

OLIVER FRIGGIERI (1947-2020): POET, CRITIC AND EDUCATOR

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When I discussed with Oliver Friggieri the inclusion of his much-loved collection of poems *Mal-fanal hemm ħarstek tixgħel: poeżiji, 1961-1988* (Your face lights up next to the lamplight: Poems, 1961-1988), chosen by Toni Cortis and published in 1992, in a national syllabus for 16 to 18 year old students studying Maltese language and literature, he was adamant: he would only accept on condition that ‘Biljett ta’ Suwiċida’ (1979), translated by Peter Serracino Inglott as “A Suicide’s Card,” was left out. The book had already been in this syllabus in the past and the poem had not been left out. It was also one of the 29 poems Philip Farrugia Randon, a personal friend of the poet, had chosen out of hundreds, to include in his readings of Friggieri’s poems published in a CD album.

To be honest, I had seen this coming. “Biljett ta’ Suwiċida” was one of his memorable poems that he had repudiated in his later life. When people mentioned it to him, he would react almost with disgust. Despite his eloquence, he would struggle to find words to describe his disdain for that poem. Or rather, he was at a loss not so much because he did not have the words to express himself on the matter but because he refused to put it into words, so great was his emotional discomfort.

To me and to many others who had read and listened to his poems over the years and who viewed this poetic “suicide note” as an integral part of his repertoire,

Oliver's decision was something we had to come to terms with. When Oliver Friggieri emerged as a soft spoken but hard hitting rebel with a cause in the 1980s, I was at precisely the same age of those students he was determined to protect from his first novel *L-Istramb (The Misfit)* and some of his darker poems. He became a leading public intellectual and a writer who had the words and the audacity to articulate our angst as ultimately solitary and insignificant human beings struggling to come to terms with an indifferent universe.

At that historical juncture, Friggieri also offered his deeply disturbing interpretation of our experience as a community, as a nation. He was deeply troubled by the "fratricidal" conflicts and the pettiness within Maltese society, more so because, as a Romantic at heart, he never subscribed to the view that the nation is an imagined community. Although as a highly perceptive literary critic he was fully aware that the Romantics created a national mythology, he never understood the nation as an act of fiction, or myth. He sought to influence the national narrative but refused to equate the "nation" with "narration." I was one of those many young men and women who were moulded by his metaphors and turns of phrase. They had seeped into our language and consciousness, at first surreptitiously, and shaped important aspects of our understanding of our lives as individuals and as members of a "national community."

So the fact that in his later years Oliver Friggieri distanced himself from some of the works that had influenced me most was something that I couldn't ignore. In our youth, but also in our adult life, many of us are fascinated by suicide. We find the stories of writers who take their own life gripping and there are moments in our lives when we identify with their despair. We read poems like "Biljett ta' Suwicida" as honest explorations of those same feelings that we have. Many of us find solace in

that honesty. We appreciate the confession, the declaration of weakness. In many ways it is healing.

In his later years, however, Oliver Friggieri the father, the grandfather, the educator who spent many hours of his days listening to the troubled stories of young people who sought his counsel, became acutely aware of the influence of his words on his readers. And this probably led him to question the wisdom of exposing young people to the theme of suicide. Whether he was right to repudiate these works is not the point here. The Oliver Friggieri we have celebrated in the days and weeks following his passing away on the 21st of November 2020 at the age of 73 is not only a great public intellectual and “voice of the nation,” as many have described him, but also an inspiring teacher who devoted much of his life to his students and to all those who wrote to him and asked to meet him to talk about the things that mattered most to them.

His decision to shield students preparing for adulthood from his poetic “suicide note” raises important questions about our role as writers and educators. Many writers are also teachers; many teachers are writers. There is no denying that these roles can come into conflict with each other. Professional educators can use literature to discuss very sensitive issues in the relatively safe environment of school and help their students deal with them in healthy ways. But the writer is not that kind of educator. It would be insincere of us to deny that literature “educates” us, but it does so in other ways. Writers are not teachers.

In an extraordinary graduation speech, he gave as a leading academic at the University of Malta in 1991, months before the publication of his iconic collection of poetry, he talked about what he had learnt from his students: their honesty, their commitment to social change and the protection of Malta’s natural environment and cultural heritage. But he also exhorted

the graduands to sow poetry in a country that was becoming increasingly monotonous and soulless, to meet in public spaces and recite the poems that uplift us. He asked them to question, to doubt and to criticize, to refuse to wade in the “stagnant waters” of Maltese society, to treat words with the utmost respect denied them by our inconsiderate society. He urged them to tell it as it is and to fear no one and nothing but their own conscience.

This is the totally honest Oliver Friggieri that I will always cherish and that will remain with us even now that he has left us; the poet, father and educator that had such a profound influence on me as a student and as a person, but also on an entire nation; the sensitive human being who always sought to make the lives of those around him better.