

## Portrait

# DUN KARM

Dun Karm (1871–1961), born at Żebbuġ, remained proud of his rural origin throughout his life and succeeded in identifying the real character of Malta without renouncing to his cultural background which was largely determined by the central role played by the Italian language and literature in his social and educational environment.

His ability to arrive at a synthesis of the two apparently irreconcilable extremes of popular Maltese culture and sophisticated Italian inspiration is typically romantic and is perhaps the basic justification for his being known as Malta's national poet.

His earlier works in Italian, dating from his first known published poem, *La Dignità Episcopale* (1889), illustrate the peace and tranquillity of his childhood and youth. The death of his mother in 1909 and the fact that from 1910 onwards, when he had to start living on his own, he had to face solitude are followed by the most significant aspect of his poetic life, the discovery of the Maltese language in 1912 as his main medium of creative expression. From then onwards he embarked on a thorough exploration of the Island's historical and cultural identity as well as of his innermost tension as an artist of sentiment and experience.

His Maltese poetry written between 1912 and the late twenties reveals two major points: the sublimation of his past life, now seen as a motive of deep nostalgia, and the celebration of the characteristics of his country. The most important poems of this period – *Mingħajr Omm* (1912), *Id-Dar* (1912), *It-Tbahhir* (1912), *Inti ma Targax* (1912), *Wahdi* (1914), *Lill-Kanarin Tiegħi* (1915), *In-Nissieġa* (1913), *Lid-Dielja* (1913), *Il-Għodwa* (1914), *Ġunju* (1914), *It-Tifla tar-Raba'* (1915), *Il-Musbieh tal-Mużew* (1920), *Lill-Miżna tar-Riħ* (1922), *Għanja ta' Malti fl-Amerka* (1923), *Xenqet ir-Raba'* (1926), *Il-Għanja tar-Rebħa* (1927) – determine his future development as a poet of subjective feelings as well as a poet of collective aspirations. Personal and national features blend to form one unique whole which at the same time reveals the fundamental dualism of his identity: the singular and the universal. Both components continued to find their expression in later works.

The thirties are perhaps the years of his maturity. Poems like *Fil-Katakombi – I* (1927), *Naf u Nemmen* (1933), *Fil-Katakombi – II* (1934) and *Lil Ġannina Pisani* (1937) discuss the existential problem from a deeply religious point of view. In 1927 he had

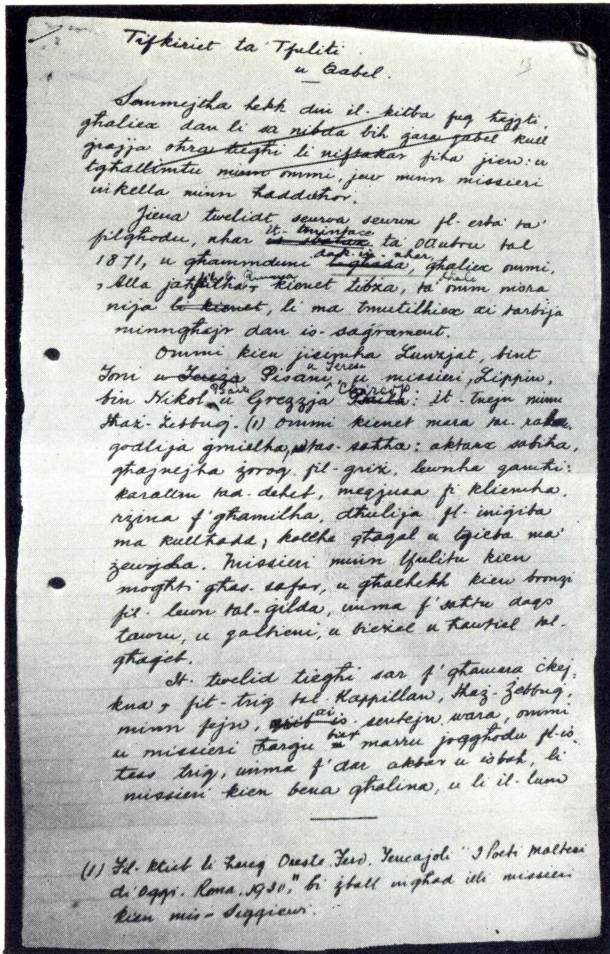


Dun Karm in his old age

already showed his intention of translating Foscolo's *I Sepolcri*. The publication of *L-Oqbra* in 1936 has a long background of study of the Italian poet's human and intellectual personality. Such an exercise prompted in him a profound meditation on the moral content of the Italian poem and a need to complete the picture by providing a poetic answer to Foscolo's philosophical queries.

The poems mentioned above anticipate his conclusions in *Il-Jien u lil hinn Minnu*, a major work begun in 1936 and published two years later. The initial crisis of solitude already defined in individual





terms is now translated into a universally human condition. Man himself is alone on earth and his main preoccupation is how to satisfy his basic wish to transcend death.

Other works of the same period – such as *Żagħżuġ ta' Dejjem* 1933, *Il-Ġerrejja u Jien* (1933), *Wied Qirda* (1933), *Għal Dun Mikiel Xerri* (1933), *Lil Mikiel Anton Vassalli* (1933), *Dehra tat-VIII ta' Settembru 1565* (1935) – contribute to the same vision of the poet obsessed with two apparently distinct preoccupations: how to interpret man in his national capacity and how to explore the destiny of man as a temporary inhabitant on earth. As time went by, the poet seems to have reached a higher level of spiritual equilibrium, poetically expressed through a dialogue with nature as evidence of a hidden divine plan.

The evolution of Maltese poetry owed much to Dun Karm's contribution. The vision he proposed of Malta as a nation is probably more intriguing for its extraliterary impact, and this confirms the relevance of his poetry which he constantly sought to transform into a sublimated image of his immediate environment.

**Oliver Friggieri**

A page from the manuscript of Dun Karm's recollections of his early life



Dun Karm in the solitude of his home. The bird is the subject of one of his better known poems