

THE MCA NEWSLETTER



Malta
Classics
Association

THIS ISSUE

- 2** Tribute to Victor Bonnici
- 4** The Power of the Classical Word
- 5** The story of Narcissus and Echo: A Retelling

LETTER From the Editor

Salvete Omnes!

Welcome to the Summer 2021 edition of the Malta Classics Association Newsletter!

I am deeply honoured to introduce myself as the new Editor. I hope to continue the great work that my predecessor, Andrew Debono Cauchi, contributed to the Newsletter.

Without further ado, as summer has come to an end and a new academic year is well underway, I ask you, friends, Romans, countrymen, to lend me your eyes.

This issue starts with a rich and heartfelt tribute written by our very own MCA President, Prof. Horatio C. R. Vella, dedicated to Victor Bonnici, for his years of kind service to the MCA.

Following that is the aptly named ‘customary dose’ of etymology with the Power of the Classical Word. Last and not least, a thrillingly captivating short story that adapts the tale of Narcissus and Echo, written by Corinne Caruana.

I hope you enjoy this short yet enriched Summer Edition. Nevertheless, remember, if ever there is something you would like included in the Newsletter, or if you have a project or event that we can share with the Classics community, send us an email at info@classicsmalta.org or contact us on our Facebook page.

Stay safe, and ἔρωσο!

Nikolai Zammit

Tribute to Victor Bonnici

As read by : Chev. Prof. Horatio Caesar Roger Vella

I have known Victor Bonnici for many years since I taught him both for the B.A. Hons Degree and for the M.A. Degree. He joined the course first on a part-time basis through the evening course, and then switched on to the day full-time course. He can be called a late vocation, since he joined the course at quite an advanced age. In fact, Victor is one of the very few persons whom I taught who is elder than me. He managed to continue his work at the port despite studying full-time, and my first impression is that he always got just a few marks below the 100% mark in every homework. He seems to have got in him the ability to learn Latin and Greek fast, and this is supported by the fact that his father, Dante, a chemist, was still translating into Greek from the *Hillard and Botting* when he was 100 years old (I saw the book on his desk at his house when he celebrated his centenary), while he can claim that at least two of his brothers knew Latin and Greek when they studied at the Seminary.

Victor was always diligent in his work and meticulous, and he always questioned to get the best satisfaction from my few corrections I could make on his work. He was also punctual, courteous and, above all, attentive to other people's needs.

Once we had a bright Bulgarian student in class who, to be able to pay for her fees, had to work hard in restaurants and bars in the evenings, and so one day she fainted. Victor was able to help her walk, if not lifting her up; the other student drove us in his car, while I, who had suspended the lecture, was acting like the general in a battle of retreat. We were going down Regional Road to Msida, where we were stuck in a traffic jam. Luckily, on my left, I saw an ambulance, and I asked the driver to take our patient, but

he said he already had another patient. So I closed the window in dismay, but soon opened it up again and asked him to sound his siren, which he did. The cars opened up like the Sea of Reeds during Exodus, and we drove just after the ambulance. The student received immediate attention, and the next few days she was back in class.

One day I was supervising one student for his M.A. dissertation from 6.00a.m. till 8.00a.m., and I was explaining to that student that I was not feeling all that well. When he left, Victor took his place and I was to teach him from 8.00 till 10.00, and I told Victor the same thing. Victor insisted that I stop my supervision, forced me into his own red car, and drove me to emergency in hospital, where I remained for observation both for heart and stomach tests. Victor was too sensitive to allow me to finish my supervision, and showed he was a man of action and of care. He indeed has a fatherly and tender care for others.

Victor is one of the few students who showed appreciation of what I did to him (his own words). He invited me on his graduation day which happened to be the 26th November, my birthday, and used the occasion to wish me well on that occasion. He showed me round his house, surrounded by rows after rows of books, and furniture built by himself. He is even the owner of the boat he himself constructed, *Nausicaa*. At home he appeared to be the most referred-to person, together with Helen, his sister.

The department soon found his great talents at Latin and Greek useful to fill gaps made by the termination of the services given by Dr Biagio Vella, and he continued to teach widely in many areas of Classics. With his past background of History, he was found

useful in teaching also the History of Greek and Roman Civilization when I had transferred the subjects to our programme from the History of Mediterranean Civilization course.

Every Christmas, Victor came to our house at Kirkop to wish me well and to thank me for all I did to him (his own words). There are very few people in our lives who show such a high level of appreciation.

Victor Bonnici is one of the co-founders of the Malta Classics Association, and from the very beginning until his resignation he served as our Treasurer. He kept us informed every month of our income and expenditure, and when a suggestion was made to spend some money for a project, I always said it was possible if Victor agreed. He served as an important link with the auditors every year, and every year he gave us a breakdown of all our income and expenditure during the annual general meeting.

I also know Victor as a holistic person, a man who really loves nature and animals. One day, he gave me a lamb which I brought up and which bore twins. He helped me with instructions on how to breed her, and even on how to milk her. As a tribute to my wife, who always loved to have such a lamb at home, but who also cleaned the glass of the sliding door leading to our garden, one night Victor presented himself to our house with the lamb in his laps. I have to say that this sliding door was so clean and clear that night, that Victor and Baba literally walked into and broke the glass of the sliding door, but luckily were both unhurt. It was a big welcome to Baba, and a handsome bill laid for the insurance company.

Victor has been our Association's great support, both physical and moral. For every event we organized, Victor was seen loaded with our audio equipment, screen, banner, projector and other gadgets, from his home where he kept these things to his car, from

the car to the hall where the public lecture was being held, and back again to his car and to his home. He also was in charge of the pizzas and wine, and took pictures at every event. We could count on Victor on every occasion. He, of course, attended every event without fail.

Victor was also our second Editor of the *Melita Classica*, and from the very beginning he was instrumental in making contact with B.D.L., who took care of the printing of our journals and books. He continued to give us this service, helping also with the editing of the journals and finalizing the last moments before printing, right until his last days with us as a member of the committee.

Victor has one problem. For every social occasion we have to think of water or soft drinks, for he does not drink alcohol. He also was a lover of his bike. We never forget Victor during our meetings: he always opened a window for fresh air, even during winter.

And here is a humble elegiac couplet from me to Victor:

Victor victoriam // gerit dum omnia curat et amat;

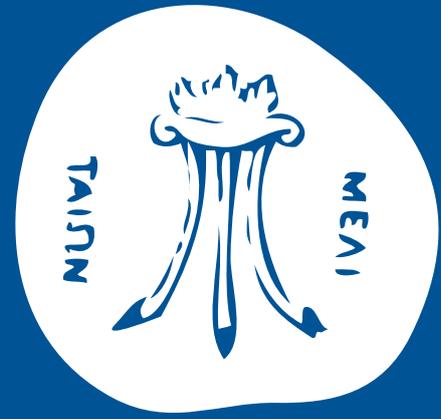
Illam coronam // accipit ei datam.

- Chev. Prof. Horatio Caesar Roger Vella. 6th July, 2021

The preceding message was read to Victor during the 100th MCA meeting on Tuesday, the 27th of July, 2021.



the power of the **CLASSICAL WORD**



democracy

noun //

a system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives.

From the Classical Greek combination of ; δῆμος (people) and κράτος (power). Also known as; Power to the people!

language

noun //

The principal method of human communication, consisting of words used in a structured and conventional way and conveyed by speech, writing, or gesture.

From the Latin 'lingua' – literally, the tongue // transferred sense of utterance and language.

acumen

noun //

Quickness of perception or discernment; penetration of mind; the faculty of nice discrimination.

From the Latin 'acuo' to make sharp + '-men' meaning a sharpened point.

panic

noun //

Sudden uncontrollable fear or anxiety, often causing wildly unthinking behaviour.

From the Classical Greek panikos, which adopts the name of the god Pan, known for causing terror.

academy

noun //

TA place of study or training in a special field.

From the Classical Greek Ακαδημία can often also be found as 'the academy'.

succumb

verb //

Fail to resist pressure, temptation, or some other negative force.

From the Latin succumbo to fall/ breakdown/ yield – 'sub-' + 'cubo' to lie down.

The Story of Narcissus and Echo: A Retelling

By Corinne Caruana

This short story is an adaptation of the tale of Narcissus and Echo set mainly in modern-day Greece around the time of the economic depression. Initially, the idea was to focus on Milos in his role as Narcissus as the main protagonist, but I soon became consumed by Filomena's thoughts as Echo and decided to elaborate on her psychological co-dependency and how this may have developed from an early age.

"I need some time to think about this. One week. Give me one week, please," Filomena cried. "This is already hard enough as it is."

"I don't understand why you want to go back to Naxos. There's nothing there! There isn't even anything here. I want to go to Florence. Nobody here cares about what I'm trying to do, and they won't care about what you're trying to do either! I only want what's best for us – can't you see that?" Milos said, his eyes circling the newspaper in his hands, not actually reading but merely scanning the pages for any news about his latest art exhibition.

Filomena stared at Milos, but he was not staring back. His luminous hair gleamed under the ray of sunshine that had infiltrated their small window and landed on his head, blinding her.

"I told you why I need to go."

"That's not a valid excuse. Your mother is a wretch. You shouldn't care if she dies too." Filomena was not one to retaliate. She simply went on with her morning, stifling her silent sobs, determined not to ruin their day. It was to be their last day trip together before they both moved on from Athens, whether to Naxos or somewhere else, and she wanted to make it as lovely as it had been when they first met. He deserved to have a good day after the way things had been going for them. He was right, she thought, Greece just isn't the same as it used to be, and there's nothing left for them, not even in Athens. They had visited every art gallery and spoken to every curator in the city, and they had taken as much as they can from what it has to offer. Things were far better when she first moved to Athens and met Milos, she thought. It was he who had introduced her to Classical Realism, and it had since become her passion. They held classes together after Milos had gathered a sizeable following of aspiring artists who had become just as enraptured with the style as he had made her.

That year or so was lovely for Filomena, when she was spending all of her time with Milos, supporting him in his art and watching him flourish. How she curses the day, the studio proprietors told them that they would have to shut it down! A lot of things shut down last year, she thought.

"Are those tuna sandwiches you're making, darling? You know they're my favourite" Milos interrupted Filomena's train of thought. "Yes," she smiled. She loved it when he called her darling.

When they arrived at their usual painting spot, the sun had already started to set, and the trees were beginning to cast a long shadow over the grassy plains.

"Daffodils. I think they are perhaps the only plant I can stand. Here, you can have some and plant them in that garden you want to grow." Milos threw the uprooted daffodils in Filomena's hands and



went on to set up his equipment; rather hastily, for the majority of that morning had been wholly taken up by Filomena's ranting and he did not wish to waste any more time. It might be his last painting in Athens before becoming internationally renowned. He was certain it would sell for millions. Filomena's ranting and he did not wish to waste any more time. It might be his last painting in Athens before becoming internationally renowned. He was certain it would sell for millions.

Filomena sat on the grass, turning the flowers in her hands. "Well, you know I can't do that now. We're leaving one way or another."

"Oh, let's not talk about this again. It's not my fault your father died just to rid himself of your mother."

Filomena gasped. "Milos, she's old! She has no one to take care of her now. I have to go. Okay, okay, I'm sorry. I told you I need a week to think about it. I still mean it. Please, why won't you just come with me? I don't want to lose you."

"I can make it big, Filomena. I can finally make the breakthrough I've been working for if I could just get away from here. All the galleries and studios loved me here – just imagine what it would be like if I could get proper training! There's a Florence Academy of Art that specialises in Classical Realism, you know. What better place to perfect my art than Florence! I would be among the great masters! And I would become known as the artist who revived classical art to its deserved glory, the harbinger of beauty and culture they would call me. These galleries here are nothing, and they never will be. Florence... I belong there..."

Milos trailed off into a frenzy of painting and watercolours, leaving Filomena to her thoughts. She didn't have the spirit to paint, and the weight of apathy had become commonplace for her. Back in Naxos, she would draw or paint every day, every second she had. She didn't have a chance to bring any of her work with her, and Milos was always adamant that she paints in the classical style so that they may practise together, but he often complained that her work lacked "a certain fire." In order to remedy this, she would sometimes steal some of his paintings so that she may copy them and learn his technique. She tried doing so in secret, ashamed of what he would do if he found out, until one day she found him rummaging in her bedside drawer demanding an explanation. Since then, they would go on "painting retreats" together so that he would show her how it's really done. She loved his art, of course, and tried her very best to replicate and please him, much to his dismay. The more she tried, the more it irritated him. So, when she was feeling despondent, like today, she would simply resort to painting Milos instead.

Finally, she said, "I want to do what you want to do, Milos. I know you don't want to come with me, but maybe you shouldn't leave Athens. I know things aren't going very well with the country right now, but you've built a reputation here, and people love you. They will always be willing to support you."

"They don't deserve me here. This country has gone to the dogs. Nobody cares about classical art anymore. Nobody cares about their heritage, about tradition. All they want is cheap, fast, and easy. Well, you know what? I don't want to sell to them! I'm going to revive art and bring culture back to Athens - back to the whole world! And I plan on doing it with or without you."

Filomena shifted in her chair. The heat of the sun suddenly felt oppressive.

"Now, are you going to pick up a paintbrush, or do I have to teach you how to do that too?" Milos said, his eyes never leaving the canvas.

One week. Just one week to make a choice, Filomena thought.

She clumsily set up her easel and looked at her watercolours.

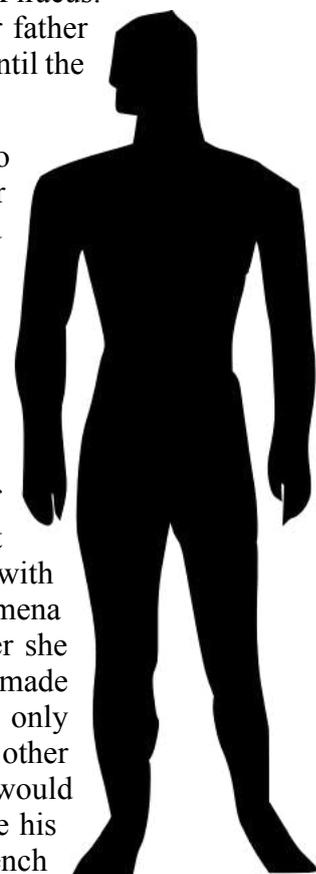
No girl should ever have to choose between her mother and her love, she mused. Oh, why must it be so difficult? Why must her mother always be so demanding? If Filomena decided to leave with Milos, her mother would cut her out of her will. She told her so in her letter. She had tried so hard to be like her, even going so far as to opening up her own little flower stall, selling the delicate white rockrose that would grow in the patch of dirt her mother had cleared for her.

“Go to Athens? Stay here and take care of your brothers and sisters! And then if you’re good enough, maybe you’ll get to run the shop one day. That’s much more useful than wasting time on your silly drawings, believe me!” her mother screamed at her that day Filomena had told her that she wanted to go to Athens.

Later that night, her father took her out to the dock where a boat was waiting for her. “I’ve bought you passage to Mykonos for tonight. Go there and then buy yourself a ferry to Piraeus. Here, I’ve packed some bread and left you some money in there as well.” Her father said, handing her a rucksack. “Your mother isn’t going to know what happened until the morning.”

That was five years prior. Her father never did tell her how her mother reacted to that story. All of her letters went unanswered until four days previously, when her mother sent for her to return because her father had passed away. Her sisters and brothers were unable to care for their mother, she knew. They were all scattered around Europe and had families of their own, a career, a livelihood. Filomena, on the other hand, did not. She had only Milos.

Milos was kind to her once. They were both students when they met, and Filomena fell in love with him the second she saw him. At first, she would catch glimpses of him around campus, always moving, always surrounded by a swarm of people. She could never find him on his own; there was always a crowd of followers trailing close by. She often wondered if they were his friends or just admirers – because, well, how couldn’t one admire him? His emerald eyes, wild with ambition, could light a fire. There was an unworldly quality to Milos, Filomena thought, that surely had not made an impact on her alone. She knew this after she found out where he liked to sit at the campus, just behind the large olive tree that made it seem as though there was nothing but a concrete wall beyond. This was the only place where she had seen him by himself, and so she would spend hours on the other side of the ancient tree, either watching or drawing sketches of him. Her heart would stop when he sometimes brought a Natalia, or an Ariadne, or a Sophia to share his bench, but all Filomena could do was ache from afar. Still, she would go to the bench every day, hoping that he would be alone. She had almost given up hope of ever speaking to him until one day, he caught her fumbling at her notebook.



The state in which he found her made her at once vulnerable and endearing to Milos. He laughed his careless laugh at her and showed her a self-portrait of his own making. It was the first drawing he had ever done, he told her, when he was just 16-years old. He keeps it with him for good fortune and inspiration whenever he finds himself feeling dispirited. And it was true, Filomena knew that day at the park. That sketch of him was perhaps his most prized possession. She wondered if he had it with him that very moment, probably still stained from the time she accidentally spilt her coffee over it when he had left it on the kitchen table. He did not speak to her for three days after that. As an apology, she redid one of her own sketches of him and painted it on canvas but, when she presented it to him, he threw it away and told her that nothing could compare to his original. It was perhaps the only portrait she had drawn of him that he didn’t like.

She shivered at the memory and became suddenly aware of the stagnant Milos staring back at her from her own canvas. "My dear, it's getting dark. I think we should head back," Filomena sighed

Later that evening, Filomena sat quietly at the kitchen table and brooded. Brooded because she knew Milos was not patient enough to wait a week for her. Brooded because she still could not understand why he had thrown away that portrait. She would go to Florence with him, she decided. Once they had established themselves there and Milos were happy at his new school, she would go back and visit her mother. That way, she wouldn't have to choose. That way, everyone would be happy. She would go and tell him right now. The thought of seeing Milos smile thrilled her. She walked over to his study and found it locked. Strange, she thought, but then again, he would sometimes lock himself away when he wanted to finish a painting. She imagined him thrown over his work, his hands moving wildly over the details of their day. With a deep breath, she dragged herself to their bed and decided that she would tell him first thing the next morning.

On November 7th, 2010, Filomena would wake up to an empty bed. She looked all over her apartment but there was nothing left; nothing but her sketches, her portraits, her imitations. Milos had left her apartment, but he was everywhere.

Milos did not think of Filomena for quite some time after he had left her in the middle of the night. The flight to Florence wasn't going to depart until later that afternoon, but he could no longer bear to face Filomena. She was an impediment to his success, he decided.

The next few years of Milos' life contrasted sharply with the hazy comfort of Athens. After graduating, Milos attempted to make a living by both teaching and painting. He would sell only to those he thought worthy of his talents, and patrons who offered low commissions would be rejected on the basis that they did not understand the genius of his work. Milos never stopped painting, even when the people stopped buying, and his reputation soon faded into nothing.

He sold his last painting on the same day he had left for Florence eight years prior. He had long since been dismissed from his teaching post, the money from which he had all but spent on materials for his paintings. What was left of him were pieces of graphite and paper which he purchased in place of some food. It would be his second autumn spent out on one of Florence's stone-cold pavements. He lost his beloved self-portrait somewhere along the way but sketched a new one from memory, for he had not seen his own reflection in months. Even then, he could be seen holding the piece of paper in his hands as if it were some delicate flower or fragile letter. It reminded him of the sunshine of his youth and the glory he enjoyed in Athens and his earlier days in Florence. The sketch of a man much younger than himself spoke to him of his immortality and that this was but one difficulty in his journey in the life of a master artist. If he was to be the next Van Gogh, then so be it. What mattered is that every person would know his name; whether before or after death was of no import for Milos Papadopoulos.