

DUN KARM,  
THE NATIONAL POET OF MALTA

by OLIVER FRIGGIERI

This year Malta is commemorating the 25th anniversary since the death of its national poet, Dun Kam Psaila, popularly and officially known as Dun Karm, perhaps the most significant Maltese artist. In 1961 Cambridge University Press paid the poet a tribute with the publication of a volume comprising some of his more important works, *Dun Karm Poet of Malta*, edited by P. Grech and A.J. Arberry. Professor Arberry had the opportunity of meeting him a few years before and was soon impressed by his creative and human merits. He sums up his judgement of the artist and the man, inseparable components of a unique complex personality, in the following paragraph: 'When I met Dun Karm he had recently entered upon his eighty-seventh year. I found him a frail old man, but still in full possession of his great mental faculties. ... It seemed to me then ... that this was a poet of more than local importance; his art and his message must reach the world, to which they truly belonged ... I became increasingly convinced of his greatness'.<sup>1</sup>

Dun Karm was born in October 1871 in a small village, Haż-Żebbuġ, which was later to feature as a microcosm of the whole island in his poetry. His humble rural origin never played second fiddle to other aspects which later naturally prevailed in his career as an intellectual. The historical and cultural identity of his country, which he sought to discover poetically and to define in a typically romantic manner, provided him with a secure point of reference in the treatment of any other universal theme.

*The language of the people*

Since his early youth Dun Karm inserted himself in the literary environment of the country, largely characterized by the island's long Italian tradition. Italian was still the most important medium of cultural and official communication,

<sup>4</sup> Alcuni di questi lessemi tengono ancora la loro grafia inglese come, handbag, division, league, comer, mentre altri assumono la grafia Maltese come graund per ground, futbol per football, clac per clutch, ġeli per jelly ecc.

<sup>5</sup> Quando invece la parola mutuata corrisponde perfettamente o quasi ad una voce già esistente nel lessico indigeno, ci troviamo dinanzi ad uno di quei prestiti che il Tappolet chiama 'di lusso' (Luxuslehnwörter) e che forse meglio si potrebbe chiamare 'di moda'. C. Tagliavini, *Le Origini delle Lingue Neolatine*, Bologna 1959, pag. 222.

<sup>6</sup> 'Sovente il prestito si riferisce ad un oggetto o ad un concetto inesistente nella lingua che lo riceve. ... In questo caso ci troviamo dinanzi a prestiti che potremmo chiamare ... prestiti di necessità (Bedurfnislehnwörter).'

Idem pagg. 222-223.

<sup>7</sup> 'I Lehnwörter sono assimilati al sistema linguistico della lingua che li adotta, in modo che il parlante non ha assolutamente l'idea di adoperare una forma estranea...'

Idem, pag. 299.

<sup>8</sup> To start in Inglese significa anche cominciare, trasalire, partire, ecc. In Maltese, però, il prestito istartja ha solo il significato di mettere in moto la macchina.

providing Maltese men of letters with the privilege of instinctively guarding against the perils of insularity and of identifying themselves with the previous and the contemporary mainstreams of the peninsula, and indirectly of the continent.

In the period 1889-1912, that is from the year of the publication of his first known poem in Italian, *La dignità episcopale*,<sup>2</sup> to the year of his first effort in Maltese, *Quddiem Xbieha tal-Madonna*, composed in January 1912,<sup>3</sup> his wide literary background is directly evident and frequently comes to the surface. His first book of verse, *Foglie d'alloro* (1896), gives ample evidence to the fact that the poet started with recognizing the most valid features of nineteenth century Italian, and consequently European, poetry, and with adapting them to his still undecided personality as a creative writer. Prominent poets like Monti, Foscolo and Manzoni furnished him with a sufficiently wide spectrum of themes and technical devices within which he could insert his own experiments, always in search of his own distinctive self. The spectacular and highly rhetorical stylistic patterns of Monti, the deep philosophical investigation into the significance of existence underlying Foscolo's *I sepolcri*, and Manzoni's successful compromise between a definite theological standpoint and contemporary political and social conditions are some of the factors determining the poet's early identity, on the one hand, and highlighting the trends which relate him to the continental mainstream, on the other.

When in 1912 Dun Karm resolved to dedicate himself to poetry in the Maltese language, he did not denounce tradition as much as he did not rely exclusively on its tenets. As a romantic, he never lost the sense of history, itself a profound source of inspiration to almost all Maltese writers of his age as well as of the following decades. From the wealth of nineteenth and early twentieth century Italian poetry, that is, from the idealism of the romantics, and from the socialisation of literature proposed in new directions by the realists, he derived the fundamental requisites which were bound to play the role of points of departure to his authentically personal contribution.

His calm passage from the use of Italian (the sophisticated written medium of the island) to the use of Maltese (the

downtrodden spoken dialect of the people) is itself a major event in the island's literary history. It signifies that the traditionally uncultivated language had finally won the attention of a serious writer who had already gained sufficient prestige so as to be able to influence other colleagues to take the same step. It also means that the poet had truly understood one of the basic principles of romanticism, namely that literature is bound to reflect the aspirations and the sentiments of the people and to establish a direct, effective rapport with them. The ideals of democracy, both political and cultural, could not be realized if not through the adoption of Maltese as the main medium of communication and instruction.

Within this framework the poet soon concluded that his poetry was to justify itself through its being an instrument of national awareness and through its integrating the abstract visions of romantic idealism with the concrete necessities of a particular historical condition. The language he uses is not much removed from the most typical idiomatic and syntactic patterns of common speech, and his vocabulary rarely departs from the popular stock. One of his merits as a refined stylist of Maltese poetry lies precisely in the fact that he succeeds in producing verse of a high order and in giving the language its aesthetic dignity without in any way obstructing direct communication with the larger cross-section of his readers. Through his works the language attained in a relatively short time the cultural status it lacked; it can be safely stated that the public image he created as a Maltese poet ('poeta Malti', as he was called, that is, a poet writing in Maltese) contributed considerably towards the official recognition of the language. In utilizing Maltese for the elaborate expression of valid content he also justified the claim, brought forward by contemporary politicians and intellectuals, that the real language of the country was Maltese, and that it consequently had a historical and a political right to be the main medium of communication at all levels.

From a strictly literary point of view, these are all considerations of a secondary, if not indifferent, significance. The poet resorted to the adoption of the popular language only insofar as his creative faculties demanded such a

choice at a certain point in time; such a decision is otherwise explainable also as an aspect of the European orientation the poet was firmly aware of, and it can be equally defined as a step necessitated in some manner by the island's contemporary situation. Eventually the language itself is recognised by him and by his contemporaries as one of the basic distinctive features of the country's national identity justifying its claim of becoming independent. What is apparently a purely linguistic decision is essentially the evidence of Dun Karm's awareness as a democratically inclined author.

#### *Three different phases*

The long experience of Dun Karm as a poet in Maltese, stretching over a period of more than forty years, can be divided into at least three different phases. The first one is characterized by the exploration of the most immediate aspects of intimate life, such as family ties, personal solitude, the local landscape, and historical events. Lyrics like *Minghajr Omm* (1912), *Id-Dar* (1912), *Wahdi* (1914), *Lill-Kanarin Tiegħi* (1915), *Xenqet ir-Raba'* (1926) and *Il-Ghanja tar-Rebba* (1927) illustrate the hidden anxiety of an apparently peaceful and calm spirit. Colourful descriptions, frequently resolving themselves into nostalgic vignettes, and an aptitude for subjectively involved narration already point out towards what was to be his typical preoccupation: the quest for the sense underlying existence, itself a mystery perceived only mistakenly and approximately through empirical experience.

In the late twenties and throughout the thirties Dun Karm reaches the peak of his creative ability, principally owing to his transcending the particular and perceiving the universality which actually transforms routine into uniqueness and thought into intuition. *Żagħżuġ ta' Dejjem* (1933), *Wied Qirda* (1933), *Il-Ġerreġja u Jien* (1933) and *Naf u Nemmen* (1933), beside being sublimated expressions of the constant state of solitude the poet lived in throughout his life, are examples of the way in which he gives a metaphorical shape to the conflict between the dictates of life and the force of volition, as well as to the need of reconciling human knowledge with a theological interpretation of

existence. Although each lyric emphasizes some particular aspect and ignores another, this group constitutes a homogeneous whole in which the physical and the metaphysical levels are fused and reorganized according to the dictates of a personal sensibility.

His translation of Foscolo's *I sepolcni*<sup>4</sup> is not merely a brilliant accomplishment of a purely literary nature. It is also another indication of the state of mind he went through in the period. The anxiety about the significance of life and the problem of evil, epitomised in death, imposed upon him the need of concentrating on a major work which really affirms his truest world vision. *Il-Jien u lil hinn Minnu* (1938), a poem of more than 500 hendecasyllabic lines, is his most valid contribution to Maltese poetry and the best evidence to his inner need of going beyond human experience in order to arrive at a spiritual justification of the mystery of being.

His point of departure is wilfully philosophical and it only illustrates its essential restrictions; from a certain stage onwards, the troubled soul has to rely exclusively on the possibility of knowing without requiring the proof of the known content. Instead of philosophy and theology, the insufficiency of which is the source of the poet's *angst*, intuition creeps in as the only solution. He echoes the principle of Jaspers that the aim of life is more the transcendence of existence than its knowledge itself, and provides a vivid symbolical reconstruction of what Gabriel Marcel affirms: 'If a man has experienced the presence of God, not only has he no need of proofs, he may even go so far as to consider the idea of a demonstration as a slur on what is for him a sacred evidence'.<sup>5</sup> Against the danger of considering life unintelligible, as Heidegger concludes, the poet demands from the human soul, rather than from the human mind, an explanation of the absurdity of death.

A whole philosophical tradition is involved in the thematic formation of *Il-Jien u lil hinn Minnu*. From a purely literary point of view, it is Foscolo who creates in him the necessity of revising his belief and of accepting its challenge without any direct support of revelation or science. The rationalism which permeates Foscolo's major work is taken for what it is worth, that is as an inalienable evidence

of man's inability to rationally arrive at a plausible explanation of life. Saint Augustine's 'credo ut intelligam' is further strengthened by Rosmini's conclusion that man's need of transcending death must have its correlative on the metaphysical level. The poet's inner journey actually relates the Kantian moral sensibility complementing the knowledge of existence to the existentialist penetration of the self. As for Kierkegaard, Dun Karm's real God is not an abstraction, but a real Father in front of whom man understands his utter dependence. Echoing Wittgenstein in a different manner, Dun Karm identifies the mystical with the inexpressible, since the mystical is beyond logical understanding.

As a poet, Dun Karm's challenge was how to translate into a set of coherent metaphorical patterns, forming one long argumentative poem, what the past and contemporary philosophical world had arrived at intellectually. A number of archetypal themes constitute the basic structure of the poem. The relationship between God and man, and between intuition and acquired knowledge, the apparent contradiction between the continuity of the natural process and man's brief life on earth, the eternal silence of nature and man's need of investigating and concluding, the finiteness of the individual as opposed to the supposedly infinite dimensions of time and space: these and various other motives are revived poetically and reorganized into a whole which is both meditative and narrative. The evolution from intellectual activity to faithful passivity is the aspect which most obviously gives unity to the poem.

The latter part of Dun Karm's life is characterized by an ever increasing serenity. Even the war poems, in which the besieged island has found a veritable documentation of contrasting sentiments ranging from epic fervour (*E-Boats*, 1941) to heartfelt mourning (*Illum*, 1941), betray the fact that the long literary journey was heading towards its end. The previous turmoil finally seemed to be overcome and silence, the Augustinian virtue the poet strove to acquire in his major work, gradually developed itself into a habitual state of the soul.

It is very difficult to assess the great influence Dun Karm had on Maltese literature in general, and on Maltese

poetry in particular. He managed to raise the standard of writing in Maltese to levels never known before, and to demand that writers discipline themselves in technique and employ their resources to give shape to worthy content. A scientific investigation into the subsequent development of literature in Malta further proves that his towering figure became emblematic of what is fundamentally Maltese and authentically poetic. In 1935 Laurent Ropa had already recognized him as a national poet.<sup>6</sup> However, his relevance is enormously wider, and nationhood is only one of the more conspicuous dimensions of his legacy.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A.J. Arberry, *Dun Karm Poet of Malta*, ed. A.J. Arberry - P. Grech, Cambridge University Press (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications n.6), pp. vii-viii. [1961].

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. A. Mons. Pietro Pace *nel suo trionfale ingresso - il Seminario*, Malta, Tipografia Industriale G. Muscat, 1889, pp. 25-27.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. "Il-Habib", 1/2/1912, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. *L-Oqbra*, Malta, Stamperija tal-Gvern, 1936.

<sup>5</sup> G. Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, vol. II, *Faith and Reality*, Harvill Press, 1951, p. 176.

<sup>6</sup> Ropa writes: "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" (*Malta et sa littérature*, "La Grande Revue", 149, nov. 1935, p. 36).

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