords puéril et sans lâche regret.

Mais vers qui se retourne et monte encor mon âme,
En te sentant suprême et peut-être pareil,
Comme les fleurs des bois aspirent au soleil
Ou le bas de la flamme au sommet de la flamme;

En cette heure de paix et da satiété
Où seul, ardent toujours et triste, et pourtenat calme,
Le front nu caressé par l'invisible palme
Qu' est dan la nuit le vent vegetal de l'été,

Ecoutant s'affaiblir en moi la rumeur brève
 Et déjà moins altière, hélas! des passions,
 Devant l'Ombre où tu veux que nous effacions,
 Je m'arrête un moment sur la route et je rêve:

Dieu de naguère, Dieu d'amour et de bonté,
 Ou Matière infinie et qu'un rythme pénètre,
 Ou Pensée apparue au sourd miroir de l'Etre
 Et qui prend son reflet pour le grande Clarte,

Substance universelle ou Raison souveraine,
 Vast Inconnue où tient mon sort, qui que tu sois,
 Force qui m'auras fait naître et mourir, — recois
 Dans l'humb'le vérité de cette heure sereine,

Recois en mon esprit, le plus fervent autel
 Où tremble encor la flamme auguste qui dévie,
 Au mystère ou bientôt aboutire ma vie
 Le consentment grave et tendre d'un mortel."

Although to him God remains unknown, yet Fernand opens his heart thus, in *Un Soir*:

".....
 Le soir est doux, ce soir, à plier les genoux,
 Dois- je en remercier un Dieu bon, qui sur nous
 Veille avec un amour paternellement tendre,
 Qui peut de quelque part nous voir et nous entendre,
 Et qui nous a conduits lentment, pas a pas,
 Et comme par la main ici ?... Je ne sais pas.

.....
 Je me sens dans le coeur d'une Chose inconnue...
 Je suis heureux. J'ignore ou je serai demain.

.....
 Dieu de jadis, Dieu juste et tendre infiniment,
 Ou nature cruel'e, et distraite un monent,
 Rien ne peut faire, o Force invisible u monde,

Fernand loves his family intensely and is also very sensitive to human misery:

Soupir

“Nuit immense et lactée, o tiède nuit de Juin,
Je te respire seul, à pas lents, sous les arbres,
En regardent le flot des soleils innombrables
Te traverser sans fin!
Coule en moi, pâle unit, verse-moi ta douceur,
Calme mon éternel chagrin, consolatrice!
Apaise de ton lait celeste le sang triste
Qui souffre dans mon coeur?”

and *Je Vis*

“.....
J’aime Decembre et Juin, les cyprès et les roses,
Les grands monts bleus, les humbles coteaux gris,
La rumeur de la mer, la rumeur de Paris.....
Bonnes, mauvaises, je ne sais:
Je vis, je vais, j’aime les choses.

Je vais aussi parmi des hommes et des femmes,
Et sous les fronts, dans les regards, je vois les âmes
Qui glissent en assaïms devant mes yeux ravis.
Le monde est comme un vol d’oiseaux d’ombre ou de
flamme
Que je verrais passer du haut des monts gravis.....
Des hommes m’ont fait mal, j’ai vu pleurer des femmes;
J’aime ces hommes et ces femmes:
Je vis.
.....
Mais à mon tour j’aurai connu le goût chaud de la vie;
J’aurai miré dans ma prunelle,
Petite minute éblouie,
La grande lumière éternelle;
Mais j’aurai bu ma joie au grand festin sacré;
J’aurai vecu,
Et je mourrai.”

Here, Fernand paints in fond words a realistic portrait of his mother’s

father, that Charles Bonnard who had been such a strong prop to lean on in time of need and whose books — La Petite Bibliothèque Nationale — amongst others, had helped Fernand so much to increase his knowledge:

“

Je regarde un portrait de toi, manqué naguère,
Un vieux cliché diffus et pâle de Daguerre,
Où tu te montres, mis à la mode du temps,
Avec des vêtements inspirés et flottants
Que semble encor gonfler l'orage romantique,
Les pans majestueux, la cravate empâtique,
Les cheveux savamment nég'iges sur la front,

Le menton doctrinaire et maigre qu'interrompt,
Somptueux, engonçant le cou jusqu'à l'oreille,
Un gilet qu'une chaîne interminable raye,
Et dans les traits cet air de rêveur à la nuti
Qu' avait légué Mil huit cent trente à Quarante -huite
.....”

and finally this apostrophe:

“ — Et je songe que maintenant, si tu vivais,
Tu serais devant moi sur la route où je vais,
Que tu m'approuverais de rêver une France
Plus tendrement penchée encor sur la souffrance,
Et que, voyant en moi ce que tu fus jadis,
Parfois tu sourirais, grave, à ton petit — fils.”

Fernand, in his poem *Féerie*, describes very vividly how the Muse enchanted him and swayed him along. Although I am no poet, I was so charmed by the magic of his verse that I got carried away and allowed myself to be diverted from the path I had been following, and to which it is time I return back.

Even during his secondary school days Fernand loved to read and to cultivate his mind; he also felt an attraction for verse writing which he had started doing pretty early in life. As I have said elsewhere, the good ear for music which he inherited from his parents, especially his father, stood him in good stead, as one can see easily by reading any of his poems for Fernand's verse is always melodious; and perhaps this also was the reason why he could appreciate Verlaine's works so keenly. His university life was rather short: he followed a course at La Sorbonne in Philosophy,

since at that time abstract thought enticed him, and carried on as well with the Sciences, especially Mathematics. Meantime, he was debating with himself about his future: whether he should follow in his father's footsteps or go in for journalism, really literary criticism and poetry. The time came when he had to weigh sincerely the progress he was making in his studies, and on finding that it was only middling, he decided to accept the job which had been offered him as Secretary to the Editor Paul Calmann, who at the time published the "Revue de Paris"; during his free time Fernand wrote poetry.

His first public contribution appeared in the literary review *Le Banquet*, of which he was one of the founders, when he was only 19 years old. Other contributors were Marcel Proust, Daniel Helévy, Robert de Flers, Jacque Bizet, Leon Blum, Henri Bergson, Gaston Arman de Cailavet, Henri Ribaud and Henri Barbusse; later in life some of these became quite famous, for instance, Proust, through his great work "A La Recherche du Temps Perdu", Leon Blum when he became Prime Minister of France and introduced so many social reforms, and Bergson who in 1927 won the Nobel Prize in Literature for his philosophical works such as "L'Evolution Creatrice". But it was Fernand's contribution published in *La Revue Blanc* on the symbolist poet Paul Verlaine, the author of "La Bonne Chanson" and "Sagesse" which opened to him the doors of his future career. In fact he thus addresses this man who, although a convert to catholicism, fell under the depraved influence of Arthur Rimbaud, became more erratic than ever, but remained, by choice, a son of the Church:

"Verlaine, clair de lune odorant des jardins,
Sanglots fous des jets d'eau pleurant dans la nuit vaine,
Femmes sur les vieux bancs, parfums frais de verveine,
Rires et longs baisers apres les fiers dédains:

Douce plaine de France ou les soleils divins
Mûrissent, lents, les blés et les raisins, ô plaine
D'où s'en viendront, à plein cellier, à buche pleine,
Les pains simples et bons et la gaité des vins.....

Oh! le pain fut la chair et le vin fu le sang
De Celui que la croix a tordu gémissant
Pour nos péchés, pour nos baisers, ô bien-aimée.....

Derrière les coteaux, écoute: au loin appelle,
Vers le parc plein d'amants rêveurs sous la ramée
Une cloche au son clair de petite chapelle.....

As one can rightly guess this exercise in literary appreciation as well as other contributions in the same line made it possible for Fernand to come into contact with many leaders of French thought and to move in literary, musical and political circles — a fact about which he is somewhat self-congratulatory. But this state of affairs had to be interrupted and to cease for a time, since he had to answer the call of duty as a loyal French citizen and do a period of military service. On the other hand, this meant a wider and deeper experience of life and thus made it possible for him to be true to human nature and its reactions, when writing poetry and when considering and weighing other people's efforts.

He was barely 23 years of age when he published his first book of poems — *La Maison de l'Enfance* — which introduced changes in the writing of poetry since in several instances it defied the rules of prosody — something which was considered a heresy by the literati of those days. He thus asserted the rights of the poet to be free from the shackles which hampered him in his lyrical flights.

It was at the insistence of Ludovic Halévy, a playwright, writer of novels and librettos (together with Meilhac he was the author of Bizet's *Carmen*) that Fernand entered his *L'Enfance* for the poetical competition held by the Académie Française..... and he won the coveted "Archon-Pespurouse" prize of 2,000 francs. Fernand's poems caused an upheaval amongst the judges of the Académie and a great controversy ensued between the conservative elements and those who were won over by the imagination of the poems and the beauty and musicality of the verse. Finally "Fernand's party" prevailed and the prize was awarded to him. This was the first time indeed that such an unbending institution had not only accepted, but rewarded, a poetical work which moved away from the sacred rules of French Prosody! Was this the beginning of a literary revolution?

I have already hinted that Fernand had to fend for himself in more ways than one; moreover, his health gave him a lot of trouble: ever since he was six years old he suffered from migraine, due to a poor digestive system. In the summer of 1897, he felt so ill, whilst swimming, that he had to be helped ashore. He was kept in bed under doctor's orders for a number of days during which he could eat nothing and drink very little, so much so that in six days he lost five kilos. On this period he makes the following remarks: "la jeunesse, l'amitié d'être nob'es et charmantes, l'amour d'une femme adorable — I cannot say who this beloved lady was, but I do not think that she was the Harlette Hayem whom he later married since in the *L'Age d'Or* he wishes "saluer d'un tendre souvenir une des plus adorables femmes qui aient jamais vécu" — la notoriété a un age

precoce; mais je n'avais pas la santé, le bien sans quel tous les autres ne sont rien". But he did not lose heart and carried on the good fight although life was "cruelle, qui mets toujours le ver dans le fruit, le grain de sable dans le miel, la maladie sous le plaisir,..... on t'aime, ô vie indéfinissable, ô mélange inextricable de bien et de mal, o chimere!" Naturally he took great care of his health and he succeeded to live to the ripe age of 87, a longish and fruitful life during which he never gave up writing, and publishing, sometimes using the pen-name of *Henri Chalgrain*.

I shall try later on to say a few words on his character, but here I wish to remark on the love he felt for mankind as this affected his public life: his great compassion for those who were worse of than himself; his tenderness for the deprived children — *les enfants nus* — as he calls them; the prisoners, even the depraved, for whom he had nothing but pity; his sorrow for the incurable, forever painfully stretched on their backs; sympathy for the young conscripts, the soldier and the sailor who may be out of luck; he even commiserated the poor silent beasts that tacitly obeyed and never rebelled. Yet when he considered this sordid and tormented side of life, with nothing to alleviate the pain and the deprivation, he did not despair and knew in his heart of hearts that life was not only wretchedness and misery; and he sang the privilege of being alive and as André Druelle says: "peu a peu se cristallise en lui le sentiment chrétien de l'existence de Dieu, prouve par le caractere humain de l'univers; l'homme, — l'intrus merveilleux de la terre — ne sera plus ce guerrier qui lançait, comme des fleches, a Dieu, ses pensees, il se perdra familièrement, humblement, dans le grand courant d'adoration des seves et des etres. Alors le poete de *La Gloire du Coeur* sera capable de s'identifier a l'abeille, filant sa petite plainte franciscaine, heureux de s'attarder a sentir dans le vent ses deux ailes fremir."

This encourages us to hope that at the end of his life Fernand found and accepted that God whom he felt in the depth of his heart, but denied in his mind, yet sought all through his life.

From what has been said so far, one can easily guess that Fernand's sentiments were rather leftist or socialistic: he was always a defender of the human rights of the luckless, of the poor, of the defenceless. He agreed with Zola as regards Dreyfus, became an active dreyfusard and worked incessantly until justice was done. He was also a lover of music and the stage, a worthy son of his father and he felt very proud that he met Sarah Bernhardt and Gabriel d'Annunzio in the salons to which he also was invited. He relates this amusing anecdote in connection with one of these receptions: at a dinner given in honour of the great Italian, to which Fernand was also invited, a lady, one of the guests, asked d'Annunzio

what he thought about love, and the latter tersely replied — “read my books and let me eat in peace.”

Although he moved amongst an intellectual elite, his humane tendencies urged Fernand to take active steps to relieve and mitigate the ignorance then prevailing especially amongst those who could not afford to pay fees for their education. He, therefore, held, or participated, in popular re-unions during which he generally declaimed some of his poems; he gave lectures and instructive talks on social and literary subjects. In 1899, together with Georges Clemenceau and Gabriel Seailles, and in the presence of Anatole France, he inaugurated in Paris at the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, the Popular University which became recognised as the “Mater Universitarum” of institutions of its kind; on that occasion he read his much felt poem “La Maison du Peuple”.

In time Fernand came to be recognised as a drama critic whose opinions were very weighty, a literary critic of value, especially as regards his books on Victor Hugo and also a poet of great merit for his melodious verse, its lyrical qualities and the philosophical thought behind it. In all his works we notice a serene and clear expression of ideas, of which there is never a dirth; an easy flight towards the beautiful, the idealistic, the romantic and the ethereal, yet tinged with the sad realism of life relieved by the loveliness of nature and the joy of living. All this stated in a harmonious juxtaposition of words and a delightful turn of phrase. In truth, one can assert boldly that had Fernand so wished he could have been a success in musical composition as much as he turned out to be in poetical writing.

Before proceeding to list Fernand's publications — those at least in book-form — one should not omit mentioning his many personal experiences as well as those which he shared with the rest of mankind — experiences to which he sensitively reacted and which therefore are reflected in his writings. His span of life covered a most interesting period in the world's history for indeed the many inventions and the technological developments had a considerable effect on society and gave a new meaning to human progress: the telephone, the telegraph and later on the wireless, the radio and television which penetrated the privacy of one's home, formerly considered one's impregnable castle, made communication easier between man and man in near and distant parts of the earth, indeed of the universe; the spread of ideas by means of the silent film, and later, by the talking picture became much quicker than had formerly been possible by means of the stage, which, in its turn, developed to reach much wider audiences; the sailing boat gave way to the steam and motor ship; the airship, aeroplane and helicopter made the world smaller; great wars were fought in which, or because of which, millions lost their life or

remained maimed due to the cruel development of lethal weapons culminating in the atom bomb which destroyed a city in a matter of seconds and left scars which are still unhealed; and the threat of more powerful weapons of war made mankind tremble for its future. On the other hand the developments in surgery and medicine made possible cures which in the past were considered existing only in the regions of fantasy. The "Third World" was born and Africa and Asia started to become themselves and to assert their rights. All these brought changes in the social life of whole nations, introduced new political ideas which caused revolutions and massacres, wars and destructions, but raised great hopes for a better future. God was denied existence, others died that the message of His Son may reach all. The Mahomedan still turned towards Mecca to worship God. The religious beliefs of the East were denied by many and still accepted by many more.

We must also consider his many journeys: his visits to England, Italy, Switzerland, the United States, Cuba and other countries, where he gave lectures, held courses and where he met famous people with whom he exchanged ideas, and where he admired wonderful natural scenery, visited museums and libraries and enjoyed food and company which varied from those of everyday life. Undoubtedly, this resulted in a greater understanding of man and a much wider and rounder culture. But in all his travels, Fernand never forgot the delicious fruits which some relatives, still resident in Malta, used to send to his father, nor the small island in the midst of the blue Mediterranean, *his* Mediterranean, the sea he loved most, which had been the birthplace of his ancestors whose memory he always treasured and for which he reserved a special nook in his heart. He thus writes:

Parfois, debout dans le chœur
S'une église d'Italie,
Son paganisme en folie
Réveille Malte en mon cœur.

Sous le romaine splendeur
Ma raison française p'lie,
Et, toute gêne abolie,
Je vais croire avec ardeur.

Oui, devant les puissants charmes
Que prend ici Dieu, les larmes
Des héréditaires fois

Montent du profond des âges
 Aux cent et mille visages
 Que j'eus dans l'île autrefois.....

All his life he had harboured the wish to visit the Island, but as he grew older his hope became fainter and fainter. This was one of his disappointments, and he says so in his letter in reply to a telegram of congratulations sent to him in the name of Maltese authors on his election to membership of the Académie Française.

Yet Fernand always and everywhere loved France: its unique Paris and its many provinces, each with a life of its own; but particularly he loved Paris and parisian life. In his old age he recalled the dream of his youth: to live for a time in each "quartier" of the city in order to understand its atmosphere and then interpret it to others — something which, to his knowledge, had never been attempted. But the softest niche was for the fresh and green hamlet of Boullainvilliers, on the outskirts of Paris, where he had his home and which reminded him of the French countryside in the provinces. This home Fernand loved very much, for apart from anything else, he felt it was still inhabited by the presence of his dear wife, Harlette, especially when a light wind blew amongst the tall elms and he imagined the soft rustlings of the leaves to be the fluttering of angels' wings. There, in the company of his dog, Copain, warm in the affection of his intimates, amongst the beautiful objects d'art, he and his wife collected during the years, especially the beautiful paintings which adorned his salon, and perhaps inspired by the spirit of the sickly Pierre Louys who had lived in the same hamlet for many a year, the poet and critic meditated, worked and wrote. (He loved also his summer — house near the forest at By and not far from the Jules Combes his "beaux — parents").

It is not possible for me to surmise what Fernand earned in money out of the various jobs he held, the royalties he got for his books of poems and other publications and what were his honoraria from lectures, courses and other activities; yet it is a good guess that financially he was not badly off. On the other hand, one is on sure ground if it is asserted that he made good and lasting friends in practically every walk of life. This could not have been otherwise because his was a very loveable disposition, affectionate towards his relatives and attached to them, especially his son and daughter Geneviève; he not only loved but respected his wife Harlette, daughter of a man of letters and godchild of Barbey d'Aurevilly and moreover, he esteemed her greatly for her "Jeunesse" and "Vertiges de New York". Towards his friends he showed great regard: he delighted in their success and sympathised with those who were less fortunate;

even towards his rivals, he was generous and always had a good word to say for them. Above all he was warm-hearted, but always serene and met the rebuffs of life with a calmness that one does not generally expect in a man who showed such lyrical passion in his poems. As I have said, his love of neighbour, especially those in the lowest level of society was great, and he went out of his way to do a kindness.

Yet he was pleased with himself and his success; and this he showed openly, especially in his reminiscences — mainly because it afforded him, the son of a “foreigner” to meet and make friends with the intellectual elite; indeed, he was proud of having been many a time a welcome guest in the salons of the great, where the highest in the various walks of life — artists, singers, musicians, composers, novelists, poets, critics, philosophers and scientists were invited and entertained and where they discussed the happenings of the day, the trends in artistic life, the new ideas in politics and the new schools of thought; or declaimed their poems, read passages from their works and in their turn entertained by their witty conversation. Thus he was proud to have been a friend of Marcel Proust, who with James Joyce and Thomas Mann is ranked amongst the greatest novelists of the 20th century; of Daniel and Ludovic Halévy; of Emile Zola; of Leon Blum; of Gaston Arman de Caillavert, of Henry Barbusse, Sarah Bernhardt and Gabriel d’Annunzio; of Aristide Briand and Alex Millerand to mention only a few. He was even very pleased when he received a letter from Mussolini to thank him when he stood up for the position taken by Italy in defence of her territorial claims after the end of World War I, even when his friend Clemenceau would not give way and stood firm against Italy’s Orlando. (I am sure that Fernand changed his views of Mussolini during the three sad years of Vichy where he lived in exile and anxiety.)

Like all those who are conscious of good work done, Fernand could not but be happy when his work was recognised and crowned with success. Some reach the apex when they are awarded, say, the Nobel Prize; others the Peace Prize. A Frenchman, I think, reaches the pinnacle of Olympus when he is elected a Member of the Académie Française. It is quite true that there have been rare cases when some well-known and deserving figure declined to accept such a reward or such an honour; but then there were generally very clear reasons: perhaps acceptance was made impossible by political authorities, or refusal was made in protest against some movement, political ideology, etc. when not for selfish reasons of self-dramatisation, as being above such praise reward or public acknowledgement. Fernand wanted and coveted such a prize, an award which crowned his efforts and acknowledged his merits: the election to the membership of the Académie Française.

For the Académie Française was founded by Cardinal Richelieu in 1635 to "labour with all care and diligence possible, to give exact rules to our language to render it capable of treating the Arts and the Sciences." Membership is restricted to forty men only, the *Forty Immortals*, supposed to be the most distinguished living Frenchmen of letters. Who is the Frenchman, indeed, anyone at all, who would not have been proud to be counted amongst such a company? And so was Fernand!

Yet, I have heard it said, but it might be mere hearsay, that in 1953 Fernand Gregh re-submitted — for he had done so in 1918, 1923, in 1946 and again in 1952, after the death of Marshal Petain, when Aldré François Poucet was elected — or allowed his name to be re-submitted for election to the Académie at the insistence of his admirer, Laurent Ropa, another man of letters, born in Gozo, and an emigré to France where, even during his life-time he was recognised as a novelist and a poet, and to whom Maltese authors owe a debt of gratitude for his translations into French of their works written in Maltese, thus drawing the attention of the world to their efforts and achievements. Whatever the truth may be, Fernand Gregh, who the year before had accepted his defeat so serenely, that on getting to know the result, went out to take part in a game of bowls, this time won hands down.

This election took place in January, 1953, to fill three seats vacated by Charles Maurras, René Grousset and the Count of Chanbrun; Fernand filled Chanbrun's place, the other seats being allocated to Pierre Gaxotte and the Duke of Levis-Merepoix, both well-known historians. As was the custom, the very same day that he was elected, Fernand gave a dignified and informative commemorative oration on the Member whom he had succeeded and to which Jules Romain suitably replied. At the time Fernand was eighty years old, and were it not that he continued to write, one could have said "finis coronat opus".

But this was not the first time that Fernand had been publicly honoured, apart from the appreciative comments published whenever any of his works saw the light of day. I think that it is here appropriate to mention the "homage a Fernand Gregh" given by *Les Cahiers Poétiques de Corymbe* of May-June, 1937, which published Fernand's poem "Anniversaire"; then a medal was also struck, bearing Fernand's face, to commemorate the prize awarded to him by the Académie Française in 1897; that same year he had also won the *Prix Palmars du Lycée Michelet* for "tres brillantes études qui furent couronnées par un premier prix de composition française au concours general". A year after his death an exhibition of his works was held at Lorent: the initiative was taken by Pierre Descaves, ex-President of the *Société des Gens de Lettres*, of which society Fernand, as well, had been elected President in 1949. André

Figueras, Fernand's great friend and admirer organised the exhibition with the help of Francois-Didier and Geneviève.

Before bringing this brief biographical note to an end, I shall mention some events in Fernand's life to which I have not yet alluded; this will be followed by a list of his publications.

- 1902 — Together with Marius and Ary Leblond founded the review *La Grande France*
- 1912 — Appointed drama critic of *La Liberté*
- 1921 — Appointed Director of *Comoedia*
- 1922 — Drama Critic of *Nouvelles Littéraires*
- 1926 — Inaugurated at La Sorbonne the *Chaire Victor Hugo*
- 1927 — LECTURED at Oxford on Victor Hugo
- 1930 — GAVE at London a Course on French Poetry
- 1936 — Directed at the Odeon *Les Amants Romantiques*
- 1949 — Directed at the Palais de Chaillot the play *Le Petit Poucet*
- 1949 — Elected President of *La Societe des Gens de Lettres*.

PUBLICATIONS

- 1896 — *La Maison de l'Enfance*, poemes, Calmann - Levy.
- 1900 — *La Beauté de Vivre*, poemes
- 1901 — *La Fenêtre Ouverte*, essais de critique, Fasquelle.
- 1902 — *Manifeste de l'Humanisme*, Le Figaro.
- 1904 — *Les Clartes Humanes*, poemes, Fasquelle - ouvrage couronne par l'Académie Francaise.
- 1904 — *Etude sur Victor Hugo*, Fasquelle — incorporating the "Manifeste de l'Humanisme."
- 1905 — *L'Or des Minutes*, poemes.
- 1908 — *Prelude Féérique*, un acte en vers, Mercure de France. Heugel.
- 1910 — *La Chaine Eternelle*, poemes, Fasquelle.
- 1917 — *La Couronne Douleureuse*, poemes sur la Guerre (1917), Fasquelle.
- 1919 — *Triomphe*
- 1923 — *Couleur de la Vie*, poemes, Flammarion.
- 1927 — *Choix de Poesies*, Fasquelle.
- 1933 — *La Gloire du Coeur*, poemes.
- 1933 — *Tableau de la Poesie Francaise*.
- 1933 — *La Contesse Noailles*.
- 1935 — *L'Ouvre de Victor Hugo*. Flammarion.
- 1936 — *Portrait de la Poesie Francaise au XIX Siecle*, Delagrave.
- 1937 — *Les Amants Romantiques*, piece en 5 actes et 1 prologue, en vers.

- 1938 — Portrait de la Poesie Francaise aû XX siecle, Delagrave.
 1939 — Histoire du Theatre Poetique en France depuis Beaumarchais.
 1940 — C'Etait l'Espagne, voyages.
 1945 — La Couronne perdue et retrouve, Falmmarion.
 1947 — L'Age d'or, souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse, Grasset.
 1950 — Theatre Féerique - Nagel.
 1951 — L'Age d'airain, Grasset.
 1953 — Victor Hugo, sa vie, son oeuvre.
 1953 — Discours de reception de Fernand Gregh a l'Académie Francaise et response de J. Romains.
 1955 — L'Age de fer, Grasset.
 1957 — Le Mot du Monde, poemes, Nage!
 1958 — Mon amitiê avec Marcel Proust - souvenirs et lettres inedites.

Others have written in appreciation of Fernand's poetry and his other works. Undoubtedly, he acquired a well-deserved reputation as an acute and discerning drama critic and as a brilliant literary scholar, but allow me to hazard that, in French Literature, Fernand will live as a poet, for in all his poems, his sensitive soul, avid for the "Gloire du coeur", happy in "le privilege de vivre" and fee'ing the "elans spir'ituel de l'etre vers Dieu", responds, in lyrical flights of great symbolist beauty and franciscan simplicity and sweetness but full of musical incantations, to insp'rations palpitating with life, which, like the nectar collected by the bee, were the result of his concrete experiences; of these there were some which had to him a more intimate meaning, such as nature in its various manifestations of form and perfume in flowers, trees and shrubs; the sea, especially "les rives de la Mediterranée de ses ancestres", "la nostalgie de l'azur d'autrefois" and "la Seine maternelle." But besides being a poet, Fernand was also a philosopher, "l'Analyste lucide", and therefore his poetry is enveloped in metaphysical speculation, and he is always asking questions to which his soul replies, not always satisfying the intellect, but only that craving for more intimate know'edge of life and its Creator and the very human desire for eternal rest and happiness in the lap of God,

"..... le Saint des Saints de toutes les Sions,
 L'innombrable foyer des adorations,
 Le point d'azur qui brule au coeur de toute flamme!

 Dieu qui regnez partout où palpitent des etres,

 O vous qu' on cherche encor quand on vous a trouvé!"

Fernand died on January 5th, 1960, when he had reached the venerable age of 87 years; his wife had preceeded him, but his daughter, Geneviève, his son Francois-Didier and his daughter-in-law, his "chère Adé" were near his bed to comfort him. He died loved by his relatives and many friends and mourned by his admirers.

I hope that this exercise will be a spur to those amongst us, lovers of things French, but especially of French Literature, to make a much more detailed study of the work of these two worthy sons of France in whose veins runs our red Maltese blood.

Please note: Since writing the above, I have learned the following, which to me seems worth recording:

1. Calcedonio, Fernand's grandfather and the son of Rosario and Maria Grech (sic in the Baptismal Register of the Parish Church of Lija) was born at Lija on Sept. 2, 1816; his wife, Marguerite, was the daughter of Fortunato and Grazia Mizzi, and was also born at Lija on June 9, 1814.
2. Harlette Hayem, Fernand's wife was a Jewess; her mother passed to second marriage with Jules Combes.
3. Geneviève — called *Lela* by her intimate relatives — was born on June 15, 1904; in October, 1935, she married Maurice Droun, the present Minister of Culture and a great friend and political associate of President Pompidou. In 1938, following in her father's footsteps, she became a broadcaster with the "Union Radiophonique International" and continued in that employment after the end of the war until 1969.
During the war, she first accompanied her family to Vichy from where, together with her mother, she escaped to Spain over the Pyrenees and where they were kept in a concentration camp. After Francois-Didier's escape to Tangiers, she also escaped and reached Morocco, where she joined the Resistance. She died on March 3, 1973.
4. Fernand Gregh went back to Paris and lived there on his own till the end of the war, when he was decorated by General Eisenhower for the help he had given to a good number of Jews.