



Shedding Light in the Hearts: Reflections on Poetry

Abstract

Starting from a statement by Giuseppe Ungaretti, poetry is examined as an emotional stimulus, as truth, and as a privileged form of linguistic expression. Each aspect is explored in its limitations and merits, in the light of quotations from poets and the Bahá'í writings. It is suggested that, as poets increasingly surpass these limitations and develop these merits within the framework of a spiritual conception of the nature of reality, they may overcome the present crisis in the relations between poetry and society and better pursue, in the full freedom of their inspiration, their ultimate purpose, is to help their fellows to "attain . . . the station of true understanding and nobility."

Résumé

Prenant comme point de départ une déclaration de Giuseppe Ungaretti, l'auteur examine la poésie sous ses aspects de stimulus émotif, de vérité et de mode d'expression linguistique privilégié. Il relève les limites et les mérites de chacun de ces aspects à la lumière de citations de poètes italiens contemporains et d'Écrits bahá'ís. Il suggère qu'en s'efforçant de dépasser ces limites et de développer ces valeurs potentielles dans le contexte du concept spirituel de la nature de la réalité, les poètes pourraient surmonter la crise actuelle qui marque les rapports entre les poètes et la société et s'approcher davantage de leur but ultime qui est, selon les Écrits bahá'ís, d'aider «les enfants des hommes» à parvenir à «l'état de compréhension et de noblesse véritables».

Resumen

Partiendo de una declaración de Guiseppe Ungaretti, se estudia la poesía como estímulo emocional, como la verdad, y como forma privilegiada de expresión lingüística. Dentro de sus limitaciones y méritos, se investiga cada aspecto a la luz de citas de poetas y de los escritos bahá'ís. Se da a suponer que, en lo que los poetas cada vez más sobrepasen estas limitaciones y desarrollen estos méritos dentro del marco de un entendimiento espiritual como esencia de la realidad, podrán superar la crisis actual en las relaciones entre la poesía y la sociedad y buscar mejor, en plena libertad de su inspiración, su máximo propósito, que es el de ayudar a sus congéneres a "lograr . . . la condición de la comprensión verdadera y la nobleza."

Having light in one's heart is a difficult thing, suffering and dying are every man's fate. —Giuseppe Ungaretti

Can Poetry Be Defined?

In 1947 Giuseppe Ungaretti (1888–1970)¹ wrote:

I'm not sure that poetry can be defined. I believe and profess that it is indefinable: that it manifests itself in that moment of our expression when the things we have most at heart, that have most shaken and tormented our thoughts, that most deeply belong to the very meaning of our life, appear to us as profoundly human truth. And this must occur in a vibration that seems almost to go beyond a man's strength, that can never be won by immersion in traditions or by study, though both of those are substantial aids to self [the vibration's] nourishment. 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. (“Indefinibile aspirazione” 149)

In these words, hints may be found of the three most important conceptions of poetry: “poetry as an emotional stimulus or participation . . . poetry as truth . . . poetry as a privileged form of linguistic expression” (Abbagnano s.v. “poesia”).

Poetry as an Emotional Stimulus or Participation

We find here the conception of poetry, as an “emotional stimulus or participation,” expounded and condemned by Plato, who said that the “natural hunger and desire to relieve our sorrow by weeping and lamentation,” which we feel “when in misfortune” and “which is kept under control in our own calamities is satisfied and delighted by the poets” (*Republic* 606a). It is those things that “we have most at heart, that have most shaken and tormented our thoughts, that most deeply belong to the very meaning of our life,” which urge poets to express themselves and are the subject of their poetry.

But whereas Plato condemns this way of making poetry because it “feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up . . . [it] lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness

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¹ The founder of the Italian “hermetic” school, his poems are internationally renowned for their clean, spare style and their almost mystical sense of beauty.

and virtue” (*Republic* 606d), Ungaretti offers a more than acceptable vindication. The emotions which move the poet appear to him “as profoundly human truth . . . [and] in a vibration that seems almost to go beyond a man’s strength,” because poetry is “an act whereby a man aims at purity, aims at loving, although his flesh may still be weak, that which goes beyond him: Human Perfection” (*Vita d’un uomo* 791). In other words, although the emotions of the poet are born from human weakness and not from reason, which Plato considers “the better nature in each of us” (*Republic* 606a), still the poet can transform them. She can transform them because she grasps them in their universality, as the emblems of two intrinsic aspects of the human condition: anguish, which is born from human nature’s frailty and contradiction, and that “yearning,” that love for “Human Perfection,” which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls “love of reality” (*Promulgation* 49) or “of exaltation” (*Some Answered Questions* 188).

These concepts seem implicit in the words which Bahá’u’lláh wrote to Mírzá Maqṣúd, a believer who had sent him a few verses: “Every word of thy poetry is indeed like unto a mirror in which the evidences of the devotion and love thou cherishest for God and His chosen ones are reflected. . . . Its perusal hath truly proved highly impressive, for it was indicative of both the light of reunion and the fire of separation” (*Tablets* 175–76).

Mírzá Maqṣúd’s poetry is described as a “mirror” of the feelings affecting his heart, a heart that is deeply human because, although it is filled with “the devotion and love . . . [he cherishes] for God and His chosen ones,” still it suffers from its physical separation from Bahá’u’lláh. Therefore his verses do not express only an ideal condition of tranquillity, but also feelings proceeding from the frailty and contradiction of his human nature, the same for which Plato blames the poets. However, Mírzá Maqṣúd’s “sighing and lamentation . . . longing and eagerness,” ennobled as they are by the “sweet savours of love” exhal- ing from “every word thereof” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 174) do not deserve repre- sent that “meek voice and depressing lamentation” which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself seems not to appreciate from “the believers of God,” but , rather, are quite simi- lar to “the soul-entrancing melody of the Kingdom of Abhá and the harmony of the Supreme Concourse,”² which he expects from them, and thus Mírzá Maqṣúd’s lamentation do not deserve any reproach. Besides, the condition that Bahá’u’lláh describes could also be viewed as a symbol. The words “separa- tion” and “reunion” do not seem to refer to only the incidental condition of physical nearness to, or remoteness from Bahá’u’lláh, which inspired Mírzá

² Letter of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá published in *Bahá’í News* 1.5 (5 June 1910):1.

Maqṣúd's verses. They also hint at the condition of nearness to, or remoteness from God, in which anyone may find oneself at different moments in life. Remoteness is a fire because it implies the pains of imperfection. Nearness is a light because it implies the luminous wisdom of spirituality. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: "Nearness is likeness" (*Promulgation* 148).

Let, then, the poets sing "the limpid marvel / of a delirious ferment" (Ungaretti, "Commiato," 137), or "rhyme . . . to set the darkness echoing" (Heaney 82), if then their poems will be a "drainless shower / of light . . . / . . . a friend / To soothe the cares, and lift the thoughts of man" (Keats 2:748). Their poems will also uplift our hearts and evoke the same feelings—which moved the poets to rise above the personal and relative plane towards the realms of beauty and spiritual yearning—in our hearts as well. They will have thus accomplished their mission of expressing our frailty and contradictions and of inspiring us with the desire to struggle to overcome them as well as with the hope to succeed in our efforts.

Poetry as Truth

In Ungaretti's words we may also find the conception of poetry "as truth" ascribed to Aristotle, who considered poetry a superior form of knowledge, "for poetry tends to express the universal" (9.1451b). In fact Ungaretti writes that in poetry "the things we have most at heart . . . appear to us as profoundly human truth. And this must occur in a vibration that seems almost to go beyond a man's strength, that can never be won by immersion in traditions or by study, though both of those are substantial aids to self- [the vibration's] nourishment" ("Indefinibile aspirazione" 149).

In other words, the poet's perception of things is different from the perception of others. In "the lightning-swift relation between inspiration and vision established [in his mind]" (Ungaretti, *Vita d'un uomo* 134), the poet does not feel things in their accidental qualities, as everyone perceives them, but in their essence. And thus the poet tries to describe them, so that she may fix on paper that fleeting "moment of grace" when she almost touched the Eternal. That is why also other people can grasp through the poet's words a universal beauty, beyond the ordinary appearance that everyone can describe. And since this beauty transcends sensory and rational perception, it can be described only through images which do not speak only to our senses and reasons, but also and mainly to our hearts.

We are reminded of a definition of poetry given by Tommaso Ceva (1648–1737):³ “a dream in the presence of reason” (qtd. in Montale 141). If poetry is a dream, this dream cannot be but “the fruit of a moment of grace.” This concept is also expounded by Plato, when he reports Socrates’ words on the four kinds of “madness,” that temporary rapture which possesses the prophet, the priest, the poet, and the lover. He says: “he who, having no touch of the Muses’ madness in his soul, comes to the door and thinks that he will get into the temple by the help of art—he, I say, and his poetry are not admitted; the sane man disappears and is nowhere when he enters into rivalry with the madman” (*Phaedrus* 245a). Many poets agree with him on this issue. For example, Dante says: “I am one who hearkens when / Love prompteth, and I put thought into word / After the mode which he dictates within” (*Divina Commedia* 2.24:52–4). And Umberto Saba (1883–1957)⁴ writes:

Sometimes a god calls me, and wants
to be listened to. For the thoughts
arising within me, for my heart’s
inner vibration, for the intensity of my grief,
I extinguish any human equality.
It is my privilege. And I preserve it. (“Privilegio” 523)

Also in the Bahá’í writings art is considered as a gift. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said: “all Art is the gift of the Holy Spirit. When this light shines through the mind of a musician, it manifests itself in beautiful harmonies. Again, shining through the mind of a poet, it is seen in fine poetry and poetic prose . . . These gifts are fulfilling their highest purpose, when showing forth the praise of God” (qtd. in Lady Blomfield 167). He explained that spirit is “the power of life” (*Tablets of Abdul-Baha* 3:611), the eternal “radiation of the light and heat of the Sun of Reality”⁵ (*Promulgation* 271), “the divine breath which animates and pervades all things” (*Promulgation* 58). Spirit manifests itself in different degrees according to the different capacities of the created beings wherein it is manifested. In the mineral it appears as “the power of affinity” (*Promulgation* 240); in the vegetable as the “power of growth” (*Promulgation* 240); in the animal as “the power of sense perception” (*Promulgation* 29); in human beings as “the power of intellectual inves-

³ A Jesuit, mathematician, and poet from Milan.

⁴ Born into the Jewish community of Trieste, Italy, his lyricism is reminiscent of the poets of the Italian *Crepuscolarismo* (the twilight poets).

⁵ In the Bahá’í writings the locutions “Sun of Reality” or “Sun of Truth” denote the Word of God or *logos*.

tigation into the outer phenomena” (*Promulgation* 29) and as the “divine spirit” (*Selections* 170), which has the power to “unveil divine realities and universal mysteries that lie within the spiritual world” (*Selections* 170); in the sanctified souls of the Manifestations of God, spirit appears as “the Holy Spirit . . . the mediator of the Holy Light from the Sun of Reality” (*Some Answered Questions* 145), “the energizing factor in the life of a man,” because “[w]hosoever receives this power is able to influence all with whom he comes into contact” (*Paris Talks* 165). All human beings can perceive the Spirit in the Manifestation of God, in the Scriptures, in themselves, in their fellow human beings, in society, in the universe. But poets can also transform their perceptions of the spirit into melodious and harmonious words which evoke, in other human beings, perceptions similar to those whereby they were inspired.

And thus the poet is a “delicate and virgin soul” (Plato, *Phaedrus* 245a) who feels a universal beauty in that which others see as insignificant and has the capacity to express it in such a form as others too may perceive it. Therefore some authors say that poets may have “a mystical knowledge of reality” (Ungaretti, *Vita d’un uomo* 134) and that their inspiration may be considered as a particular kind of mystical experience, “the Contemplation of Immanence” (Happold 88). As William Blake writes:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour. (490)

Poetry as a Privileged Form of Linguistic Expression

In Ungaretti’s words we may also find the conception of poetry “as a privileged form of linguistic expression.” He writes, in fact, that poetry manifests itself in a particular “moment of our expression,” as “the fruit of a moment of grace—towards which a patient, desperate solicitation, particularly among the older, cultivated languages, is never out of place” (“Indefinibile aspirazione” 149). We find here the concept of poetry as both an inspired and a solicited expression. The poet has the capacity to infuse beauty into her words, both by her very nature and because of her solicitation, that is, her studies and search. Therefore, poetry is born from the instinct of the poet, but it is also the fruit of the poet’s search for inspiration and for a greater capacity of expression. Poetry is thus the fruit of a linguistic search. As Ungaretti writes:

When I find
in this my silence
a word
it is dug out of my life
like an abyss. (“Commiato” 137)

In the Bahá’í writings we find various statements on the meaning and importance of words. Bahá’u’lláh writes:

Every word is endowed with a spirit . . . [and] the impression which each word maketh is clearly evident and perceptible. . . . One word may be likened unto fire, another unto light, and the influence which both exert is manifest in the world. . . . One word is like unto springtime causing the tender saplings of the rose-garden of knowledge to become verdant and flourishing, while another word is even as a deadly poison. (*Tablets* 172–73)

And ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that “the function of language is to portray the mysteries and secrets of human hearts. The heart is like a box, and language is the key” (*Promulgation* 60). The Bahá’í writings suggest what we can do so that our words may better “portray the mysteries and secrets,” and thus unlock the boxes of human hearts and become “like unto springtime causing the tender saplings of the rose-garden of knowledge to become verdant and flourishing.” On the one hand, they seem to imply that beauty makes words more valuable. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said that “[p]oetry is much more effective and complete than prose. It stirs more deeply, for it is of a finer composition” (qtd. in Lucas 11–14). And to a correspondent who had sent Him her verses He answered: “Endeavor, so far as it is possible for thee, that day by day thou mayest string the pearls of poesy with sweeter rhythm and more eloquent contents, in order that it may become conducive to the perpetuity of thy name in the spiritual meetings” (*Tablets of Abdul-Baha* 3:546). On the other hand, Bahá’u’lláh recommends “refinement⁶ which . . . is dependent upon hearts which are detached and pure,” “moderation . . . combined with tact and wisdom,” “leniency and forbearance,” suggests to “carefully deliver . . . [one’s] words at the appropriate time and place,” and advises that “an enlightened man of wisdom should primarily speak with words as mild as milk, that the children of men may be nurtured and edified thereby and

⁶ The original Arabic word translated as “refinement” is *liṭāfat*. This word “has a wide range of meanings with both spiritual and physical implications, such as elegance, gracefulness, cleanliness, civility, politeness, gentleness, delicacy and graciousness, as well as being subtle, refined, sanctified and pure” (Notes 199).

may attain the ultimate goal of human existence which is the station of true understanding and nobility” (*Tablets* 172, 173). His words do not specifically refer to poetry, but to the importance of the word in view of the development of civilization. But they may be useful to poets as well, while they face three vexed questions about poetry: the language of poetry, the purpose of poetry, and the freedom of poets.

The Language of Poetry

In the twentieth century many have maintained that the peculiar trait of poetry, which sets it apart from any other modality of literary expression, is its language: how should the current language, which the poet always and for various reasons perceives as inadequate to sing “[a]fter the mode which . . . [Love] dictates within,” be modified?

The Bahá’í writings seem to suggest that poets may more easily achieve their goal if they pursue, on the one hand, the beauty of their words, and on the other, a “refinement,” which implies for them to acquire certain inner qualities. The idea that poets should pursue beauty is mostly accepted, although the criteria of beauty may be different. But as to the “refinement” and the inner qualities of poets, a few considerations may prove useful. Ungaretti writes: “The artist, if he is a true artist, suffers more than anyone else the punishment that his word may prove unintelligible to most people, as if his art were an extraordinary, monstrous work for his kind: his art itself bears the bleeding wound of such an unjust powerlessness” (*Vita d’un uomo* 735–36). If it is true that such incomprehension depends on society, and that it could be overcome if society would “achieve a more human order” (*Vita d’un uomo* 735), it is also true that “refinement” would enable the poet to obtain a deeper understanding of himself, his fellows, and society. And thus he could communicate more easily with them. Because, in Ungaretti’s words, “[t]he supreme factor of human utterance is that which one has to say in order to know himself, for everyone’s uplift,” (*Vita d’un uomo* 745) and “conducting a linguistic research, while having nothing to say, is dangerous and absurd” (*Vita d’un uomo* 737). Also Salvatore Quasimodo (1901–1968)⁷ writes: “Poetry is a human achievement, but different kinds of people can achieve it” (266). Even in our times some poets have variously and more or less eagerly aspired to “refinement” and to the inner qualities recom-

⁷ Eminent representative of the Italian “hermetic” school of poets. After World War II he opened his poetry to social and political engagement, while remaining formally faithful to “pure” poetry. He won the Nobel prize for literature in 1959.

mended by Bahá'u'lláh for a more effective use of words: detachment, purity of heart, moderation, wisdom, tolerance, and the capacity to “carefully” deliver one’s words “at the appropriate time and place” (*Tablets* 173).

According to Ungaretti, poetry “must bear the unmistakable hallmark of its writer’s individuality and, at the same time, reveal those traits of anonymity, those choral features, whereby it is poetry, and it is not alien to any human being” (*Vita d’un uomo* 741). And how will a poem be both personal and anonymous, if the poet is not so detached as to be able to observe his own emotions? Ungaretti wrote: “I dreamt of a poetry whereby the secrecy of the soul, neither betrayed by, nor distorted into, impulses, might be compatible with arguments of deep wisdom” (*Vita d’un uomo* 975n1). The uneasiness of an “insistent self” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 256) is not unknown to modern poets. To her friends who scold her because she “keeps saying: ‘I, I,’” Patrizia Cavalli (b. 1949)⁸ answers: “is not this ever-present cockroach / a sufficient expiation? / Happy you, if it moves off” (851, 855).

As to purity of heart, Saba dreams of “the propitious oasis” where he “may cleanse” his words “of the lie that blinds” them (“Parole” 125). Ungaretti wishes that we may “go back with our memory to the time of our primal innocence” so that “poetry could regain its emotional prestige” (*Vita d’un uomo* 843) and mentions an “unappeasable hope for innocence” as the foremost “contribution of the nineteenth century to poetry” (*Vita d’un uomo* 133). The Italian literary critic Stefano Giovanardi points out that the Italian poets of the second part of the twentieth century aspired to “a ‘virgin’ subjectivity . . . free from the wounds, the alienation, the *manques d’être*, inflicted by history” (xxxiv).

Moderation seems to be a deeply felt need of many poets in the twentieth century, at least in the domain of form. Ungaretti writes: “The word . . . — whether enlisted in the pompous vacuity of oratory, or trifled with in the expression of decorative and ‘artistic’ longings, or perverted in picturesque sketches or sensual melancholia or rising from aims not purely intimate and universal—such a word seemed to me to fail in its poetic purpose” (“Indefinibile aspirazione” 154).

As to wisdom, Quasimodo writes: “People want truth from poetry, a truth which they have not the power to express and in which they may recognize themselves, a disappointed or active truth which may help them . . . to make

⁸ Her poems, in the form of solipsistic and ironic confession, are characterized by an expressionistic style.

sense of joy or pain, to establish good and evil, in this uninterrupted flight of days. . . .” (277). And what truth may come from a poet who has no wisdom?

Leniency and forbearance remind us of Dante’s verses: “Love and the gentle heart are one same thing” (*Vita Nova* 11.3), because these qualities are fruits of the loving capacity, which Ungaretti considers indispensable for poets when he says: “Beauty is perennial and we could see it, fleeting with each instant, returning to life in front of us, such as it was always seen by all those who loved” (*Vita d’un uomo* 569).

Bahá’u’lláh recommends to “carefully” speak “at the appropriate time and place” and His words may sound like an encouragement for poets to modulate their words according to the rhythm of life and history. Ungaretti noted that “any writer who does not express history in, and does not impress the mark of his personality upon, his work is a minor writer, and history will disregard him” (*Vita d’un uomo* 768). Thus it seems that many poets feel the need not only to give a beautiful form to their words, but also to release them from the burden of imperfection that makes them unfit to convey a universal beauty that may stimulate their readers to raise above their human frailty. And the process of the soul’s spiritual struggle in its pursuit of “refinement” is recognized as an essential part of poetry. In the words of Giuseppe Conte (b. 1945),⁹ poetry describes “the journey of Psyche towards Love, of the soul seeking for itself and struggling against the ‘other’ within each human creature” (14).

The Purpose of Poetry and the Freedom of Poets

Few poets would rhyme for nothing, and many share Saba’s wish that from their “poor verse . . . / . . . might be born, for everyone, bread.” (“Il Borgo” 116). And poetry, with its recognized traits—expressing a universal beauty that only the sensitive and refined eye of the poet sees there where anyone else would perceive only a flat everyday occurrence—has all the required to enoble its readers. Poets of all times have borne witness to this fact in their poetic and critical writings. For instance, Giacomo Leopardi (1797–1837)¹⁰ wrote: “I have a poor opinion of any poem which, perused and meditated, does not leave in its reader’s soul a noble feeling that may deter him, for half an hour, from any base thought or unworthy action” (*Operette Morali* 251). And Quasimodo said that

⁹ Italian poet and essayist whose poems take their inspiration from D’Annunzio.

¹⁰ The greatest Italian lyric poet after Petrarch, his poems, pervaded by a deep existential suffering that makes him a modern poet, have exerted a great influence on modern Italian poets as Ungaretti, Saba, Quasimodo, and Montale.

poetry “turns into ethics just because it expresses beauty” and thus the poet “does ‘change’ the world” (293).

Bahá'u'lláh wrote: “It is permissible to study sciences and arts, but such sciences as are useful and would redound to the progress and advancement of the people” (*Tablets* 26). And thus in this age-old controversy the Bahá'í writings seem to agree with all those who have faith in poetry's noble purpose. If the poet has a mission, it is that of the “enlightened man of wisdom” who speaks so “that the children of men may be nurtured and edified thereby and may attain the ultimate goal of human existence which is the station of true understanding and nobility” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 173).

And yet few poets seem willing or even able to write poems for a prescribed purpose. Leopardi said: “The purpose of poetry is not utility, although this may be helpful . . . utility is not its natural purpose, in whose absence poetry does not exist, as it does not exist without delight, since the natural purpose of poetry is to delight” (*Zibaldone* 1:5–6). Poetry is an unfettered activity, a moment of ecstasy, a dream that spontaneously arises in the heart of the poet. As Plato explains: “. . . the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him: when he has not attained to this state, he is powerless and is unable to utter his oracles” (*Ion* 534b). And Ungaretti sings:

poetry
is the world humanity
life itself
flowered from the word
the limpid marvel
of a delirious ferment. (“Commiato” 137)

A poet will not obey any imperative besides those of her heart. There she finds the reasons and explanations for her rhyming. It is true, the poet looks at reality and, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, feels within it a beauty which at that moment no one else besides her sees. And yet she feels, and describes to others, only that which she has the capacity to feel. Therefore her poetry is always and wholly tinged with her colors and pervaded by her fragrances. Her readers will recognize those colors and fragrances which radiate and diffuse from her inmost heart, as well as the colors and the fragrances radiating and diffusing from their own inmost hearts. That his poetry may be ennobling or not depends on the poet's efforts towards “refinement” and on the spiritual qualities she has thus acquired. Whenever a poet has acquired detachment, purity of

heart, moderation, wisdom, leniency and forbearance, and the capacity to speak “at the appropriate time and place,” her poems reflect “the holy breathings of the spirit, and . . . the yearnings of his higher self,” and not “his inordinate desires, his selfish purposes and the promptings of his human self” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 207). And they may do this, not because of a deliberate act of the poet, but because of his inborn and acquired talents and “the divine spirit that animates . . . [his] soul” (on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *Compilation* 1:7). Thus when a poet has acquired “refinement” and its implied qualities, he may help his readers to attain “the station of true understanding and nobility” and also make an important contribution to society.

The Poet and Society: A Difficult Relation

The issue of the relation between the poet and society occupies a prominent place in any discourse on poetry. Society needs the poet, who, through the beauty of her words, may show how the plain facts of everyday life may be transcended and invested with a meaning that may inspire people with the wish to improve those facts and incline them towards a common good. But the poet also needs a society ready to listen to her, to respond to her words, and to spur her in her attempts to refine the content and the form of her art.

In the West, this relation has become more and more complicated in the course of time and in the last few decades has assumed problematic traits. In 1952 Ungaretti observed: “There have always been crises in the world: they are continual” (*Vita d’un uomo* 813). Thirty years later the Canadian poet Roger White (1929–1993)¹¹ denounced a worsening situation: “Poetry is no longer very accessible to the average reader; it is rare to find families and groups of friends gathering together to read poetry; it is increasingly seen as a specialized and elitist interest divorced from real life, and few consider it a source of pleasure and insight” (62). But at the same time he also noticed that “more people aspire to write poetry than read it, and that more read it than buy it” (62). And recently Giovanardi has raised his alarmed voice from Italy:

Italian poetry of the second part of the twentieth century seems to get ready to go through the final years of this century in a silence of renunciation rather than expectation. . . . It is not given to know whether this is a definitively terminal stage, a temporary suspension, or the fruitful incubation of a new style. Therefore, all that is

¹¹ His poems are characterized by a candid and refined satirical vein and a deep interest in the spiritual dimensions of human life.

left to do is to stick to facts, set aside any project, and scan the sky, in growing disquietude, in search of signs. (lviii)

This crisis does not concern only poetry, but “is strictly related to the human condition, to our existence as human beings, to our certitude or illusion of being privileged creatures, the only creatures convinced of being the masters of their fate and the depositories of a destiny that no other living creature can claim” (Montale 13–14). Therefore its reasons are so complex that we must be content with examining only three aspects of contemporary society which in our opinion have played an important role in the occurrence of this crisis. They are the diffusion of the materialistic conception of the nature of reality, the decline of religion as a social force, and an attitude of indiscriminate disapproval of tradition.

The materialistic conception of the nature of reality, born in the West as a rebellion against religious dogmas and promoted by scientific discoveries and the resulting technological achievements, has finally become predominant and assumed the dogmatic traits of “a religion without God” (Armstrong xix). Its salient features are the primacy of the senses over reason, the denial of transcendence, the preeminence of material values, skepticism, individualism, relativism, utilitarianism, cynicism, and hedonism. Certainly these negative attitudes are not shared by all Westerners, or by all Western poets. However, in recent decades they have become increasingly widespread. Ungaretti mentions in this regard a “fear of a matter that stifles beauty, of a matter that makes the expression of poetry harder than in any other age.” He pities “the tragedy of every human being suffocating in such a harshness”; lists the different attempts of his contemporaries to escape and to release their souls from matter, such as “mocking the abjection, the tension, or the ridicule to which one is reduced . . . blasphemously deifying its infernal blindness”; and augurs that “the language of poetry . . . [may be] rescued through less negative means” (*Vita d’un uomo* 808, 809).

The decline of religion as a social force has been the result of a series of at least three factors: the need to release the conscience from irrational and oppressive dogmas; the reactionary attitude of a number of powerful religious leaders; and misleading, usually literal, interpretations of Scriptures by both upholders and detractors of religion. A concept of religion thus took shape, intended, on the one hand, as “adherence to a collection of certain dogmas and the practice of rites and ceremonies” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 143) and, on the other, “the product of human striving after the truth, as the outcome of certain climates of thought and conditions of society,” a concept that has been taken by many thinkers “to the extreme of denying altogether the reality or even the possibility of a specific revelation of the Will of God to mankind through a human

Mouthpiece” (Universal House of Justice 217.6). These concepts implied a growing distrust in religion as a social force, even among those who appreciate its personal salvific power. But most of all these concepts encouraged many people to reject religion and, together with it, its spiritual principles and moral values. There has thus slowly grown the “now prevailing sadistic insinuation that there is no sin, that nothing is true, and everything is permitted” (Ungaretti, *Vita d’un uomo* 852–53). And thus also there has emerged the human being described by Quasimodo, a human being “who justifies evil as a necessity, as a need one cannot shirk, who scorns tears because they are ‘theatrical,’ . . . who is expecting an evangelical indulgence, while standing with his bloody hands in his pockets” (273). Although many agnostic or atheistic humanists—poets and nonpoets—may have lived, and live now, under the banner of the spiritual principles and moral values taught by religion—principles and values which they consider and accept as a purely human achievement—nevertheless, irreligiosity is more often and in various degrees attended by moral laxity.

The break with the past has assumed unprecedented dimensions in the twentieth century and seems to be on the point of endangering the balance between renewal and preservation that guarantees the continuity of any civilization. This development has implied a change in the readers of poetry, most of whom do not know, and do not care about the “poetry of the tradition” (Pasolini, *Poems* 215). But it has also implied that poets must look for new languages, even at the cost of becoming almost incomprehensible, so that “much modern poetry is . . . one might say written in a secret private code” (White 62).

All these developments have contributed to complicate the relations between society and poetry. If poetry is emotional participation, which ennobling feelings will the poet share with readers, in the eyes of the majority of whom “[a]nything spiritual, supersensory or idealistic is ridiculed, being replaced by the most degrading and debasing interpretations (Sorokin 80)”? If poetry is truth, which truth will the poet share with an audience that is becoming increasingly skeptical? If poetry is language, which language will the poet share with listeners, most of whom neither know nor care about “the poetry of the tradition”? Furthermore, today poets seem greatly restricted in their freedom and autonomy. The publishing business, with its need to conform to the laws of the market, and the mass public, with its growing agreement in demanding conformity with the values of materialism, risk handicapping poets who do not share

their view of the world. Montale (1896–1981)¹² wonders: “how could an art that does not resort to useful *clichés* . . . that does not comply with the current mental stenography, survive and flourish in such times?” (122).

The situation is so oppressive that many modern poets do not see any way out of “the great swarm of surrogates and individual adventures” (Montale 125) where they feel condemned to live. And “light and winged and holy thing[s]” (Plato, *Ion* 534b), “delicate and virgin soul[s]” (Plato, *Phaedrus* 245a), as they are, they record, each in his way, a mounting pain and uneasiness. Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975)¹³ perceives himself as “a dead / forgotten voice, that vainly / repeats yet living charms” (*Bestemmia* 3:60). Franco Fortini (1917–1994)¹⁴ complains that “poetry / cannot change anything” (836). Giuseppe Piccoli (1949–1987)¹⁵ has no hope in the meaning of words, which “[f]rom the living face to the dead mouth / . . . are not sufficient, now: they fly / and do not stop” (942).

These same poets, and others, for example those who published in the Italian periodical *Officina*,¹⁶ have followed the road of political commitment, in the hope that recent ideologies may assist them to renew “the ethical and ideological value of literature, before the poetical institutions” (xxiv). But today their initial impetus is exhausted. Other poets responded to the growing pessimism of the years of the Cold War and tried to emphasize the ennobling mission of poetry, following the road of a specific religion, like David Maria Turollo (1916–1992).¹⁷ Turollo sees a possible salvation from the present emptiness only in the Divine “‘I am’ . . . / the voice of new heavens / and of new lands” (443). His poems, an exception in the modern world of poetry, have been

¹² A hermetic poet, like Ungaretti and Quasimodo, his words are pervaded by a pessimistic vein and an agnostic attitude that makes them sometimes sarcastic. He won the Nobel prize for literature in 1975.

¹³ The foremost Italian neo-realist poet, also internationally known as a film director and novelist. His works, always politically *engagé*, are influenced by both Catholicism and Marxism.

¹⁴ Italian neo-realist poet. A contributor to the periodical *Officina* (Workshop) edited by Roversi.

¹⁵ Having gone through the alienation of schizophrenia and of a mental hospital, a suicide at thirty-eight years of age, Piccoli expresses his inner *malaise*, his quest for his release through a messianic truth, in a both forceful and gentle language.

¹⁶ *Officina* is an Italian periodical committed to the discussion of social and political topics, from the point of view of literature.

¹⁷ An Italian Catholic priest and well-known poet. He often describes the darker aspects of the modern world, with a constant hope for its future renewal.

widely circulated. It seems strange that they have been excluded from the comprehensive anthology *Poeti italiani 1945–1995*. Perhaps it was because Turoldo aims at renewing the meaning of poetry, rather than its language. However, most poets of the last few decades have expressed a stoicism or irony that we may well read as an ill-concealed pessimism.

Overcoming the crisis

Many wonder what poets may do, beside all of this, to make the best of this crisis. Leopardi, who already in his time denounced the pressure of materialistic attitudes still very far from having reached the present dimensions, wrote:

How shall a poet use the language, follow the ideas, and adopt the costumes, of a generation in whose opinion true love is a puerility . . . whose illusions have disappeared, whose passions, not only the great, noble, and beautiful, but all passions, are extinguished? . . . Without illusions or passions, are ‘poet,’ ‘poem’ meaningful words? (*Zibaldone* 2:834)

And more recently Ungaretti wrote:

Every day it may happen that one comes out of, is released from, a crisis. It may happen even today, when a man, any man, achieves, in unspoken ways or through his art, such a moral dominion over his times that, although he reflects their terrible and barren aspects, and echoes the disputes of his culture, . . . although only a broken reality may appear from him—a reality comprehensible only in scattered fragments, still his song may silently unwind, in the secret thrusts of his heart, or through an essential vocabulary, with a rhythm both personal and of his times, and his rhythm may hold and match, albeit with the lightning speed of the cry that he happened to hear and repeat, the rhythm of tradition in its numberless historical developments. (*Vita d’un uomo* 813–14)

The words of Leopardi, and even more those of Ungaretti, seem to suggest two fundamental directions for the poet’s efforts to come out of, or at least struggle against, this crisis: to achieve a “moral dominion” over his times while accepting to reflect even their most difficult aspects, and holding and matching “the rhythm of tradition in its numberless historical developments.”

As to achieving a “moral dominion” over his times, this implies, in my opinion, for the poet to be resolute in expressing the “yearning for freedom . . . [that] is the very essence of poetry” and that urges him “to signify through his

words a break through the limitations of history, or an emancipation from its conditions and determinations” (Ungaretti, *Vita d’un uomo* 793). And this resolution implies for him to reconsider the prevailing materialistic conception of the nature of reality and the meaning and value of religion.

Reconsidering the materialistic conception of the nature of reality means, in my opinion, first of all extending one’s free and independent search after truth beyond the narrow boundaries of the material world and towards the universe of the human “love of exaltation,” as manifested in the pursuit of the noblest qualities of the human spirit through “refinement.” It also means reassessing the skepticism of people who do not believe in the possibility of “refinement” for a human being, whom they consider an intelligent animal, unable to escape the dominion of the instincts, and reconsidering the idea that human beings may be, on the contrary, creatures born from the realm of nature, endowed with intelligence and capable of manifesting, if they want to do so, the spiritual qualities of wisdom, love, and determination. As a matter of fact, “[p]oetry always reasserts, it is its mission, the integrity, the autonomy, and the dignity of the human being,” and it has always wanted for “the supremacy of spirit . . . [to] be universally accepted as a fundamental rule of any society” (Ungaretti, *Vita d’un uomo* 771). Reconsidering the materialistic conception means reassessing individualism, intended as the freedom to indulge the promptings of one’s self even at the expenses of spiritual principles and moral values, in the light of the harvest of destruction that this attitude has already produced, and looking for the empowerment of one’s self “through . . . [one’s] commitment to larger undertakings in which the self—even if only temporarily—is forgotten” (Bahá’í International Community 265–66). This is the “moral *engagement*, . . . to take a position in front of mankind, in front of the world . . . to search a reason for living” (594) called for by Montale. It means, finally, reassessing a relativism that tends to ignore universal spiritual principles and moral values, in the light of the intrinsic significance of well-known spiritual principles and moral values shared by all cultures in their highest expressions, which imply freedom from prejudice, tolerance, and solidarity among all people. This is the way suggested by Ungaretti as “the best way . . . the way trodden by Italian poets from the *Stil Novo*¹⁸ to the *Ginestra*,”¹⁹ and—we may add without fear of being denied by the

¹⁸ The “new sweet style,” the Italian, mainly Florentine, highly refined “love” poetry of the late twelfth and early thirteenth century, whose most famous representatives were Dante (in his *Vita Nova*), Guido Guinizzelli, and Guido Cavalcanti

¹⁹ “The Broom,” one of the most celebrated poems by Leopardi.

Italian poet—by the great poets of all climates: “the way that leads to oppose hate with love, always love” (*Vita d’un uomo* 854).

As to reconsidering the meaning and value of religion, this means, in my opinion, rediscovering “the essential foundation or reality of religion” beneath “the dogmas and blind imitations which have gradually encrusted it” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 363). This implies for the poet to rediscover religion as “that mystical feeling which unites man with God”²⁰ through His Manifestation, to revive his confidence in the possibility of achieving results of personal perfection and collective progress through the application of the teachings which God revealed through His Manifestation in order “to endue all men with righteousness and understanding, so that peace and tranquillity may be firmly established amongst them” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 206). It implies, finally, for the poet to renew the joy of practicing those teachings, which are always centered on the concept of love, for the sake of the love of God. This is the “reality of religion,” the divine spirit that may “find expression in the work of the artist.”²¹

As to holding and matching “the rhythm of tradition in its numberless historical developments,” this implies for the poet to have a more constructive relation with the past—a difficult attitude in the context of materialism, whose hedonism implies overestimating time’s destructive aspects compared to its long-term constructive possibilities. This seems to be the thought of Paolo Ruffilli (b. 1949),²² who since his infancy conceived “the idea of the relentless / decline, that all is running / towards a dead-end” (969). And of Gregorio Scalise (b. 1939),²³ who sees, in the passing of time, but the vanity of things: “Time grows old, ages, / in the light of present reality, / I must say that all is sham” (909). In this context, history itself loses its meaning and appears as “the naught . . . that someone insists on calling memory” (Bevilacqua 788).²⁴ Ungaretti, however, said: “I do not know how, but . . . [man] should again have time for a less precarious reckoning with his past and future. I do not know how, but history should again become familiar to him in its ends, return into its circle, wherefrom

²⁰ Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, published in *Bahá’í News* 102 (August 1936): 2.

²¹ Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, published in *Bahá’í News* 73 (May 1933): 7.

²² An anti-lyric and self-ironic poet, whose works are considered emblematic of the end of the poetic culture of the sublime and the ineffable.

²³ A poet of the generation of the seventies, he describes, with a rational and anti-rhetorical language, the absurdities of modern times.

²⁴ Italian novelist and poet, who describes his Emilian motherland in elegiac and expressive tones.

it may reflect towards him the inscrutable signs of the eternal” (*Vita d’un uomo* 878–79). In this regard, the Bahá’í writings offer many valuable considerations. From their perusal, it seems that history is characterized by the unfoldment of several simultaneous processes. An overall process concerns humankind as a whole, and resembles the development of any individual, which from the stage of the zygote gradually grows towards full maturity. Another process concerns the evolution of the various civilizations. Each of them goes through a cycle similar to that of a solar year. From the blossoming of the springtime it proceeds, through a summer apogee, towards the harvest of autumn and the involu- tion of winter. The earlier stages in the evolution of each civilization seem char- acterized by the workings of two parallel processes of integration and disinte- gration: the destruction of the obsolete remains of the former civilization, and the construction of the structures of the new one. And the processes of integra- tion seem characterized, in their turn, by an alternation of crises and victories, which see the central theme of each civilization advancing towards its full frui- tion.

Towards a more authentic human society

In the course of the development of all these processes, the uninterrupted thread of the spiritual principle of love continues to unwind, in practical expressions of growing breadth and depth, as humankind proceeds towards higher and higher levels of maturity. All these processes are seen as the unfoldment of a single di- vine plan, which is the same as God’s plan for the whole creation, and which provides for the attributes of the spiritual worlds to gradually appear in the ma- terial world. This plan provides for humankind, guided by the teachings of the Manifestations of God, to arise from a pseudohuman condition, based upon the laws of the world of nature (competition and the struggle for existence with the survival of the fittest), and thus oriented towards the quest for power, towards a more authentically human society founded upon cooperation, universality, the consciousness of the oneness of humankind, and thus oriented towards the quest for spiritual growth through the spiritual reality of love.

In our time, according to the Bahá’í writings, humankind is “experiencing the commotions invariably associated with the most turbulent stage of its evolu- tion, the stage of adolescence, when the impetuosity of youth and its vehemence reach their climax, and must gradually be superseded by the calmness, the wis- dom, and the maturity that characterize the stage of manhood” (Shoghi Effendi 202). This is the reason for all the upheavals, changes, and reformations that have occurred in recent decades. In all this turmoil we can perceive, therefore,

like Edoardo Sanguineti (b. 1930),²⁵ only a “Palus Putredinis”—a rotting marsh—(95) or like Valentino Zeichen (b. 1938),²⁶ the “imminent decline of the West” (861), and we too will think, like Roberto Roversi (b. 1923),²⁷ that “[n]ever has the end been so near” (145). However, in the framework of a spiritual conception of the nature of reality, things take on a different meaning. The editorialist of the magazine *World Order* writes:

Instead of asking us to be ironists and stoics, the sacred texts of Bahá’u’lláh ask us to look unwaveringly at the light of possibilities and new potentials. They ask us to discard an inadequate view of the world, in the process replacing an almost universal intellectual pathology with what Bahá’ís take to be spiritual and intellectual health—and the real hope for humanity (“Century of Light?” 3).

Even today, therefore, as in any other age, poets may tread the ancient path of spirituality with renewed minds and hearts. It is neither the road of any ephemeral political or ideological commitment, nor of any extremist expressive search, but that of an abiding spiritual engagement, which has always been a distinguished trait of the greatest poems. This commitment does not aim at a moralistic renewal of man (cf. Quasimodo 287), but at opposing the destructive trends of the prevalent materialistic thought through an effort to assist “man in getting back to the sources of moral life . . .” (Ungaretti, *Vita d’un uomo* 831) and to make the best use of the best legacies of the present and former civilizations. Poets could thus assist in filling that “epochal void of ideas, perspectives, general programs, vainly exorcised by emphasizing the individual point of view, or sometimes by surrendering to pure expressivity” (Giovanardi xlvi), which has seemingly weakened their voices. As Ungaretti writes:

The utmost aspiration of poetry is that its words may perform the miracle of a world resurrected in its primal purity and glowing with joy. Sometimes words, in the best hours of the best poets, reach that perfect beauty which was the divine idea of man and the world in the act of love through which they have been created. (*Vita d’un uomo* 746)

²⁵ One of the foremost poets of the Italian experimentalist neo-avant garde, whose poems were published in the iconoclastic anthology *I Novissimi* (The Newest [poets]), a collection presented as “poems for the sixties.”

²⁶ His poems have been described as moving “between neo-Art Nouveau and *neo-Crepuscolarismo*” and are characterized by ironic, prosaic, and essayistic tones.

²⁷ Italian neo-realistic poet, the editor of *Officina*.

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