Review of *Rakkmu* by Paul Xuereb
(*The Sunday Times*, Malta, 21 January 2007)

'LOOK IN THY HEART, AND WRITE'

Adrian Grima: *Rakkmu* (poeżiji 1995-2005) Klabb Kotba Maltin.
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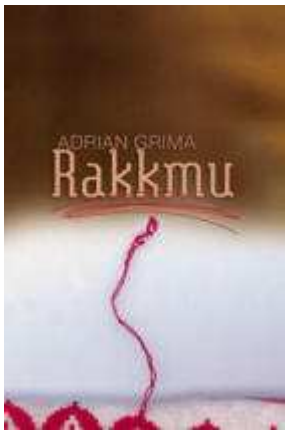

We have much to be grateful to Adrian Grima for his continual efforts to bring to our attention the achievements of Malta's New Wave writers, and at the same time making connections with writers in other countries, both in the Mediterranean region and beyond. One of his principal collaborators in Inizjamed, Clare Azzopardi (whose *Il-Linja l-Ħadra* I reviewed in these columns last month) has very recently reminded readers of this paper's sister paper about how much more this country can do to help its authors to become known well beyond our tiny shores such as by subsidizing translations into foreign languages and bringing our literature to the knowledge of international conferences and book fairs. I have little doubt that authors like Grima and Azzopardi, and a number of others associated or not with Inizjamed, including a number of fine older writers, could create a foreign readership if they were represented in good translations, of which at the moment there are far too few, and if such translations were distributed and marketed professionally abroad.

Grima's poems in the present volume, which cover ten years of his literary activity, show him developing from the young man newly in love with his wife and enchanted by the intellectual curiosity of his infant children to a maturer man forced by his country's environmental horrors on the one hand and that same country's often disturbing behaviour towards illegal immigrants on the other hand, to adopt a political stance and to speak up against the greed of the money-makers and brutal breaches of human rights.

Throughout the poems we have here, however, Grima manifests his talent for the concrete, his ability to make the reader see a person, whether a child or a political activist in Palestine, or capture an emotion in material terms. In the love poems occupying the first section, there are particularly felicitous lines, such as "Ħallejt ġenbejk fuq ruħi", said by his lover after love-making, in which the concrete and the spiritual fuse admirably together, while in one of the "political" poems, an African immigrant is depicted graphically as he tries to speak Maltese: "Jitlaqlaq fil-konsonanti ż-żgħar, Joseph, / bil-vojt marsus

bejniethom jidwi f'rasu,/ U jistħi mill-ħsejjes li jlissen, jgħidli / qishom platti jċekċku f'daqqa f'lejl ħati."

It is this loving depiction of humans and things, this constant attempt to capture the spirit through appearance, that make his poetry, and more especially his poems about suffering foreigners, so moving.

This vividness, sometimes a piling of vivid imagery, puts his love poetry, despite its simplicity and frequent directness, apart from traditional love poetry. Short pieces like "Jekk tridni" and "Spazji oħra" hit the reader's emotions hard as they summon up a moment that would have disappeared for ever had it not been crystallized so well in the writer's images.

Grima empathises not just with the lot of the clandestine immigrants but also with those of his countrymen who live on the periphery of society, like the sick and the drug-takers who queue up daily for their pills at the hospital dispensary, while cars drive desperately round the nearby roundabout unlike the night which seems to dominate that area, "roundabout bit-toroq magħluqa." His heart even goes out to the lonely people waiting longingly for the postman to deliver a letter "to break the morning's monotony", and do not stop waiting even when they know the postman has already gone past.

A number of Grima's pieces are written in a poetic, but never sickly, prose. "Possibilitajiet ikkumplikati" is one of the most successful of this group with its lyrical evocation of himself and his young sons blowing soap bubbles, magical worlds they create only to see them travel swiftly away and disappear. The first paragraph is especially good with its subtle use of rhyme to bind the prose together.

Of the poems inspired by experiences in other lands, "Dubrovnik" is most memorable. Those who have visited that enchanting city will remember the swallows flying low and swooping down in the narrow streets. For Grima, they are frantic spirits that never cease to commemorate the hideous damage wrought by the Serbs to the famous walls of the city, a lament that never ceases for wounds that will forever be felt, despite the excellent restoration the walls have received.

As a lover of his country, he is appalled at the way in which politicians have forgotten the fervour of yesteryear and allowed the country to submit to creeping destruction. In one of his bitterest poems, "B'idejna", he depicts his embarrassment when the national anthem is being played. What is he to do with his hands as he stands to attention? Perhaps, he says, he should cover his eyes and block his ears at the same time.

Grima is becoming an adept in the writing of epigrammatic verse of a sarcastic nature, such as "Djalogu" and "Mhux vera." In the former he writes "Id-djalogu ġo Malta jsir bil-gaffa / u jdum sakemm ilestu mit-tħaffir / id-diskussjoni ssir bis-safety helmet / biex ħadd ma jisma' l-beraq tat-tkissir." Truly a memorable comment not just on discussion about the building industry in Malta, but also about public discussion in general.

Grima closes the collection with a fine collection of poems about his experiences in Palestine and his relationship with people from that country who have visited Malta. "Look in thy heart, and write" wrote a great English poet [Philip Sidney], and in many of the verses in this section, Grima's emotional as well as his intellectual engagement shines brightly.