

NECKLACES OF CORALS AND PEARLS. REFLECTIONS ON POETRY

Abstracts. The author analyses the meaning of poetry for him through some published and unpublished poems he has written. Poetry is sometimes born as a sincere expression of true feelings to understand their essence better. If poetry is just this expression, it risks renouncing its uplifting function of the spirit, which seems to be one of its highest merits. If the poet wants to avoid this hidden danger, he must struggle not only to perfect his language but also to increasingly express the infinite potentialities with which his spirit is endowed. The tie between the poet and poetry is a bond of love, which the poet must continuously nurture. The poet does so for an inner necessity, ready to sacrifice other commitments. If he is willing to make the required efforts to perfect himself and his art, inspiration will assist him in achieving significant results.

*O Poesy! For thee I hold my pen
That am not yet a glorious denizen
Of thy wide heaven . . .*
John Keats

Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) wrote that “poetry . . . ties the particular to the universal; it embraces suffering and pleasure, transcending them, and, rising above the clash between the parts, it reveals the place of each part in the whole, the harmony over the conflict, the sweep of the infinite over the narrowness of the finite” (*Poetry* 15-6). And as a matter of fact the word, the instrument of poetry, can offer “such pearls of wisdom and utterance as will promote the well-being and harmony of all the kindreds of the earth” (TB72). In the hands of a person who has the capacity of fully exploiting its potentialities, it can “affect the minds and impress the hearts of those who listen” (TAB1:59). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá emphasises the special value of the word of poetry when He says: “Poetry is much more effective and complete than prose. It stirs more deeply, for it is of a finer composition” (in CC2:78, no.1422), and, as Shoghi Effendi explains, it

“can better awaken . . . noble sentiments than cold rationalising.”¹ These statements seem to confirm the following words written by John Keats (1795–1821): “the honours paid by Man to Man are trifles in comparison to the Benefit done by great works to the ‘spirit and pulse of good’ by their mere passive existence” (To Reynolds, 19 February 1818).

Over the years, I have written several odes that convey my ideas about poetry. I will quote some of them, along with brief comments pointing out their fundamental aspects, hoping my readers will peruse their texts and grasp their subtler aspects.

An Early Poetical Program

Expressing with sincere, harmonious, and beautiful words deeply felt, sometimes not wholly understood, feelings, not only to unburden my heart but also to achieve a better understanding of their truth and, sometimes, their beauty, is my early poetical program, delineated in the ode “Poesy” (2.22), written in 1962:

Sweet dreams
throbs of worries
stirs of thoughts
for a long time refrained.

The heart opens up
the soul vibrates
under the spell of a yearning
transcending the ephemeral—
grace of forms harmony
of words depth of vision.

And when it bursts out—
an impassioned effusion
of emotions and words—
it is like a wind that crosses

¹ On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 10 October 1932, to an individual, in CC1:7, no.26.

the mountains like a river
that rises swells overflows
and everywhere floods.

Joy of speaking
true feelings
of weeping tears
shed in the breast
but not on the brow
of portraying
in a mirror of words
sincere images
of generous affections.

It is a blaze of truth
an outlet of sensations
an appearance of the features
of the innermost heart.

That poetry allowed me to express worries and thoughts, and what kind of “grace of forms” I wanted to infuse into my verses is immediately apparent in the first two poems I have preserved of those adolescent attempts at poetic expression. The second is “I Alone Have No Peace” (1.4), written in 1955, inspired by the fragment of Alcman: “Slumbering are the mountains, / crest and chasm, ravine and precipice” (see *Lyra Graeca* 1:77, fr. 36), studied in those days at school.

When the moon shines
and her pale face beams
high in the sky, all is
calm and serene
in the world. Cradled
in the arms of sleep
every man takes a break
from the toils of the day.

I alone am awake
 I alone have no peace:
 a grief burdens
 my heart, an anguish
 forbids me to rest.

In these verses, the peace of the landscape serves only as a counter-weight to the war that an “anguish” triggers in the poet’s heart. This composition is an early hint of the restlessness that pervades many of the following poems, a feeling very similar to that which has animated most modern poets. The first is “Yearning for Beauty,” written in 1955:

Fervour of ideas
 is seething in the heart
 yearning for beauty
 harmony perfection. (1.4)

Although the poet’s heart is restless, he aspires to the “beauty / harmony perfection” he sees in nature and wants to reproduce in his heart and verses. And beauty already appears as harmony and perfection, an echo of the Platonic, beautiful–good hendiadys. The ancient Greeks had a particular word, *Kalokagathós*, which is composed of the adjective *kalós*, “beautiful,” the conjunction *kai*, “and,” and the adjective *agathós*, “good.” Obviously, “beautiful” here meant an inner beauty to which goodness in the broad sense was closely related.

Poetry and Self-indulgence

As attractive as this kind of poetry may be for the poet and his readers, it conceals a hidden danger: self-indulgence, intended as an indulgence to “The ego . . . the animal in us, the heritage of the flesh which is full of selfish desires.”² In his effort to write, as the verses by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney (1939–2013) seemingly suggest, “to see. . . [himself],

² On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, to an individual, 8 January 1949, in LoG114, no. 387.

to set the darkness echoing,”³ the poet runs the risk of falling into narcissism; not to expose the best part of himself; to emphasise the less noble aspects of his life; and of ignoring respect, good sense, measure, and thus also good taste. In contrast, the beauty of poetry seems to suggest quite another thing. It seems to suggest that poetry may “affect the minds and impress the hearts of those who listen,” inspiring “gladness” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in “Recent” 318), “rest and joy” (TAB1:59), and refreshment of their “breast” (TAB3:69). It seems to suggest that poetry may “appeal to higher motivations in life.”⁴ The Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837) wrote in his “Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro [Dialogue between Timander and Eleander]”: “Now I do not think highly of those poems which, read and meditated, do not leave in the soul of their readers such a lofty feeling that, for half an hour, will not prevent them from conceiving a petty thought or performing an unworthy action” (*Operette* 251). Another Italian poet, Salvatore Quasimodo (1901–1968), Nobel winner for Literature in 1958, explained that poetry “turns into ethic just because it expresses beauty” and thus the poet “does ‘change’ the world” (*Poesie* 293). My aspiration to write this kind of poetry is evident in the ode “You Come Back, O Poetry” (5.14), penned in 1991:

After long silences
you come back, O Poetry.
I fear you no longer
for the self-indulgence
you once inspired me.

Today you suggest
new roads of light
and mists and hazes
are left behind.

³ “Personal Helicon,” in *Death of a Naturalist*.

⁴ On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 23 December 1979, to a believer, in CC2:414, no. 2231.

The self is still longed for
 but it is the self
 that returns to the Lord
*pleased and pleasing Him.*⁵

And though on my *scroll*⁶
 barbarian scripts
 are written still,
 today the effort suffices me
 of changing those letters
 into divine words.

Poetry and Love of Transcendence

As imperfect as he may be, the poet is like any other human being “even as a finely tempered sword concealed in the darkness of its sheath” (PHW, no.72). The “love of transcendence” (SAQ217, sec.48, para.8) and the aspiration “towards exaltation” typical of human beings sometimes motivate the poet to “come forth from the sheath of self and desire” (PHW, no.72). When he sings this effort, he can impress the minds and touch the hearts of his readers, inspiring them to follow the rewarding roads of the quest for inner perfection. If his effort is sincere, he does not fall into arrogance; he does not exceed “the bounds of tact and wisdom”⁷ because he remains ever aware of his human imperfection and does not cease to strive “to turn this nether dust into high heaven” (SWAB70, sec.35). These thoughts emerge from “And It Is Still So Much” (6.46), addressed to a lady who, in 1994, having read my poems,

⁵The Koran describes three stages of the soul: the soul which is “prone to evil” (12:53), “the self-accusing soul” (75:2), which accuses and blames the self for its evil deeds, and the soul “at rest” (89:27), here “pleased and pleasing Him” which has attained the goal of perfection.

⁶ “Every man’s fate we have fastened on his own neck: on the Day of Judgment we shall bring out for him a scroll which he will see spread open. (It will be said to him:) ‘Read thine (own) record: sufficient is thy soul this day to make out an account against thee’” (Koran 17:13-4, trans. Yusuf Ali).

⁷ Bahá’u’lláh, in CC2:407, no.2212.

said: “And the Faith? Where is it in your poems?” and advised me against spreading them.

You tell me, O my friend,
you don't perceive
any scent of the eternal
wafting from these words.
And how could you,
if their writer is what still remains
of an ephemeral nothing—
and it is still so much.

But I feel a flame in my heart
which you for sure cannot see
a flame which burns and consumes
the hindering veils of that nothing.
And as long as this flame is burning,
I cannot be silent about the stirrings
it kindles in my heart.

O my friend, when all
has been consumed by this flame,
no words will remain for me
to say, and I shall be silent
like the sycamore's leaves
at the dropping of the wind.

If then you will tell me
that in that silence you perceived
the scent of the eternal,
I shall know that you found it,
as I did, where it had always wafted:
in the hearts of humankind
in the beauties of the world
in the mysterious fathoms

of the *Mother-Letters*⁸
 in the joys of the efforts
 bent so that the heavenly
 Kingdom's luminous model
 may be copied down here.

This type of poetry reflects the thought of Benedetto Croce when he wrote that poetry “springs from the ‘unsatisfied desire,’ and not from satisfied desire, from which nothing is generated” (167).

Poetry as an Act of Love

If poetry aspires to express “beauty / harmony perfection,” its origin is an act of love, love for this triad and others with whom the poet wants to share it. The soul of the poet presents itself at the alcove of poetry and begs to be admitted. Once allowed in, it forges a special relationship with the Muse, which is wholly personal. My poems disdain the lessons of prosody and prefer the plain ways of natural spontaneity. They do not express pretentious passions but frail human feelings. They preserve that trepidation that arises from a persistent feeling of remoteness from the Ideal, always accompanied by the hope of receiving a coveted inspiration and being able to bring its fruits into the world. These thoughts are the essence of “Psyche and Poetry” (7.44), written in 1996:

You are not nymph to me,
 nor am I satyr lusting
 after you. I am not
 Zulaykhá nor you
 Joseph, but I am
 Jacob blinded
 by too many tears
 shed for his son's
 long and abhorrent absence.
 I am Majnún, indeed, and you

⁸ The reviving words of Scripture.

his unreachable Laylá.
Shall I always sing
unappeased longings?

I never frequented
Vulcan's smithy.
I flee from its busy
sounds and shabby
tools, its shaggy
stenchy, perspiring
muscles. I am not
Arachne, then, and you
her magnificent web.
I am Narcissus, instead,
and you limpid sheet of water;
I am Echo, and you
transforming mountain
with grassy recesses.

I want you as light
as veil of trembling bride,
as subtle as frail
stem of a meadow flower,
as delicate as white nymphaea
laying upon the waters.
You are not to me solemn
hawk's flight, but whirring wing
of iridescent humming-bird,
not enamelled sunset palette,
but ethereal rainbow's lightness.

When I speak to you
in the solitudes of my heart,
I hear the answer
of your gentle voice.

But if I venture
to reverberate the echo
of your words into more
concrete dimensions,
suddenly I hear cawing
crows, hooting
owls. Alas, poor
Psyche, your candle's
drop awakens Eros.
He smiles and bestows
upon you his warm
and soft embrace, but then
he flies away. And you,
Psyche, find yourself
alone, empty
your alcove, still panting
your breast, as yet unappeased
your exhausting desire.

But perhaps some day
after that meeting
you will feel in your bosom
like a flutter of wings.
Perhaps that fleeting embrace
will have born you a child.

My poems speak, therefore, of an unfulfilled love. One thing is the feeling of "beauty / harmony perfection" perceived by the poet, and another is the verbal expression he can give it. This feeling of inadequacy, less known to the general public, has been a constant companion of many eminent poets. To mention only my three favourite poets, Petrarch almost obsessively polished his lyrics; the nearly perfect "The Infinite" by Leopardi was born from an idea recorded in the *Zibaldone* and later elaborated through various stages by the great Italian poet; even the minimalist perfection of Ungaretti's verses hides a patient and

prolonged activity. Recently, I discovered in the sonnet “Il cacciatore (The Hunter)” by Giovanni Pascoli⁹ (*Myrica* 58) an evident portrait of the poet, with the anguish he feels when he fails to transform one of the raw products of his imagination into a work at least acceptable.

The Poet and His Fruit

The poet loves his fruit. Therefore, he aspires to dialogue with an audience he addresses, although he does not know his readers and knows they may be only a few people. He feels deeply bound to them, not by the poison of their “suffrage” (Keats, to Reynolds, 25 August 1819), but by his love for humankind, to whom he feels close because we are all “rays of one sun . . . the Sun of Truth” (SWAB88, sec.45; 89, sec.46). However, his highest aspiration is that his poems may be equal to his cherished Ideal and, as such, may obtain a higher approval. And to get this approval, he pursues the highest perfection of which he is capable because “no created thing shall ever attain its paradise unless it appeareth in its highest prescribed degree of perfection” (SWB 88) and “no paradise is more glorious in the sight of God than attainment unto His good-pleasure” (ibid. 103). These feelings permeate the ode “Yesterday a Kindly Friend” (8.14), written in 1997:

O benevolent Beauty
that once more emerges
from the thousand and one nights
darkening my heart. If it were
not for you, which fruit
could we taste of the world?

You infuse sweetness into my words,
you make them garlands
of meadow flowers, necklaces
of corals and pearls, bracelets
of turquoise and jasper.

⁹ (1855-1912), an Italian Decadentist poet and classical scholar.

But which neck will accept
their embrace? Which wrist
their adornment? Which voice
will ever intone them?
Which heart will beat
together with mine at their sound?

Yesterday a kindly friend
whispered in my name some
of mine earlier verses of love
in a place which is dearer to God
than anywhere else in the world.

But while my soul was receiving
from her this unusual gift, where
had that unconscious one gone?
And was one of the thousand
angels triumphantly circling
around that place moved
by her voice? Did he bring
her whisper of love to that Throne
of which I dare not even think?

And did that great Ruler
from Whom each beauty radiates
hear an echo of those songs,
although from afar?

But even if I shall never know,
the joy still remains
of that friendly heart
which brought me to such
a high place within itself,
which gave a resonant voice
to my heart, unaware and far off.

The Poetical Imperative

The poet cannot refrain from writing. As Domenico Pisana, teacher, literary critic, and theologian, said:

like St. Paul on the road to Damascus, the poet lives a moment in which he falls from the gray horse of everyday life and senses something inside that leads him to write, to withdraw, to give the word its expressive power to interpret a feeling that is his, but that becomes collective, of everyone and that becomes the epiphany of a universal metaphysical essence . . . (“Poetry,” RTMNews)

When poetry speaks to him, he unhesitatingly responds. Although his poems may disconcert others, he cannot keep silent, like “The Tawny Candle” (9.74) in 1998 in the Serbian Orthodox Church of Saint Spyridon in Trieste.

Snow-white silent
they burn, tear
after tear they melt
into hazy light
beneath the icon.

But she, the tawny
candle, sodden with sandal
and incense, cannot keep
quiet, as she burns,
in the astonished silence
of her snow-white companions.

As she burns, she crackles,
and gives off her sweet fragrance.

This poem reminds me of the irony of a poem written in the Nineties by the American poet Diane Huff Lofti entitled “The Anatomy of a Poem,”¹⁰ which partly says:

. . . What’s that? Speak up, boy!
 You say you have hung your soul out to dry—
 Don’t you know that all the neighbors, passing by,
 Will know that today is Saturday and much more about you that is
 conveniently
 Necessary? Move your clothesline, son!
 Didn’t you know that’s why the back of houses exist?
 Where if you must disclose your soul,
 It takes some work to get a glimpse.
 Our advice is to stop it.
 All that exposure can’t be good for it,
 And as for your poem, whatever happened to it,
 Take two aspirins, and if it comes back again,
 Give us a ring.

However, the poet never loses hope that his words may inspire others with feelings similar to those he has perceived while writing his verses.

The Linden Tree (1998)

In the love embrace of springtime
 the May linden tree bedecks itself
 in thousands of cream-coloured sweet-
 scenting blooms. Perchance a swarm
 of industrious bees may perceive
 their perfume and soon follow its trail
 and reach them and eagerly quaff
 their feeding nectar. What sweet
 honey, then, will they produce! (9.62)

¹⁰ *World Order* [new series] 28:2 (Winter 1996-97), 48.

Poetry and the Fleeting Moment

The poet writes because sometimes his perceptions seem so beautiful that his heart cannot accept to let them vanish into nothingness. Thus, he sings them because he wants to perpetuate them and share them with others, trusting that their beauty will bring his readers, as few as they may be, closer to that “sign” that exists in each created being, which is “the mirror of His beauty in the world of creation” (GWB262, sec.CXXIV, para.2).

The Fleeting Moment (1998)

Such is your beauty, O fleeting
moment, that I cannot allow
the night of oblivion to eclipse
you with its darksome wings.
I pause, then, that I may listen
to your voice, and, lo, I hear it
and soon put it in the form
of words. Perchance tomorrow,
when this insignificant mote
of knowledge will be extinguished
to this life, someone will read
these verses and your unique
beauty will be renewed
at her measure in the hidden
recesses of her heart.
Accept, o unknown reader,
the gift of my heart to yours.
Let you throb with me
at the beauty that I offer
and then, as you can,
give it at once to others. (9.74)

The Poet and His Muse

Poetry is a friend from which the poet does not want and cannot separate, like Keats, who “cannot exist without poetry” (To Reynolds, 17 April 1817). However, poetry is a mysterious friend who surrenders but soon pulls back, always leaving the poet hoping to have a more intimate, more appeasing meeting with it. The verses of “Upon the Throne of Thy Beauty” (11.50), written in 2002, say so.

Here Thou art in front of me,
such a light on Thy face
that its features can't be seen.
I dreamt of Thee glowing
upon the throne of Thy beauty,
even though the darkness
of my eyes would always
veil me off from Thee.
But in the dead of night
I often hear Thy voice—
a gentle melody that dispels
the darkness of my heart—
I feel Thy warmth that melts
the ice that still remains
of remote days of chill
and fear. Yes, I feel Thee
beside me, albeit only
in a glimpse, like in those
troubling dreams when
one's eyes seem tightly
closed and there is no power
that may open them. But
tomorrow, perchance, my eyes
to Thy beauty will be opened
and Thou wilt finally disperse
the darkness that still remains.

Poetry and modernity

Today, the poet also must stand up to the pressure of a world that seems to ask him to renounce what he cherishes most, his “unfettered rush” (Ungaretti, in Bastianutti 141) toward the Infinite. Many artists today are looking for banally colloquial words. Sometimes, they prefer the themes of a mediocre everyday life. Does this happen because there is but one step between the sublime and the ridiculous? I love minimalism, but only to avoid false and pompous bombast. I appreciate simplicity but could never give up “depth of vision” (Poesy 2.22). Every day, I look for transparencies of the infinite because “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.”¹¹ Most of all, I long for that subtle balance between form and content, which enables the verse to convey the Ideal and sometimes attain the sublime, that is, that moment when the message of the artist reaches his public

with such a power that it produces a particular psychological condition, whose most distinctive traits are the retreat of the rational-logical dimension, a state of provisional mental alienation, whereby the audience wholly identifies itself with the artist’s creative process, a deep commotion associated with feelings of pleasure and enthusiasm, which subjugate and fascinate the hearers’ minds. (Guidorizzi 7)

Therefore, I do not want to forget that if the word seeks to exert its “influence,” it needs “moderation” (TB143), without which “Whatsoever . . . will cease to exert a beneficial influence” (GWB216, sec.CLXIV, para.2) and that it also needs “refinement” (TB143) which, implying graciousness and courtesy, exalts “the human condition” and furthers “the development of man’s inner reality” (SWAB146-7, sec.129).

Another challenge that contemporary poets face is the conviction that poetry should only be “lyrical” and that, as an academic friend and poet of mine wrote to me, we cannot think of “poetry as ‘content’ or what . . . [you want] to transmit . . . [because] the poet is not a journalist or a

¹¹ Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince* 82.

scholar, he is a guardian of language.” On the contrary, I think that the poet must convey noble messages because poetry “can better awaken . . . noble sentiments than cold rationalising.”¹² And if to do so, the poet introduces a certain discursiveness into his verses, no one should accuse him of writing in “poetichese,” that is, that “amateurish and unrealistic style of many young aspiring poets” whose most important feature “is the narrative imprint opposed to poetry” (*Treccani. Neologisms*). I am thinking of the poetic form of *qaṣīdih* defined by the Italian Islamist Alessandro Bausani (1921-1988) as “poetry with a purpose” (“Letteratura neopersiana” 196), which Persian poets used above all “as an instrument of panegyric or even philosophical and moralising poetry” (ibid. 176). Could we not try to renew its ancient glories by adapting it to the needs of the modern world?

The Italian literary critic Stefano Giovanardi (1949–2012), while commenting upon the situation of poetry in Italy in the second half of the twentieth century, mentions “a silence of renunciation rather than expectation” (LVIII [My translation]) On the contrary, the poet cannot renounce, wait, and yield to banality, scepticism, cynicism, and scurrility, as many people seem to do today. The days of our lives are too precious to be wasted in cynicism and mockery. The poet strives to preserve a lightness that will eliminate any trace of ostentation and presumption from his words. He also hopes to be able to open the hearts to beauty because he too, like Keats, hates “poetry that has a palpable design upon us” and thinks that poetry “should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one’s soul, and does not startle or amaze it with itself, but with its subject” (To Reynolds, 3 February 1818). The poet writes verses because writing is part of her struggle towards that “undisturbed peace and absolute composure” (TB162) that God wants us and others to strive to realise through other means. If this is his way of writing poems, his words will exhale “the sweet-smelling fragrance of the love of his Lord, the All-Merciful . . . over all created things,” they will not draw “spears of sarcasm toward people” and will “unlock

¹² On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 10 October 1932, to an individual, in CC1:7, no.26.

treasures and . . . reveal wisdom and mysteries.”¹³ These reflections are implicit in the poem “Reality’s High Peaks” (11.58), written in 2002:

Refined poets are looking
backward, they say,
their polished words
don’t soothe the mind.
Shall perchance the future
be but a constant decline?
Shall it be just unmitigated,
trivial disenchantment?
No, if today the mind
has lost its wings,
if today it doesn’t search
for celestial beauties,
tomorrow it shall be
noble once more and
shall again behold the stars.
Work hard, then
to rouse from sleep,
get up from the plain
where the drift drags you.
You’ll soon conquer
Reality’s high peaks.

Poetry and Poetical Models

Each poet is himself and aims for originality not only in his thoughts but also in his expression. At the same time, however, he especially admires some of his noblest predecessors. It is from them that many of his art instruments are coming. For me, these poets are in the first place: Giuseppe Ungaretti, Giacomo Leopardi, and Petrarch, to whom I feel deeply bound. Dante is too great for me to think of a link with him. The

¹³ Bahá’u’lláh, in Ra‘fatí, *Yádnámih* 296, provisional English translation by Omid Ghaemmaghami.

poem “Flowers” (7.8), written in 1995, is dedicated to these poets. They echo these words by Bahá’u’lláh: “The soul that hath remained faithful to the Cause of God . . . provideth . . . the pure leaven that leaveneth the world of being, and furnisheth the power through which the arts and wonders of the world are made manifest” (GWB161, sec.LXXXII, para.7).

A rain of flowers
was poured onto my lap
by the fertile passing time.
Each flower a thought
of happiness, an idea
of beauty, a gift
of love to be offered
today with joy to them
who so many gifts
bestowed upon me.

To you, *man of pain*,
who only yesterday withdrew
from the *balustrade of breeze*
whereon you’d lean
your *melancholy*,
I offer sweetly scented
jasmines from your
African country, as fragrant
as your youthful days,
bearers of *unrestrained surges*
to whosoever may yearn
to be transfigured with you
into a flight of clouds
and straightaway cross
the threshold of the placeless
so that he may find there
ecstatic abandonments.

To you, inimical
to your *arrogant age*,
in love with tittle-tattle
and *loathing virtue*,
to you who, having leapt
over the hedgerow of your *lonely hill*
through new eyes are scanning
ever-expanding horizons,
I offer flowers of *sweetly*
scented broom, assured as I am
that you are today enlightened
by that sun, which here on earth—
and I don't know why, indeed—
you were not enabled to behold,
and thus with unusual joy
you now devote the stirrings
of your comforted heart
to the promotion of the *impressive*
destiny and fated progress
of the human race.

To you, *sweet Calliope's tongue*,
that we, who have not as *gentle*
a *habit* as you had,
often read obfuscated
by every low thought,
I offer *white and yellow*
flowers, as the flowers
of *the first day* when you saw
freed to the air her golden
hair from which you so quickly
caught fire. And Laura
whom you loved was not
just an earthly woman,
but the *divine incredible beauty*

that you, and many others still,
 already here among us saw.
 And *such and so many sweetnesses*
 you found that we too are, along
 with you, all full of love for her.

And as I offer you these flowers,
 from that same Beauty, after which
 I too eagerly yearn—as you all did—
 I implore for you more and more
 lively blazes of light, brighter
 and brighter reflections of love,
 more and more joyous exhalations
 of fragrances, which through other
 magical pens may descend
 into the world to enlighten, warm
 and perfume the hearts.

One of the characteristics of my poetry is that it is also strongly influenced by the Sufi model filtered through the Bahá'í Scriptures. My perusal of these Writings and my attempts to translate (with the support of Faezeh Mardani) first Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Persian poems and later the verses of the Iranian poet Tahereh¹⁴, as well as my study of the Koran, of Islamic traditions, and great poets such as Rúmi, Háfiz, 'Aṭṭár and Sa'dí, almost imposed by the need to improve my understanding of the Bahá'í Writings and to perfect my translations of those poems, brought me very close to the Eastern model that gradually became part of my imagination, modifying my way of writing poetry. I have not written any poems about this influence, so I will try to illustrate its main aspects now.

The first purely formal aspect is the gradual adoption of rhetorical forms typical of that model and unusual in the West. I transcribe the primary Eastern rhetorical forms that recur in my poems:

¹⁴ Later published in the Italian anthology Tahereh. *Il Tesoro nascosto*.

Taḍmín, literally “sponson” (Coletti 197), consists in “inserting the verses of another in one’s own poem” (Steingass 306). *Taḍmín* is the first of these forms to appear in my poems and is also the most frequent. The first example occurs in the poem “The Sown Seed” (3.44), written on 11 December 1965, where I quote “the wall of shadow” from Ungaretti’s “Mother.” The most typical poems in this respect are “Flowers” (7.8), with its numerous quotations from Ungaretti, Leopardi, Petrarch, and Foscolo, and “Departures. I” (12.72), where I quote Ungaretti and extended passages from a prayer by Bahá’u’lláh and from “Mattinata” by Ruggero Leoncavallo.¹⁵

Mulamma’, bilingual poetry, literally “of different colours” (Steingass 1310), consists of inserting words in another language into one’s verses; see, for example, “The Swans of the Bodensee” (9.52) or “Is It Joy or Pain?” (9.36).

Su’ál-u javáb (question and answer) consists of inserting dialogue into the poem or writing a poem entirely conceived in this form (see Bausani, “Letteratura” 178). Two examples are “My Lover Asked Me” (9.48) and “Reciprocity” (9.86).

A sort of *radif*, a “refrain-word” that in Persian poetry is repeated at the end of each couplet as “a sort of echo-rhyme” (Saccone, “Nota” 65), is present in “*Shaykh* ‘Alí Akbar-i-Mazgání” (10.14): the adjective “Best-Beloved” repeated at the end of each stanza.

A second aspect is using words and phrases typical of the Eastern model, initially drawn primarily from Bahá’u’lláh’s Hidden Words. Already in “Forgetful of the True Friend” (3.36) of 1965, I mentioned “the True Friend” of Persian Hidden Words, no. 52. In “In the Kiss of Life-giving Water” (3.50) of 1966, I spoke of “purity / of thought . . . kindness / of the heart . . . radiance / of the soul,” an apparent reference to “possess a pure, kindly, and radiant heart” of Arabic Hidden Words, no. 1. Later I drew on other Bahá’í Writings: for example, in “To the Poor

¹⁵ In retrospect, I found a *taḍmín* already in one of my poems written on 19 June 1957, “Impotence” (1.52), where I quote “the slings and arrows” of the famous monologue of Shakespeare’s Hamlet.

Astonished Heart” (4.14) I quoted “the indwelling Spirit” from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Some Answered Questions (sec. II, par. 8); in “And It Is Still So Much” (6.46) I mentioned the “mother letters” from *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, sec. LXXIV, par. 1; in “Give Me Your Cup” (9.4), I recalled the “insistent self” from *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 256, sec.206. I also have introduced among my verses numerous Koranic locutions; see, for example, “You Come Back, O Poetry” (5.14), where I describe the “self” who returns to God “pleased and pleasing Him,” explaining in a note: “The Koran describes three stages of the soul: the impassioned soul, which is ‘prone to evil’ (Koran 12:53), ‘the self-accusing soul’ (75:2), which accuses and blames man for his evil deeds; and the soul ‘at rest’ of 89:27, which has attained the goal of perfection” and immediately afterwards I mentions the “scroll” of the self, commenting in a footnote: “According to Koran 17:13–4, God hangs a scroll around the neck of every newborn human being; all the actions she will perform in her life will be written on this scroll. At the moment of its earthly death, the soul is invited to read the contents of its scroll; God’s judgment will be based on this content.”

A third aspect is the reference to myths typical of the Oriental model. I will mention first the *Rúz-i-alast*, one of those myths which, assimilated through the explanations offered by the Bahá’í Writings, has most nourished my spirit. It takes its origins in a verse of the Koran, which reads:

And when thy Lord brought forth their descendants from the reins of the sons of Adam and took them to witness against themselves, “Am I not,” said He, “your Lord?” They said, “Yes, we witness it.” This we did, lest ye should say on the day of Resurrection, “Truly, of this were we heedless, because uninformed.”

Bausani explains this verse as follows:

A lastu means in Arabic, “Am I not?” (your Lord). It would be a day out of history when God asked all future men whether they recognised him as their absolute Lord, and they pronounced the fatal

“yes,” with which they accepted their deserved condemnation in case of rebellion. (“Commento” 553, note 172-174).

In the Bahá’í Scriptures, this myth recurs as a fascinating metaphor conveying the various meanings of the human traits of spiritual instinct (PT88, sec.29, para.8) and love of transcendence (see SAQ217, sec.48, para.8). The soul remembers that primordial day of closeness to God and feels nostalgia for it. This myth is present in some of my poems, such as “Our Sorry Voices” (3.84) and “Against Each Nay” (7.14). Other myths have their roots in the interpretations of the stories of the Koran elaborated by the Sufis: in “Psyche and Poetry” (7.44) and in “On the Wave of a Remote Music” (6.50), I recall the myth of Joseph; in “Sinai” (10.24), I think of the story of Moses. “Where Are the Boundaries” (6.8) of 14 March 1994 is written in its entirety in the language of the Sufis, totally renewed in Bahá’u’lláh’s mystical Writings.

A fourth and final aspect is the direct influence of various Persian mystical poets. A parable told by Rûmî inspired “Return on the Wrist of Your King” (10.44); Sa’dí shows up in “As One Day the Drop” (8.28). Ḥáfiz’s influence is so prominent in the poems of the ninth collection, “The Gift of the Friend,” that I felt the need to subtitle it “In the Footsteps of Ḥáfiz” to avoid misunderstandings. All these poems imply a concept explained by Bausani:

Whenever the mystical tradition, and in general classical Persian literature, speaks of real love and allegorical love, it means precisely the inverse of what we would mean by the same expressions: real love for the absolute, allegorical love between a man and a woman. (*Saggi* 147)

All this became part of my poetry without any specific reflection on my part, and it is so unusual that it has almost forced me to accompany my poems with some notes, which are also uncommon in poetry. But these notes, as Milli Graffi also thinks, are “strictly essential, just enough to provide the minimum of information that allows the reader

to elaborate on his own the very particular structure of the original system” (15.17).

When Poetry Keeps Silent

For the poet, the worst time is when the voice of poetry seems silent. The anguish of this silence is the theme of “Sleepless Night” (12.20), written in 2005:

When I hear your voice
I forget weights
of awkward thoughts,
whirls of clashing
sensations, remembrances
of embarrassing errors,
even the exhausting
inquietude of desire
deserts my limbs.
You alone remain: fire,
electricity, uninterrupted light.
But when your voice
is silent, I find myself
confined in a lonely
exile. The quiet murmur
of this world of small
things that God has
ordained for us as a home
is like the annoying
hum of an insect
in a sleepless night.

The poet wants to listen to the voice of poetry, even when everything seems to say that other commitments are more pressing.

Silences. II (2015)

In this heart absorbed by sundry
tasks, you kept tactfully quiet.
For a long time you left me alone.
While you were silent, anxieties
and grief mounted up. My heart
felt deserted and trembled.
Today I neglect any other thing
to listen once more to your voice:
is it self-satisfaction or love?
What is this song of yours?
Is it the melody of the inmost heart,
or the whisper of the *insistent self*?
I surrender to the warmth
which you always bestow
through the spell of your word
in the hope not to find there
mermaids songs, but the reviving
echo of His sweet invite. (13.10)

The poet fears that other thoughts may distract him, that other tasks may prevent him from giving ear to the voice of poetry, which sometimes is so feeble. Through its mellow and persuasive words, poetry provides meaning to the most insignificant things of life, weight, and value to the poet's work. In 1980 the Bahá'í English writer Geoffrey Nash, who considers poetry "the divinest of the arts," writes: "It is true as well that what Yeats once called 'The Muses' sterner Laws' ['The Grey Rock,' v. 59] require of the poet a single-minded devotion which is perhaps at present incompatible with the time and effort required" (1, 2) to carry out other vital tasks, viewed as more urgent, especially "to carry forward an ever-advancing civilisation" (GWB215, sec.CIX, para.2). However, isn't Nash's statement also true for most professions? What shall we say of the life of a physician? Is the mandate of a poet less urgent than any other one? Shall not the poet contribute "to carry forward an ever-advancing civilisation" through his words?

Make Yourself Heard (2015)

O my sweet Muse, your charming
voice always echoes in my heart's
most hidden precincts, as light as a rose
laid down on the water that a small wave
soon sinks. Too strong is the buzz
of this swarm of inconclusive thoughts.
O darling, persist, make yourself heard,
do not permit the ephemeral
to prevail. Do not allow
this base clay to bedim
the luster of the gold that you
lavishly bestow. Your melody,
I want, I want your songs,
I want to hear again the thousand and one
stories that you alone can tell.
My hair is white, my members
tired, blurred my senses.
But my heart, my heart is
always awake, always eager to give ear. (13.18)

Thus, poetry is a demanding friend that requires constant dedication and surrender. I think it is indeed a gift that the poet should nurture; otherwise, like a flower without water, it withers and dies. Ungaretti said: "Poetry then, as is usually agreed, is indeed a gift; or better, it is the fruit of a moment of grace—towards which a patient, desperate solicitation, particularly among the older, cultivated languages, is never out of place" (in Cary 149). Only when the poet cultivates and reaps that flower and each of his words is "dug out of . . . [his] life / like an abyss," (ibid. 137) the heart of his readers will be "refreshed and dilated with joy" (TAB3:669).