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The Political Relevance of Dun Karm, the National Poet of Malta: A Stand beyond Partisanship

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Abstract

The role played by Dun Karm, Malta's national poet, in the gradual reconstruction of Malta's claim of being a nation, far transcends the strict confines of poetry in particular, and of literature in general. His ability in fusing into one unique whole the Semitic and the Latin components of Maltese identity transcended politics and managed to establish in a relatively short span of time a sound vision of the island as worthy of achieving independence, and eventually of being recognised by all nations as a republic. This account seeks to identify the influence on political parties exerted by Dun Karm through his works and of proposing a vision of Malta which naturally integrated the Semitic and the Latin segments.

Keywords

maltese, arabic, italian, identity, poetry, politics

1. A Land in Search of Recognition

It was Malta's fascinating and colourful history that made Malta a much sought after resort for whoever seeks a glimpse of a place where past and present habitually go hand in hand. A small national community, which also includes a diaspora of Maltese living in several countries across the world numbering thousands, is now recognised for its uniqueness achieved largely through sheer dint of hard work by the literary class, Much of it dates back from the late nineteenth century and then going well into the Sixties of the twentieth century when the island achieved its Independence from Britain in 1964.

Dun Karm Psaila (1871-1961), commonly known as Dun Karm, rates, as the national poet, foremost amongst the more prominent interpreters of the island's run up to statehood. He notably helped identify the island's main distinctive features—namely, the island's long and uninterrupted religious tradition,

the Maltese language, the ancient heritage cast in stone, Malta's benign climate, and the warm approach of the inhabitants towards foreigners. All this he transformed into poetic modalities which were also intended to assume a political meaning. In providing a cultural definition of the country Dun Karm sought to convey a clear message to the institutions involved in the constitutional development of a British colony on the way to achieving independence.

2. A Poetic Definition of Malta: "Small and Enchanting"

Three tiny islands make up the Maltese archipelago. There is first the main island of Malta and then there are the two other offshore islands—Gozo and Comino. All lie smack in the middle of the Mediterranean some 100 kilometres south of Sicily and 288km off the North African coast.

Malta covers a footprint of around 246 kilometres. Numerous harbours, low hills and sandy beaches characterise the island's topography. The island's archeological patrimony dates back to some 7000 years long before Abraham settled in Hebron and some 5,000 year before Christ walked on earth. Malta's renowned megalithic temples are the oldest free standing stone buildings in the world (Renfrew, 1986). The Hypogeum is an early example of the fusion of a people's culture with religion. An interesting feature also found on the island is what is commonly known as "the cart tracks". These are commonly assigned to the Bronze Age but remain largely unexplained.

All of this make up some of the more salient secure points of reference in the "poetic" definition of Malta as a "small and enchanting", "tiny and complete" nation. The basic figurative language characterizing Maltese poetry, in both the Maltese and English languages, largely anticipate the political diction of the two post-war outstanding political leaders, Gorg Borg Olivier, who lead the Christian Democratic Nationalist Party and his rival, Oxford educated Dom Mintoff who for decades lead the island's Labour Party. The language deployed in the political rivalries between both leaders over how Independence from Britain was to be achieved was latched to a purely traditional literary diction. Words like "omm" (mother), "helwa" (sweet), "għaqda" (unity), "sliem" (peace) are examples of how literary figurative language contributed towards the formation of a common emotional approach to the political impasse dominating the opposing political arguments until Malta eventually won its Independence. Henry Frendo gives detailed accounts and interpretations of this formative period in most of his fundamental works, including *Lejn Tnissil ta' Nazzjon* (1971), *Ir-Rivoluzzjoni Maltija tal-1919* (1970), *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony: the Maltese Experience* (1979).

The identity of early Malta was shaped by the Phoenicians, the Carthaginians, and the Romans. The arrival of the Phoenicians accounts for the introduction of writing. St Paul's shipwreck in Malta in 60 A.D., recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, then gave birth to a strong Christian tradition that survives still. In 1798 Napoleon invaded Malta and forced the Order of St. John to leave. The uprising of the Maltese against their French occupants led to the British blockade. Malta asked for British protection in

1802 until in 1814 it was annexed to Britain under the Treaty of Paris. Eventually the island achieved its independence from Britain in 1964, and became a republic in 1979.

The Arabs who ruled Malta between 870 and 1090 were succeeded by the Normans and then by the Order of St. John of Rhodes and Jerusalem. The Knights of Malta bequeathed to future generations a wealthy architectural heritage still evident all over the island.

This also explains why the stone, in both literature and politics assumes such great importance not only but also in its symbolical sense. For example the semantic field of the verb “bena” (to build) is quite frequently evoked by both writers and politicians. The native tongue of the whole community, Maltese, goes back to the Arabic period (870-1090). It is the only national language in Europe which belongs to the Semitic family, and is written in the Latin script. Maltese is formally recognised as the sole national language of Malta, whereas Maltese and English are both official languages (*Constitution of the Republic of Malta*, Chapter I, 5, (1), (2)).

Set against this background, the contribution of a major poet like Dun Karm can be better understood as being an equally political and artistic cornerstone of life on the island; the underlying motive is driven by need to construct political action built on an awareness that is cultural, mainly historical. This accounts for the fact the past is constantly being cited as the benchmark for any eventual renewal.

Dun Karm interpreted contemporary Malta through the apparently imaginative revival of long gone historical phases, mainly the shipwreck of St. Paul in 60 A.D., the presence of the Order of Saint John (1530-1798), and the uprising of the Maltese against the French (1798-1800). It is not paradoxical at all that in times of political turmoil this tiny British colony was already discussing nationhood. Any eminent author could then still at the same time favour the Italian tradition whilst publicly professes his respect for the British Empire. One could also at the same time discover the Maltese language as the most efficient way of lifting the national spirit by seeking greater sovereignty.

The gradual recognition of the Maltese language by the authorities from 1934 onwards was a political landmark rather than a literary success. By the early twenties of the last century Dun Karm had already acquired national recognition. Although he firmly resented involving himself in politics he did get somewhat embroiled in the political debate of the day when he decided to start writing also in Maltese (a step vehemently resented by the pro-Italian segment of the Maltese intelligentsia). He also backed certain political developments. In a text held at the Archives and Rare Books Section of the University of Malta (216a/v/2), he recalls his direct involvement in the organisation of the new national day festivity. The 1921 general elections had secured a victory for the Unione Politica Maltese led by Joseph Howard (1862-1925). The newly elected Prime Minister invited Dun Karm to his office and asked him to write for him an appeal to the Maltese people in Italian, which then could be translated into English and Maltese. The speech had to stress the importance of history and a national identity. Dun Karm, a timid person instinctively unaware of his genius, told the Prime Minister he had never

participated in politics and was not sure he could accomplish such a task. The Prime Minister reiterated that he purposely chose him, a man above politics who enjoyed the respect of the whole nation.

In a letter from the office of the Prime Minister, dated 9 September 1922, also held by the Malta University's Archives and Rare Books Section (216a/V/3), Howard once again expressed his admiration towards Dun Karm: "I have the honour to convey to you an expression of the thanks of the Government for the able manner in which you drafted the Appeal to the People of Malta which was issued on the occasion of the Anniversary of the 8th September".

Within three months Dun Karm was to become the author of the national anthem, six verses set to music by Robert Samut. Dun Karm's collaboration with the Prime Minister was to for some time. Apart from Joseph Howard, Prime Minister between October 1921 and October 1923, his last successor, Francesco Buhagiar too showed similar admiration and confidence in the poet (Friggieri, 2014).

3. A Symbol of National Identity

Which party did Dun Karm side with in the early twenties of the twentieth century? Was he pro-British or Pro-Italian? What did he mean in the thirties when he said that he loved both Italy (for its artistic prominence) and Britain (for its democratic tradition), but not so much as he loved Malta, his "only mother"?

Dun Karm Psaila was soon to start being universally known simply as Dun Karm, which was how he signed his works. Dun Karm remains one of the few non-political personalities who succeeded in malding the nation's way of thinking. It happened to a great extent after his death, as one generation after the other held high their respect for his remarkable and convincing vision of the country's future.

Several politicians adopted a phraseology which is unmistakably his. Professor A. J. Arberry of Cambridge University recalls his impressions of Dun Karm after visiting him in November 1957:

"It seemed to me then, at a time when I had read only a few of his Maltese poems, that this was a poet of more than local importance; his art and his message must reach the world, to which they truly belonged... As I read more and more of his writings, and penetrated deeper and deeper into his spirit, I became increasingly convinced of his greatness" (Arberry, 1961, p. 7).

This is perhaps more applicable today when the apparent simplicity of his verse has grown into an expression of what the complexity of contemporary life makes people seek. Local politicians, like Dom Mintoff, Eddie Fenech Adami, Guido de Marco have shown by their choice of phrases, adjectivisation and emotional intensity of a patriotic nature, Dun Karm's influence on them. Mintoff's political slogan "Malta l-ewwel u qabel kollox" (Malta first and foremost) is typically Dun Karm-esq. So is Fenech Adami's insistence on the idea of "aħwa Maltin" (Maltese brothers/sisters) and "flimkien" (together), and of Joseph Muscat's choice of the key-phrase "Malta tagħna lkoll" (Malta belongs to all of us). Even the revival of the word "ġens" (derived from Arabic: "gans") is owed to the poet which he chooses in

preference of the word “razza” (race), “nazzjon” (nation) and “poplu” (people), possibly considered by him too prosaic, colloquial and sectarian to imply that the sacrality of the concept of nationhood is clearly understood to be a nation’s further stage of maturity. Such a pure style adds to the conviction that even Semitic Maltese could convey the right message with the elegance of ,say, Italian. In the introduction to his own translation of Ugo Foscolo’s *I sepolcri*, he compares the strained but equally functional relationship between Italian and Maltese to a human couple of uneven social status (Friggieri, 1986, pp. 255-256).

4. The Political Dimension

There is little related to Malta which is not immediately political and partisan. All public utterances, in both Maltese and English, are politically loaded, and evoke colours in terms of their partisan connotation. They all imply allegiance, a sense of belonging to a party. That involves half of the whole community on each side since duality, or at least its perception, explains one characteristic of being Maltese- or rather Mediterranean. Support for one party or the other has been accepted for decades as dualistic since most people support either the Labour or Nationalist parties. Allegiance to political parties is not the only instance of duality and similar examples can be found in the country’s social fiber.

This approach to life is structurally reflected in the language, where twoness is frequently the only form through which plurality is expressed. It can all be summed up in such a phrase: there is the Self and there is the Other. Dun Karm’s long narrative poem, *Il-Jien u lil hinn Minnu*, is an allegorical exposition of the belief life is meant to be transcended, rather than lived. The title of the poem is normally translated as “The I and beyond It”, meaning that Reality should lead to the discovery of Truth, or in Platonic terms, that the world of Objects implies the world of Ideas (Friggieri, 1988, pp. 1-16).

An empirical, historical interpretation is also plausible: it is simply a hypothetically “genetic” condition due to the fact that people are born within one of the two major parties, a condition preceding personal decisions. Hence the poet’s constant insistence on the need of national unity (“għaqda”, unity, “lkoll”, all, “flimkien”, together, are some of the more frequently chosen key-words) emanates from a concern which is equally moral and political. In *Lill-Bandiera Maltija* (To the Maltese Flag) he deplores the possibility of having blue or green added to the two colours, white and red, which are alone the authentic components of the Maltese flag:

Hekk, bajda u ħamra biss irridek jiena,
 Bandiera helwa ta' din l-art hanina,
 ...
 Hekk, bajda u ħamra biss; kull lewn barrani
 Li jithallat ma' lwienek, ikun blù,
 Jew ikun aħdar, .ihassarlek ismek.
 So do I want you, only white and red,
 Sweet flag of this kind land,
 ...
 So, only white and red, any foreign colour
 Added to your colours, whether blue
 Or green, will ruin your name.

The known denotation of blue and green is national, since they refer metonymically to Britain and to Italy respectively. The Maltese flag, made up of white and red equally spread over the whole space, only needs to have blue (namely, a third British component) or green (a third, Italian one) added to it to make it lose its dignity. Yet, through their connotation they are also understood in partisan terms, since Maltese culture, eminently Mediterranean, typically Southern, identifies colours with ethical attitudes, such as allegiance and continuity. Published in 1946, *Lill-Bandiera Maltija* clearly reflects Labour leader Dom Mintoff's proposal to integrate the island with Britain, and the Nationalist leader Enrico Mizzi's claim that Malta was Italian and consequently deserved to be annexed to the peninsula. Seen in such a perspective, the more important works of the war and the post-war periods seem to be consistently intended to strengthen the collective sense of nationhood. Eventually his influence reached leading politicians vigorously nurturing opposite views. In encouraging unanimity at all levels, he made people consider the cause of Malta as a family affair. As evinced in the *Innu Malti*, the national family is metaphorically conceived as follows: God ("Alla") is the father of the country ("art"), the country is the mother ("omm"), and the citizens are the sons and daughters ("ulied"). The key-words of the whole of the poet's political works are somehow summarised, reduced to the essential few, in the national anthem, the figurative content and the social message of which he had long exploited to the full in previous instances. (These poems have some of the more important examples of such intertextuality: *Innu lil San Filippu ta' Aggira*, *Il-Milied*, *Għanja ta' Malti fl-Amerka*, *Lil Malta*, *Wara Hamsa u Ghoxrin Sena*, *L-Ewwel Xita*, *Malta Ġawhra tal-Mediterran*).

Lil Malta (To Malta) is a significant political statement published in 1939 when the havoc caused by the Second World War could lead Britain to take hasty, and irrevocable decisions. It is written in the form of a Petrarchan sonnet, the most eminent amongst all of the poetic genres of the Italian literary tradition. Of the seventy words constituting the whole sonnet in Maltese only two are non-Semitic,

namely Romance, derived from Italian (“azzar”, steal, and “poezija”, poetry). A subtle understatement pervades the whole poem, the central theme of which is complete loyalty towards one’s motherland. In spite of spending many years expressing himself exclusively in Italian, he felt himself utterly and completely Maltese throughout this period (1889-1912). The preference of words of Semitic origin to others, derived mainly from the Sicilian and Italian languages, may suggest that he intended also to prove that the traditionally underestimated vernacular was resourceful enough, in both vocabulary and syntactic structures, to express whatever made a language like Italian so prestigious. He admitted that much when translating Ugo Foscolo’s *I sepolcri* (Dun Karm, 1936, pp. 9-11).

The two quatrains (constituting the octave of the Italian sonnet) manifest his “imħabba” (love) towards Italy and Britain, both personified as women. The first one signifies the original source of Malta’s cultural tradition, whereas the second evokes the cause of the smooth introduction of democracy and civil law in Malta. In this manner Dun Karm employs his resourceful imagination to prudently appeal to the political parties to be mutually grateful and appreciative. The volta, a sudden twist in mood and content, occurs precisely at the very opening of the septet, six highly emotional lines in which Dun Karm sums up the essence of all his feelings. He seeks the middle stand between the two extremes, summing up in four simple words his own personal position within the complex political situation prevailing in the post-war period. The achieved historical compromise sounds like a political party’s slogan regarding foreign policy: excellent relations, prompted by solid admiration, should be maintained with both Britain and Italy, whilst Malta should be preferred over both. He thus addresses personified Malta: “Izda daqshekk lil ħadd”—but (I love) none as much as (I love) you:

Izda daqsek lil ħadd, o Malta tiegħi,
 Għax int biss ommi, inti tajtni l-isem,
 U għadmek għadmi u demmek jigri miegħi.
 Daqsek lil ħadd, għaliex jekk inti żgħira,
 Setgħetek huma kbar fir-ruħ u l-gisem,
 U għmielek sa fil-kbar nissel il-għira.
 But none as much as you,
 Because only you are my mother, you gave me my name,
 And your bones are my bones and your blood runs through me.
 None as much as you, for if you are small,
 Your skills are great in soul and body,
 And your beauty caused envy even in the big ones.

Throughout the years when the Language Question reached higher peaks of controversy Dun Karm was in a sense politically involved in sideline politics—through his poetry then a genre very far from being considered innocent, innocuous and purely literary. Poems like *L-Innu tal-Haddiema* (1912), *Għanja*

ta' Malti fl-Amerka (1923), *Il-Għanja tar-Rebħa* (1927), *Għasel Malti* (1928), *Malta Ġawhra tal-Mediterrran* (1928), *Fil-Mużew* (1929), *Lil Mikiel Anton Vassalli* (1933), *Lil Malta ta' Llum u ta' Għada* (1934), *Il-Għanja tal-Lsien Malti* (1939), *Lil Malta* (1939), *Lil Malta—wara l-ġieħ tal-George Cross* (1942), are all examples of a consistent trend with regards to Malta's ambition to achieve independence. Whilst attempting to strike a middle course, he never failed to derive a universal moral principle from specific events. The essential fact in this respect is the compromise he strove for between two apparently mutually exclusive choices: favouring the pro-independence movement and being loyal to the British government. Consistently developing his definition of Malta in romantic terms, he counselled for a totally peaceful approach at all levels. In 1935 he published *Lill-Bandiera Ingliza* (To the British Flag), an explicit declaration of admiration and loyalty towards the British Empire. The two countries, Malta and Britain, are portrayed metaphorically: Britain is a "sultana" (queen), and Malta an "omm" (mother).

Dun Karm never forgot his rural origin. His sense of awe and reverence with regards to nature is unflinching. He remains deeply rooted in his religious conviction. Environmental awareness is for him instinctive. This is evident in how local flora and fauna form part of his complex impression of the island. An unsurprising expression of admiration of the Maltese landscape is eventually translated into giving shape to his innermost existential anxieties. Various features of contemporary Existentialism, ranging from Kierkegaard's anguish to Sartre's sense of absurdity, became evident in scale and scope in a period of his life which reached its peak with *Il-Jien u lil Hinn Minnu* (1938). Numerous poems, such as *Il-Ġerrejja u Jien* and *Žagħżuġh ta' Dejjem*, both published in 1933, offer other valid examples of this attitude.

The fact he wrote extensively and exclusively in Italian from 1889 to 1912 implied that he inherently had Nationalist Party tendencies. When he started to express himself in Maltese in 1912 he qualified himself to be considered a supporter of Gerard Strickland and Paul Boffa, leaders of the Constitutional Party and the Labour Party respectively. He risked tarnishing his objective reading of events even though he was much afraid of being identified with one single party at the exclusion of others. Notwithstanding, his numerous periodic declarations constitute an almost complete chronicle of his times. His choice in favour of Maltese, a Semitic language, also nearly earned him the accusation of his being "anti-Catholic" since it implied the abandonment of Italian, an offshoot of Latin, the tongue of Rome, the centre of Catholicism (Pi, 1934, p. 1). Numerous prejudices seemed all logical in the early decades of the twentieth century. In actual fact Dun Karm went on writing in Italian for much longer after his "discovery" of Maltese in 1912. He was then reluctant only to go on publishing in Italian, due to partisan considerations. Still writing in both languages continued to be for him normal behaviour. The question remains whether he was a Nationalist or a Strickland or a Boffa supporter. Very likely he supported all and none (Friggieri, 2011, pp. 14-18).

When it comes to politics, it remains difficult to conclude whether he was a Labourite (the Anglo-Maltese connection) or a Nationalist (the pro-Italian choice). His personality has been analysed thoroughly but a plausible conclusion seems elusive. His “ambiguity” makes him what he is, the most representative voice of a tiny ancient nation which till recently still needed to be defined in terms of itself and of its regional character.

5. A Romantic Interpretation of Nationhood

When the first Parliament of the Maltese colony assembled in 1921, Dun Karm felt the need of expressing his joy as well as of exposing his interpretation of that historical moment. Britain was going through a fundamental change regarding the way in which Imperialism was gradually morphing into what became the Commonwealth (Laferla, 1938). Malta, on the other hand, was steadily moving towards greater autonomy. The greater source of dissent and conflict, however, concerned the question of Maltese ethnic identity, frequently answered in terms of language. The certitude that the derivation of Italian from Latin could provide an analogous answer (namely, the Maltese are Italian) was in direct conflict with the conviction that Maltese is derived from Punic (namely, the Maltese are Phoenician). The misconception of the Punic origin of Maltese was an effort “in the search for the deepest roots of national identity” (Brincat, 2011, p. 28). Words like “indipendenza” (independence), “repubblika” (republic), “sovranià” (sovereignty), “libertà” (liberty), “demokrazija” (democracy), “awtonomija” (autonomy), “nazzjon” (nation), “poplu” (people), “komunità” (community), all derive from the Italian language and were weaved into patterns characterising Maltese as an offshoot of Arabic. These were eventually accepted even by strict purist scholars and writers (Such issues are discussed in detail by (Aquilina, 1961, pp. 42-49).

Efforts were made to provide Semitic equivalents, even though such efforts defied the logic underpinning linguistic evolution. The real motive, surfacing as literary and academic, was political, indeed an effort to answer the question implied in every political measure of the era: the question was: who am I?

Dun Karm dwelt with the problem in existential terms in *Il-Jien u lil hinn Minnu*. As his literary personality evolved, he moved from seeking civil self-identification to seeking it in its permanent, existential dimension. He reached his poetic and intellectual maturity in the late Thirties. In the early twenties he was still seeking certitude as a member of a social, ethnic community which had just achieved assembling its own Parliament.

It took Dun Karm eighteen years to publish the poem about Malta’s new Parliament, *1921—Lil Huti l-Maltin nhar l-Ghoti tal-Kostituzzjoni* (1921—To my Maltese Brothers and Sisters on Obtaining the Constitution). It first appeared in the December 1939 edition of *Il-Malti*, a literary review then enjoying meagre readership. It is a patriotic hymn inspired by the urge to see national unity in the midst of deep

division. In 1921 he was already making full use of the rhetorical factors, both thematic and technical, and of the preferential lexical register characterizing the national anthem he was to write about a year later. The substantial questions raised here were eventually answered by history. He was first invited to write the lyrics for a national anthem something then still missing in Malta. Then by 1935 he was unanimously considered as Malta's national poet. This was first announced by Laurent Ropa: "Peut-être a-t-on été frappé, comme je le fus moi-même, par la beauté vraiment souveraine (ou alors je ne trompe fort) des extraits du "Chant de La Victorie", que je viens de présenter. Leur auteur, Mgr. Carmelo Psaila, alias Dun Karm, fait figure de poète national" (Ropa, 1935, p. 36).

6. The National Anthem

Inevitably Dun Karm is best known as the author of the national anthem. His six lines gained weight and significance as they got older, although they were only composed in 1922. Like other works of art, and mainly like forms of collective expression, they have become more meaningful through their growing connotation and the social, political and economic developments that were to mark the Twentieth century. Although the Maltese anthem is not as old as others in neighbouring countries (the British and the Italian, for instance), it is by now old enough to warrant comparison on an international scale. Anthems acquire greater importance as their relevance becomes deeper and their content and form fit perfectly into tradition. Normally national anthems stand more for what is constant than the ephemeral or the merely fashionable.

This anthem, heralding Malta into wider and deeper statehood—Independence (1964), the declaration of Malta as a Republic (1974), Freedom Day (1979), membership in the European Union (2005)—has withstood the test of time, especially when political confrontations tended to become ideological. Its popular tune composed by Robert Samut before the text was written is simple and evocative much on line with the essence of the Mediterranean character (Friggieri, 2014, pp. 64-66). As the local population milled around two opposing political groups, Dun Karm sought to transcend this rigid demarcation by evoking historical events, and by seeking reconciliation between the Pro-British and the Pro-Italian movements. He approached the problem through a subtle compromise between the two components of Maltese cultural identity. A close look at the lyrics of the national anthem provides a good example of the fusion of Arabic and Latin cultures. As Maltese is derived from Arabic and has grown into a rich and autonomous language through its contact with Italian, the pro-British and pro-Italian segments of the population could overcome any type of conflict and adopt a third option, namely the recognition of the fact that both were Maltese. The Arabic-Latin reconciliation is thus seen as a logical effect of overcoming the other conflict. Dun Karm repeatedly viewed both attitudes separating the tiny Maltese community as examples of one unique version of national identity. He himself, apart from Italian and Maltese, adoperated English, thus demonstrating his belief that being

Maltese involved a fusion of diverse cultures. In broader terms he meant Labour and Nationalist party supporters could retain their diverse character and reach consensus on whatever is considered essential to being Maltese, common to both.

When in 1912 he began to compose poetry mostly in Maltese, he retained the components of his cultural identity, all essentially Italian. He went on writing without interrupting his creative itinerary or going through an identity crisis. His Maltese, faithful to a rural origin, is basically Semitic in its vocabulary, whereas his syntactic patterns reflect the spoken or written language at the popular level. This is considered as standard Maltese. He favoured the revival of ancient Maltese words of Arabic origin, now falling into disuse, and believed poetry was the best medium for such a project. Although he did not risk reviving Semitic words to the point of not being understood, he managed to retain literary dignity, the “decorum” the vernacular needed to be considered worthy of recognition.

The following six lines, constituting Malta’s national anthem, can be fully appreciated in the light of the complex nature of its thematic and stylistic components:

Lil din l-art ħelwa, l-omm li tatna isimha,
 Hares Mulej, kif dejjem Int ħarist:
 Ftakar li lilha bl-oħla dawl libbist.
 Aġhti, kbir Alla, id-dehen lil min jaħkimha,
 Rodd il-ħniena lis-sid, saħħa ’l-ħaddiem:
 Seddaq il-għaqda fil-Maltin u s-sliem.
 This sweet land, the mother that gave us her name,
 Guard her, Lord, as you’ve always guarded her:
 Remember that you have always draped her with the sweetest light.
 Bestow, sovereign God, good judgement upon those who govern her,
 Grant mercy to the employers, strength to the workers:
 Confirm the Maltese in unity and peace.

(Translation by Charles Briffa)

All the words are Arabic, whereas the metrical pattern is based on the hendecasyllabic line, the most esteemed rhythmical system of the whole prosodic Italian tradition. The two stanzas constitute a citizen’s prayer to God for Him to take care of his mother, namely Malta, called “omm” (mother) in political speeches and in poems of a patriotic nature. Christian faith, Semitic language, Italian culture: Dun Karm thus managed in 1922 to defy controversy and to make people declare that the fusion of varied elements into one unique whole was a historical fact bound to be accepted by all. The hymn became increasingly popular and won official recognition by being enshrined in the Independence Constitution of 1964.

7. Dun Karm's Contribution to Maltese Literature

One can perhaps best understand Malta's historical and cultural components through a comparative approach. A short personal note may be fitting here. In the course of collecting Dun Karm's complete poetic works, I had first to embark on the task of establishing his ties with Malta's previous literary—*Dun Karm* (1978) and *Storia della letteratura maltese* (1986).

In constructing the literary history of Malta I needed to have at hand all the poems Dun Karm wrote in between 1889 and 1954. Therefore collecting his poetry in both Maltese and Italian took me not less than thirty five years until 2007 when Malta University Press published the complete collection of his Italian poems under a descriptive title, *Le poesie italiane*. The volume includes poems which go back to much more than the past one hundred years and which are being published in this volume for the very first time. In *Le poesie italiane* included are poems which date back to 1889 and as recently as 1946. All are put in chronological order together with their original source; a manuscript, a typescript, a published copy from a magazine or a newspaper, or just a leaflet.

Dun Karm was not very keen on publishing his poems, either in Italian or in Maltese. Placed in such an order, his poems manifest a steady and consistent development. His basic themes, ranging from the quest for self-identification to the affirmation of a national identity, gradually grew more intense whilst his style became more elegant and more efficient in expressing the feelings of an entire nation. Writing in Maltese made him aware of the need to consider simplicity as the best method of expressing himself whilst being understood. However much he resented political involvement, his role was on the peripherals of politics and politicians considered him as a voice transcending the limits of partisanship, a voice that expressed the suppressed feelings of supporters of both the Labour and Nationalist Parties. They accepted him as a voice evoking national unity, sorely missing at that specific time. The poetic innuendos in speeches delivered by Malta's then main political leaders mirror his influence on them.

The complete collection of his Maltese poems was launched in an edition by Klabb Kotba Maltin and Karmen Mikalleg Buhagar in 1980. This was the first time his complete works appeared in Maltese. Although the task took a considerable number of years to complete, further research led to the discovery of more poems in Maltese. Klabb Kotba Maltin included them as an addendum to an enlarged edition of my biography *Dun Karm—Il-Bniedem fil-Poeta* (1980). All credit for the publication of *Dun Karm—Il-Poeżiji Miġbura* (1980) is owed to Paul Mizzi, the outstanding protagonist of Maltese culture, and founder of Klabb Kotba Maltin. I came across more poems later (including some minor ones in English).

I hope to have completed the task of reconstructing the real literary portrait of a national poet whose writings are classified as the patrimony of an entire country. I have grown to know the personality of an astounding poet who, however strong and confident in the portrayal of his image of Malta, was essentially a timid, inward-looking person, as *Il-Jien u lil hinn Minnu* amply illustrates in theme and

style. In this sense he is typically a romantic spirit, inspired mainly by questions of faith, national identity, solitude, history and social issues. His diction is densely metaphorical, frequently recalling Biblical archetypes, especially where notions of finality are concerned.

A textual reading of his works unearths the nature and extent of the influence exerted on him by the Italian literary tradition he was continuously exposed to. It ranged from Dante and Petrarch right down to Monti, Foscolo, Manzoni, Pascoli and Carducci. He retained the modes of the previous literary eras as much as he discreetly appreciated those of his own times. A whole definition of the life of a country goes in the understanding and the evaluation of a sub text which may be termed as the rhythm of a country. Dealing with this question Dun Karm is clearly aware of the pace Malta itself adopted at least since the first phase of the post-war period. Dom Mintoff, Archbishop Michael Gonzi and George Borg Olivier fiercely crossed swords and took up their place on the stage where, in front of a bitterly divided national audience, the die was cast for the future of numerous generations. Decades earlier Dun Karm yearned for national unity and the Independence of Malta. Sadly he died three years before the island eventually won its Independence from Britain in 1964.

8. A Non-Partisan Political Commitment

Although Dun Karm eschewed being identified with any political party, his literary works were often interpreted as a political statement. This he resented in categorical terms. He declared he did not side with Fortunato Mizzi when he previously wrote in Italian (namely between 1889 and 1946, and later, since some of the more recent poems are undated), nor did he side with Gerald Strickland when he then started to write in Maltese (from 1912 onwards, and at least up to the post-war period, according to the dated works, and later). He claimed to have been proud never to have embraced any of the political parties.

The strong influence he exerted on the literary activities of his times is perhaps only a part of the spiritual legacy he bequeathed to the nation. When comparing his Italian poems with those in Maltese—one is bound to be impressed by the sheer elegance with which he handles both languages—one can only detect distinctive evolution in terms of his style and attitude. His basic vision of life, both human and national, is one and the same. He embodied propriety across all aspects of life. He was forever aware of being a priest, of enjoying the esteem of his contemporaries. He was to enjoy that respect by the generations that followed.

9. The Existential Question

Although Dun Karm is essentially known as a poet who greatly contributed and influenced the path to nationhood, his deeper self is quite different. In the thirties, the culminating period of his whole literary journey, he translated Ugo Foscolo's major work *I Sepolcri* (*L-Oqbra*, 1936) and thus risked coming

closer to the fundamental dilemma of his world view, more so concerning the problem of happiness in the regard of the problem of suffering. Dun Karm is eminently a poet resembling a voyager in search of significance and justification. He largely relies on his mother for an answer, and eventually concludes that in terms of faith the answer is only acquired through silence, through confident submission. The opening lines of *Il-Jien u lil Hinn Minnu*, which he started writing in 1936, and published two years later, set the mood for the completion of a self-portrait which soon attains universal significance:

Hsiebi bħal ġhama: biex isib it-trejqa
 Itektek bil-ġhasluġ kull pass li jagħti;
 Jimxi qajl qajl u qatt ma jaf fejn wasal;
 Dalma kbira tostorlu l-kif u l-ġhala,
 U d-dawl li hu jixtieq qatt ma jiddilu.
 My thought is like a blind man: to find the way
 He taps out with a stick every step he takes,
 Shuffles slowly, never knowing where he has got.
 A dense darkness shrouds from him the how and why,
 And the light he yearns after never illumines it.

(Translation by A.J. Arberry)

Departing from the discovery of Italian and proceeding with the efficiency of the Maltese language (he was past his fortieth year when he started experimenting with his native language), Dun Karm finally acknowledged the uniqueness of silence, presumably the only perfect language. Most of his poems are highly emotional, at times argumentative. This betrays the direct impact on him by various writers and philosophers like Dante, Shakespeare, Foscolo, Rosmini. He is most loyal to the philosopher he considers to be the most important of all, Saint Augustine. Perhaps his whole poetic journey is best summed up in Saint Augustine's preferential choice of silence, now finally conceived as the complete surrender of reasoning to the forcefulness of sentiment.

In this respect Dun Karm is a national poet of a much more relevant dimension. He is looking for a patria which is not restricted by the confines of specific time and place. *Il-Jien u lil hinn Minnu*, a poem in blank verse of more than 500 lines, comes down to a halt as soon as the hypothetical traveller, the unifying factor in an otherwise paradoxical context, discovers that life is meant to be transcended, and that the final stage of any verbal or intellectual utterance is only accessible through silence. It is a level of awareness beyond verblivity gained through the discovery of something more eloquent than speech. This was his culminating point (1938), and his later works, in both Italian and Maltese, are weary expressions of a true poet now tending to listen more to the voice coming from within. He died in 1961, but he had completed his final poetic statements much earlier.

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