

The political significance of Dun Karm, the national poet of Malta

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A historical ‘symbol’ of national identity

Which party did Dun Karm (1871–1961) side with in the early twenties? Was he pro-British or Pro-Italian? What did he mean in the thirties when he affirmed that he loved both Italy (for its art) and Britain (for its democratic tradition), but none so much as he did love Malta, his ‘only mother’? Dun Karm Psaila, soon known as simply Dun Karm, is one of the very few persons who have managed to mould the Maltese people’s way of thinking. He did it mostly after his death, since many generations have appreciated his vision of the country and numerous politicians have adopted a phraseology which is typically and unwittingly his.

This is perhaps more applicable today when the apparent simplicity of his verse has grown into a sort of expression of what the complexity of contemporary life makes people yearn for. But major politicians, like Dom Mintoff, Anton Buttigieg, Lino Spiteri, Eddie Fenech Adami, Guido de Marco, Ugo Mifsud Bonnici, have consistently shown traces of his influence on themselves through the choice of phrases, adjectivisation and emotional intensity of a patriotic nature. Mintoff’s ritornello ‘Malta l-ewwel u qabel kolloxx’ (Malta first and foremost) is typical of Dun Karm. So is Fenech Adami’s insistence on the idea of ‘ahwa Maltin’ (Maltese brothers/sisters) and ‘flimkien’ (together). This point merits a study on its own. Even the revival of the (Latin) word ‘gens’ is due to him.

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A poet of the working class

Is there anything in Malta which is not immediately political, and mediately partisan? All our utterances, in both Maltese and English, are politically loaded. They all imply allegiance, a sense of belonging to a party. Perhaps it is a 'genetic' condition: you are born within a party, preceding personal decisions.

Even if unconsciously, Dun Karm was political. His writings are indications of a situation which tended to go to extremes. The fact that he wrote extensively in Italian implied that he inherently had Nationalist tendencies. When he started to express himself in Maltese in 1912 he immediately qualified himself to be considered a supporter of Strickland and Boffa. He risked all this, he was afraid of all this, yet he took the plunge. His choice in favour of Maltese, a Semitic language, also warranted 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.

It may all sound absurd nowadays, and it 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 only reluctant to go on publishing in Italian, due to partisan considerations, but not to write. In the long process of collecting all his scattered poems in Italian I was most surprised to know how natural it was for him to write in Italian as well as in Maltese. Was he a Nationalist or a Stricklandist or a Boffist? He must have been partly all, and none. He is definitely the most prominent literary voice of the working class of all times.

Dun Karm is the author of one of the earlier Maltese hymns of the workers (*L-Innu tal-Haddiema, L'inno degli operai*, 1912). He was well acquainted with Father Charles Plater (1875–1921), a great champion of the working class, a close collaborator of the local Labour movement, and a visitor to Malta where he died, as evinced by Dun Karm's widely revealing elegy *A Padre Charles Dominic Plater SJ* (1912). His poems inspired by workers and his exposition of the social condition in Malta are a major aspect of his direct social commitment. (I have dealt extensively with the radical thoughts of Dun Karm as a strong voice of the poor and the working class in my book *Dun Karm* (1989, pp. 31–72). This trend, however, pervades his whole poetic corpus, in both Maltese and Italian, and this is mainly due to his loyalty to his mother and to the social condition he was up in. His lifelong relative poverty is in itself another source of motivation.

The significance of the national anthem

A national anthem gains weight and significance as it gets older. Like other works of art, and mainly like forms of collective expression, they become more meaningful through their growing connotation. Although the Maltese anthem is not as old as various others of neighbouring countries (the British and the Italian ones, for instance), it is luckily now old enough to bear an international comparison. Anthems acquire greater importance as their historical relevance becomes deeper and their content and form somehow start to belong to previous traditions. Normally they stand for what is constant, namely much stronger than whatever is transient and merely fashionable.

Dun Karm's national anthem, accompanying Malta as it reached higher degrees of statehood – Independence, the declaration of Malta as a republic, Freedom Day, membership in the EU – has long withstood the test of time. Its fine tune by Robert Samut is no less valuable.

A secure place in the history of Maltese literature

One cannot understand any historical and cultural aspect of Malta if not through a comparative approach. I embarked on the task of establishing his far-reaching ties with our previous literary tradition, which was Italian. I have dealt with this matter in my books *La cultura italiana a Malta – Dun Karm* (Florence, 1978) and *Storia della letteratura maltese* (Milazzo, 1986), apart from numerous articles in Italian, English and Maltese.

In constructing the literary history of Malta, apart from other things, I had to have at hand all the poems Dun Karm wrote over a very long period of time (approximately 1889–1954). And so I started to collect his poetry in both Maltese and Italian, a task which took me not less than thirty five years, and which hopefully came to a close in 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 one hundred years ago and which are being published in this volume for the very first time. In *Le poesie italiane* I have included poems which are as early as 1889 and as late as 1946, and are all put in chronological order together with their original source, namely a manuscript, a typescript, a published copy from a magazine or newspaper, or just a leaflet. Dun Karm was not very keen to publish his poems, either in Italian or in Maltese.

The complete collection of his Maltese poems was published in an edition by Klabb Kotba Maltin and Karmen Mikalleg Buhagar in 1980. That was the first time his complete collection appeared. I had been working on the collection for a number of years. However, in doing further research on other topics I came across more poems of his in Maltese, and Klabb Kotba Maltin kindly included them as an addendum to an enlarged edition of my biography of the poet (*Dun Karm – Il-Bniedem fil-Poeta*, 1980). Paul Mizzi, the grand man of Maltese culture, and founder of Klabb Kotba Maltin, is the special one to whom all the merit is due for the publication of *Dun Karm – Il-Poeziji Migbura*.

I came across more poems as well later on (including some minor ones in English). Thus now I hope to have finally completed the task of reconstructing the real literary image of our national poet. Throughout these years I have also grown to know the personality of an artist who, however strong and confident in the portrayal of his image of Malta, was an essentially timid, inwardlooking person, as his major work, *Il-Jien u lilhinn Minnu*, (The I and Beyond it) amply illustrates in both theme and style. A real gentleman, a true poet.

In my critical studies on his poetic personality I sought to establish the nature and extent of the influence exerted on him by a rich Italian literary tradition he was continuously and most satisfyingly exposed to. It at least ranged from Dante and Petrarch right down to Monti, Foscolo, Manzoni, Pascoli and Carducci. He retained the modes typical of the previous literary eras as much as he discreetly appreciated those of his own times. A whole interpretation of the life of a country goes in the understanding and the evaluation of what may be termed as the rhythm of a country.

I have dealt with this point not simply in the regard of Dun Karm but also, and more importantly so, in respect of the pace Malta has adopted at least since the first phase of the post-war period, when 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. Dun Karm yearned for the Independence of Malta since many decades before, but he died three years before 1964.

A political stand beyond partisanship

Dun Karm was very much afraid of being identified with any political party. His literary stand, however, somehow constituted a political statement. This he resented in categorical terms. One may recall what he once wrote to his friend Laurent Ropa, the eminent Gozitan poet who never forgot his origins and who first acknowledged Dun Karm as a 'national poet'. Dun Karm declared that 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, to my knowledge, undated), nor did he side with Gerard Strickland when he then started to write in Maltese (from 1912 onwards, and at least up to the postwar period, according to the dated works, and later). He claimed to have been proud never to have belonged to any political party. Then he affirmed: "Io sono maltese, solo maltese, e niente altro che maltese."

The influence he exerted on the literary circle of his times is perhaps only a part of the spiritual legacy he left. When comparing his Italian poems with the Maltese ones, apart from being struck by the sheer elegance with which he handles both languages, one can only detect evolution in terms of style and attitude. His basic vision of life, both human and national, is simply one and the same. He embodied correctness under all respects, and was always aware of being a priest.

There is no doubt he enjoyed the deep esteem of his contemporaries and of successive generations. It is difficult to conclude whether he was a Labourite (the Anglo-Maltese connection) or a Nationalist (the pro-Italian choice). It is quite difficult to arrive at a plausible conclusion. His 'ambiguity' makes him what he is.

The relevance of a romantic spirit in a post-modern era

Every writer is subject to the double law of time and place. We all belong to a specific point in time, and to a stretch of land. Not more than that. Life is change, movement, et cetera, and so is the relevance of works of art, and not simply of books. It means every author is faced with the challenge of being perceived differently by subsequent generations. Of course, the question is put only in the regard of eminent writers, since oblivion normally covers the rest. So this is a condition characterising the fact that although, as John Keats put it, "A thing of beauty is a joy forever", the perception of beauty does change a lot. Fashion is an overriding rule, and frequently it similarly involves the concept of truth as well. A case in point is found in our own paradoxical era, post-modernism.

Although Dun Karm is basically known as a poet of 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 he thus risked coming closer to the fundamental dilemma of his world view, which concerns the problem of happiness in the regard of the problem of suffering. Dun Karm is eminently a poet resembling man as 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, namely confident submission.

Departing from the discovery of Italian and proceeding with the relatively late discovery of Maltese (he was past his fortieth year when he started experimenting with his native language), he finally discovered the uniqueness of silence, presumably the only perfect language, distinctly faithful to self-expression. He is here most loyal to the philosopher he considers to be the most important, Saint Augustine. Perhaps his whole poetic journey is best summed up in something Saint Augustine said to this effect: "I will keep silent, lest the Lord passes along and I fail to hear him."

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. His major work, *Il-Jien u lilhinn Minnu*, comes down to a halt as soon as his hypothetical traveller discovers that life is meant to be transcended, and that the final stage of any verbal or intellectual utterance is only reached through silence. It is a stage beyond verballity reached through the discovery of something more eloquent than speech. That was his culminating point (1938), and his later works, in both Italian and Maltese, are expressions of a true poet now tending to listen more to the voice coming from within. A frail, distraught man, he died in 1961, but he had completed his final poetic statements much earlier.