

Julio Savi, an active member of the Association for Bahá'í Studies "Alessandro Bausani," put his weighty poetic work, studies, and letters on poetry at the disposal of this Association, and the Association was only too happy to grant him its patronage, as it has already done with his other writings. The Poet agreed, out of friendship and a spirit of collaboration in the field of studies, to meet Iscander Tinto, one of the members of the Board, to discuss the most significant aspects of his poetic experience with him. The following is a report of their meeting.

AN AFTERNOON WITH THE AUTHOR
by Iscander Tinto

Julio Savi receives me on his great terrace, still in flower in this strange autumn of 2023. He is best known in the Bahá'í community for his scholarship. A connoisseur of the Bahá'í writings, Islamic mysticism, and Western thought in general, he has published several books and many papers in Italian and English on topics ranging from interreligious dialogue to human rights, from the philosophical and social teachings of the Bahá'í Faith to its mystical aspects. He is less well-known as a poet, although he has already published several anthologies in Italian and English. Besides his constant contributions to scholarship and poetry, Savi also lived an intense practical life, both as a physician and as a participant in the efforts of the Bahá'í community to advance human civilization. His personality reminds me of the curiosity and enthusiasm of Pascoli's "child (fanciullino)."¹ Still, in him, there is also such awareness of the meaning of life as he has drawn not only from his studies but also from the numerous practical activities to which he has dedicated and still dedicates his life.

¹ Giovanni Pascoli (1855-1912), an Italian Decadentist poet and classical scholar. According to him, "There is within us a little child who not only has chills . . . but tears and his own moments of joy." A true poet listens to the child within him, to what the child sees and perceives (see Colarossi).

When we start talking about his poems, he tells me that he feels like a poet even before being a scholar and that his verses result from years of meditation and service. In my opinion, they convey feelings and insights that embrace the essence of Julio Savi, a poet, a scholar, and an active member of society.

Iscander Tinto: After publishing five poetic anthologies,² you now announce another volume on your website. Divided into 14 collections, like those in *Remoteness* (2001) and *Lontananza 2001-2016* (unpublished in English), this anthology is much broader than the others—the poems are more than 400—and bears the same title. It appears in both the Italian and English versions. Would you like to introduce us briefly to your recent work?

Julio Savi: This anthology collects almost all the published and unpublished poems I have written since 1955, arranged chronologically. I have given a detailed exposition of the structure of the text in the preface preceding the fourteen collections. The decision to publish it online stems from the desire to make available the poetic testimony of the spiritual journey of an ordinary person who, like many others, has struggled to bring coherence between yearning and action to any interested reader as well as in the hope of giving my contribution to the ongoing dialogue on this art form. I kept the title *Remoteness* because it better expresses the continuous line that unites all my verses: the tension toward an Ideal so high that it always seems very far away. My preface to the first anthology explains the reasons for the bilingual publication: the English language “could address much wider audiences than Italian” (15.5).

² In Italian, *Lontananza* (2001), *Lontananza 2001-2016* (2016), *Chiaroscuro* (2019), *Il colore del ricordo. Poesie d’Africa* (2021), *Il nuovo giardino. Poesie bahá’í* (2021)—three of them in their English version as well, that is *Remoteness* (2002), *The Shade of Remembrance: Poems of Africa* (2021), and *The New Garden: Bahá’í Poems* (2021).

- IT: Your curriculum published in your most recent anthologies begins with the words “Asmarino by birth and of Italian origins and culture.” What significance does this sentence have to your poetry?
- IS: My bond with Asmara and Eritrea has remained unbroken. In addition to the understandable attachment to the land in which I was born and lived through the crucial period of the formative age, two events have strengthened it: the encounter with the Bahá’í Faith in 1957, described in the last ten poems of “I’ll Be Free Once Again” (1.65-78), and the first steps into the world of poetry, illustrated in the “Academy’s Note” preceding *The Shade of Remembrance* (15.21-3). Briefly said, in 1954, five teenagers from the Italian Liceo Ginnasio “Ferdinando Martini” in Asmara, later six, founded an academy of Platonic inspiration to discuss literature and poetry. Their motto was “knowledge, beauty, and friendship.” In their meetings, they got into the habit of reading the poems they wrote and listening to their friends’ comments. The academy then disbanded because the six left the city to follow their destiny. I was the first who went away, but my connection with the academy’s motto, “knowledge, beauty, friendship,” and with poetry, has never been interrupted. Over the years, my love for that land has transfigured its beauty into a place of utmost closeness to God.
- IT: Your anthology *The New Garden* (2021) is divided into three parts, with a prologue and an epilogue, as if to indicate, as suggested in its “Afterword” (15.41), an inner story that starts from a premise, follows a specific path and moves toward an epilogue. After what you just said in your answer to my first question, can we read the whole new anthology in this key?
- JS: That’s it. The poems of the first collection, “I’ll Be Free Once Again,” may be considered a prologue. The first, “Yearning for Beauty” (1.4), already contains the premises of a lifestyle and a poetic orientation: “beauty / harmony perfection.” The second, “I Alone Have no Peace” (1.4), transmits the restlessness that was the engine of my poetic story. “To Life” (1.14) has a Leopardian debut (a poet I have always loved) and echoes the problematic

shade already evident in “I Alone Have no Peace” (1.4). But the mystical vein immediately peeps out: those pains are fake; nature is not “the brutal force / that furtively ordains the general harm” of Leopardi (*The Canti* 118). The image of God as the Kindly Father, to whose Will it is good and right to adapt, immediately appears. And with this, the doors to hope are opened. All that follows is a trace of a spiritual journey toward the fruits described in the *New Garden*’s “Epilogue” and more extensively in the last four collections of this new anthology. “I’ll Be Free Once Again” also includes “Yearning. II” (1.36) and “Wait. I” (1.66), comprised in *The New Garden*’s “Prologue” (5 and 6, respectively). The first, dated 8 August 1956, seems to be a love poem. But it is a Love with a capital L, a theme that later matured, almost blossomed, with a greater familiarity with Persian mystical poetry. The adolescent looks for a girl who is equal to his dreams; subsequent events make him understand that even that expectation was part of his greater dream, the anticipation of the Ideal.

IT: You always write the date and place in every poem. Asmara, Padua, Asmara, then after 1962 Bologna, San Giovanni in Persiceto and many other sites: Why this clarification?

JS: There is a contradiction in my relationship with poetry. On the one hand, I have always felt the need to detach it from the events that gave rise to it, for my perhaps unrealistic aspiration to universality. In my early years, Ungaretti’s hermeticism helped me in this effort. On the other hand, I have always felt the need to leave an autobiographical mark in my poems, almost an inner diary, to bequeath traces of feelings and emotions that seemed too significant to keep them silent. I say this in “The Fleeting Moment” (9.76). Therefore, I would compare these dates to those that always accompany the pages of all diaries. I do not have the presumption to “give historicizing importance” (Fo 21) to my poetry, one of the defects of bad poets that the poet Alessandro Fo includes in his

“synthesis on some of the main aspects of ‘poetichese [bad poet-ics]’” (ibid.).³

IT: If your poetry wants to be a diary, don’t you think you have been too vague to allow readers to follow you on your inner journey?

JS: The literary critic Mario Donadoni (1906–1974), who at the beginning of the Sixties recognized in my youthful verses lyrical moments “of absolute value,” wrote: “A certain reservation binds the young poet who later will be able to explain himself better and expand, albeit in chastened measures, his anxieties, and anguish on the tightrope of his urgent feelings.” I don’t think I have ever managed to overcome this “reservation.” And so maybe someone could ask me the reasons for my melancholic vein, as one of my friends from the Asmarino Hexandric Academy did during one of my brief “repatriations” to my hometown after leaving in 1960. To him, I replied, “I am unhappy because I am not what I would like to be, and I cannot accept some of my flaws.” At some point in my life, I concluded that a kindly Creator could not assign a soul its specific defects to make it suffer. It is much more credible that they were destined for that soul because its attempt to overcome them will help it approach the perfection toward which the Creator wants it to advance. (see *Who Am I?* II 10.70) And this is one of the most essential meanings I think can be drawn from my poems. Many of them testify to an inner struggle necessary to sustain if one wants to nullify one’s “anguishes” by trying to modify those inner landscapes in which they can better thrive. Early awareness of these concepts emerges in the poem “The Neutron of the Spirit,” dated 7 March 1995 (6.80).

IT: The ten poems written between September 1957 and 15 March 1958 (1.65-78) indicate a significant turning point in your life.

³ “Poetichese” is an Italian neologism defined as “amateurish and unrealistic style of many young aspiring poets” whose most relevant datum “is the narrative imprint versus poetry” (*Treccani. Neologisms*).

- JS: These ten poems are also part of the collection “I’ll Be Free Once Again” and are a dim reflection of the encounter with the Bahá’í Faith. Each of them describes an aspect of a profound transformation that began for me in those days. My meeting with the members of the Asmarino Bahá’í community, especially young Eritreans, was of utmost importance because, in them, I saw some of my dreams fulfilled, such as interracial friendship. They welcomed me like a true brother.
- IT: The dates of your poems seem to indicate that your poetic output features periods of silence and periods of lesser fertility. Can you explain why?
- JS: When I did not write poetry or wrote fewer, I focussed my creativity in different directions. The first period of silence ran from 1958 to 1961. As with any conversion, the experience of encountering the Bahá’í Faith has been overwhelming. The beginning of active life in the community, the commitment to university studies, and the revolutionary experience of moving to Italy fully occupied my mind.
- IT: In the poems written between 1961 and 1972, the shade of melancholy that tinges those of the first collection, “I’ll Be Free Once Again,” seems accentuated. Can you explain that?
- JS: In November 1960, I left Asmara and moved to Bologna. In those years, I perceived a nostalgia for Eritrea, family, and distant friends closely intertwined with inner regret: I discovered that the ideals that had attracted me to the Bahá’í Faith were still far from me. “Have a pure, kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting” (AHW, no.1). and “Ask not of Me that which We desire not for thee, then be content with what We have ordained for thy sake, for this is that which profiteth thee, if therewith thou dost content thyself” (ibid. no.18), recites one of the most beloved Bahá’í Scriptures. I felt very far from these appeals, which, in their striking beauty, had

contributed to thrust me toward the Bahá'í community, and I suffered from it.

IT: Those poems reflect your anguish, but those written after 1974 seem to indicate a progressive attenuation of those feelings. Did something significant happen?

JS: A reading by Roberto Assagioli (1888-1974), the psychiatrist and founder of psychosynthesis, helped me understand the origin of those feelings. I will read this passage for you:

An incapacity of the mind to stand the illumination, or a tendency to egotism or conceit, may cause the experience to be wrongly interpreted, and there results, so to speak, a “confusion of levels.” The distinction between absolute and relative truths, between the Self and the “I,” is blurred and the inflowing spiritual energies may have the unfortunate effect of feeding and inflating the personal ego. (*Psychosynthesis* 44).

In Roberto Assagioli’s metaphor, I was like an acorn that “having the illumination of what it can become, that is, a great oak, would say: ‘I am an oak’” (*Transpersonal Development* 50). But soon, the facts will prove otherwise. These feelings permeate the poems of the collections “Unfulfilled Dreams” and “The Heaven of My Heart.” Assagioli’s explanation helped me continue with determination in my inner struggle to transform the lofty Ideal I had found in the Bahá'í Writings into a lived reality.

IT: You wrote very few poems between 1968 and 1979. Would you like to give us some specific clarification?

JS: However attractive to those who write or read it, poetry as an “outlet of sensations” (Poesy 2.22) hides a pitfall: indulgence toward the self, understood as “the ego . . . the animal in us, the heritage of the flesh which is full of selfish desires.”⁴ While struggling to write, as the verses of the Irish poet Seamus Heaney (1939-2013)

⁴ On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 8 January 1949, to a believer, in UD453.

suggest, “to see . . . [him]self” and “to set the darkness echoing” (83), the poet risks falling into narcissism, not exposing the best sides of his being, but the less noble aspects of his life. It sometimes risks ignoring modesty, common sense, measure, and thus good taste. Nevertheless, the beauty of poetry seems to suggest something completely different. It seems to indicate that it “affects the minds and impresses the hearts of those who listen” so that they may find in it “rest and joy” (TAB1:59) and their “breasts . . . [may] be refreshed” (TAB3:669). It seems to suggest that it may be a “cause of gladness” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in SW10.17: 318) and “awake . . . noble sentiments.”⁵ At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837) stated in his “Dialogue of 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” (251). A century later Salvatore Quasimodo (1901–1968) explained that poetry “turns into ethics just because it expresses beauty” and thus the poet does “change the world” (293). My persistent spiritual myopia made me uncomfortable in those years, so I did not write poetry. Occasionally, I took a few notes in a secret diary. After 1985, I elaborated those words into poems dated 1979–1983 and 1983–1985 because they express feelings and sensations that date back to those years.

- IT: Your anthology presents other periods in which you wrote less poetry than in others, for example, 1983–1990 and 2006–2012. Can you give us some relevant elucidation?
- JS: The years between 1983 and 1990 were a period of intense study of the Bahá’í Writings. I needed to study the Bahá’í teachings that recommend that we follow the mystical path but “with practical feet”⁶ to clarify the mystical vision of life that my father had taught

⁵ On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 10 October 1932, to a believer, in *Importance*, no.30.

⁶ This statement has long been attributed to David Starr Jordan (1851–1931), a famous ichthyologist, president of the World Peace Foundation and of Leland Stanford Junior

me. The fruit of those studies was *The Eternal Quest for God: An Introduction to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Divine Philosophy*. That book helped me bring a greater balance in myself and reconcile myself with my poetic vocation, which has always been alive within me. The years between 2006 and 2012 were a period of increasing practical engagement in the service of the Bahá'í Faith, but also of fruition of other studies of the Bahá'í Writings, especially the mystical ones that particularly attracted me from the beginning—the first edition of *Towards the Apex of Reality. An Introduction to the Study of Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys and Four Valleys*, a book that further contributed to my balance, dates back to 2008. Only in recent years have I been somehow experiencing the pangs of the so-called “writer’s block.” However, it is probably just my search for a new language that I hope will mature within me.

IT: In her afterword to *Chiaroscuro*, the poet Milli Graffi⁷ writes that you draw extensively on the “Western literary model” but that you are also strongly influenced by the “Eastern model” and that you often use “unusual images” and add “brief explanatory notes, strictly essential, just sufficient to provide that minimum of information that allows the reader to elaborate on his own the very particular structure of the original structure” (15.17) at the bottom of the page. Do you have any comments on her ideas?

JS: The Bahá'í sacred Texts, written in Arabic and Persian, immediately won me over for their fascinating literary beauty. At the same time, their style, which enchanted me, hindered me in a deeper understanding of their intended meanings. For this reason, I perused some of the most famous Persian poets of the Islamic golden age, trying to understand and assimilate their styles. I strove also to read the Koran more carefully and familiarize myself with some of the “myths” of Islam, which I found very evocative. So, on the

University in Palo Alto, California, who on 8 October 1912 invited 'Abdu'l-Bahá to speak at his university. 'Abdu'l-Bahá accepted his invitation and spoke about science. (see Balyuzi, *'Abdu'l-Bahá* 287)

⁷ (1940-2020), poet, translator, and art critic.

one hand, the beauty of the Bahá'í Texts and, on the other hand, the charm of the Persian poets penetrated my heart, creating a kind of inner poetic landscape that my verses reflect.

IT: How did the “Eastern model” influence your poetry?

JS: There are many examples of this influence of the “Eastern model.” In some poems, this influence is purely formal; I have adopted typical rhetorical forms of that model. The earliest and most frequent is *taḍmín*, literally “sponson” (Coletti 197), which consists in “inserting the verses of another in one’s own poem” (Steingass 306). The most striking example is the poem “Flowers” (7.8), which includes extensive and repeated quotations from Ungaretti, Leopardi, Petrarch, and Foscolo. In other poems, this influence implies using words, locutions, and references to myths typical of that literature. For example, “You Come Back, O Poetry” (5.14) is rich in Koranic words and phrases filtered through Bahá'u'lláh's Four Valleys. As for the myths, one of the most important is the so-called *Rúz-i-alast*, one that, assimilated through the explanations offered by the Bahá'í Writings, has more than others nourished my spirit; see, for example, “Our Sorry Voices” (3.84). Finally, a direct influence of at least three poets is recognizable: Rûmí, in “Return on the Wrist of Your King” (10.44); Sa‘dí in “As One Day the Drop” (8.28); and Ḥáfiz, whose 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. This Eastern influence is so unusual in the West that I felt the need to add short explanatory notes at the end of my collections of poems to allow the readers to discover their meanings by themselves. The subject is vast, and I do not think going into it further here is appropriate. If you want to know more, I recommend that you read the chapter “Poetry and Poetic Models” of my article “Necklaces of Coral and Pearls” (16.3.19-26).

IT: Your anthology *Chiaroscuro*, published by Il Verri in 2019, presents the poems following your proposed eleven themes . Do you have any comments on this?

JS: When I proposed that subdivision to Verri, I wrote them these reflections, which I will read for you:

Here, we have a poetic journey which, moving from doubts and uncertainties, sometimes heart-rending, attains, through an ideal steadfastly pursued, ancient promises and hopes, as well as an unexpected serenity born from discovering anticipated transparencies of the infinite in daily life . . . “Yearnings” speaks of tension toward the absolute, the dominating impulse of this anthology; “Chiaroscuro” follows the poet’s doubts and uncertainties throughout his itinerary; “The New Garden” highlights the spiritual encounter that has steered his course;⁸ “Transparencies” sings instants of inner clarity; “Ordainer nature” uncovers meaningful transparencies in the beauties of nature; “The shade of remembrance” renews the memory of Eritrea and of the friends, the poet met there;⁹ “Psyche and poetry” summarises the author’s poetics in its evolution; “Daily chronicles” looks at this world, at news stories, and more or less recent historical events; “Family Album” admits its readers into the intimacy of domestic walls; “Reciprocity” honors the merits of friendship; “Glimpses” transfigures urban and natural landscapes . . .

Milli Graffi writes that these eleven themes “trace the movements, the concatenations, the links, which flow into each other, which initiate a direction, which open a perspective or that widen it” and are not “divisive, but strongly conjunctive” (15.17). According to Graffi, “this impulsion to establish correlations within the texts but also . . . externally to them, is an essential prerogative” of my

⁸ See the homonymous anthology published in 2021.

⁹ See the homonymous anthology, self-published in 2021 and recorded on *Maitaccli*, the newspaper of the Italian Asmarinos, in 2020.

poetry. I perceive them as so crucial that I initially considered presenting this *opera omnia* by arranging the poems chronologically but already divided according to these eleven themes. I then gave up, not to cage my possible readers and leave them the freedom to find their favourite path. I limited myself to include two thematic indexes, one for each collection and one for each theme.

IT: Is one pre-eminent among the eleven main themes you identified in your poetic work?

JS: I think so. Despite the great diversity of my poems, they all seem to convey a constant tension toward transcendence. This tension characterizes especially three of the eleven themes. “Yearnings” speaks of it directly. “Chiaroscuro” tells the pain of remoteness from transcendence. “Transparencies” shares the joyful amazement of discovering it in one of the beauties of life.

IT: So you agree with Milli Graffi when she writes in her afterword to *Chiaroscuro* (15.17): “An unremitting, passionate, troubled need, constantly felt as an inner challenge, a continuous personal grappling with the other than oneself and the self: one could say that for Julio Savi, poetry is what was once called spiritual exercise.”

JS: This consideration brings me back to the definition of “spiritual exercises” given by Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), the Spanish Catholic priest and theologian who introduced them into the Catholic world. I will read it for you:

The first Annotation is that by this name of Spiritual Exercises is meant every way of examining one’s conscience, of meditating, of contemplating, of praying vocally and mentally, and of performing other spiritual actions . . . For as strolling, walking and running are bodily exercises, so every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all the disordered tendencies, and, after it is rid, to seek and find the Divine Will as to the management of one’s life for the salvation of the soul, is called a Spiritual Exercise. (16)

To me, poetry is the expression of my need to attain what Catholics call “salvation of the soul” and which we Bahá’ís call “spiritual progress” in the sense of “the awakening of the conscious soul of man to perceive the reality of Divinity” (PUP194, para.6); that is, the discovery of the infinite virtues with which God has endowed us and which are His image in us, through our struggle to express them in our lives. However, I do not see one’s aspiration to spiritual progress as an end in itself. I consider it a means to fulfil one of our fundamental duties as humans here on earth: “to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization” (SWB215, sec.CIX, para.2). That is why in making poetry, I always feel the need to convey a message to my potential readers, a message that may help them to pursue their own path of spiritual progress, to contribute to the collective progress of our civilization. In the ancient dilemma between art for art and art for life, I lean toward the latter, without disdaining the former, as long as one adopts the ancient concept of beauty as *Kalokagathós*, a Greek word composed of the adjective *kalós*, beautiful, the conjunction *kai*, and, and the adjective *agathós*, good. For this concept, I refer you to my article “Necklaces of Coral and Pearls” (Chap.17.4).

- IT: Answering my first question, you said you wanted to publish this work “to make available the poetic testimony of the spiritual journey of an ordinary person who, like many others, has struggled to bring coherence between yearning and action to any interested reader.” Perhaps you can explain this concept better now.
- JS: Although imperfect, the poet, like every human, is like “a finely tempered sword concealed in the darkness of its sheath” (PHW, no.72). His “love of transcendence” (SAQ217, sec.48, para.8) and his aspiration “toward exaltation” (*ibid.*), typical of any human, sometimes stimulate in him the will to free himself “from the sheath of self and desire” (PHW, no.72). When he sings this effort, the poet can affect the minds and impress the hearts of readers, inducing them too to follow the fruitful paths of inner perfection.

While so doing, he indeed risks falling into arrogance and transgressing “the bounds of tact and wisdom.”¹⁰ However, if his effort is sincere, he remains ever aware of his human imperfection. He does not cease to strive to turn “this nether dust into high heaven, to make of this world a mirror for the Kingdom” (SWAB70, sec.35), even when—as I do in my last three collections, “Transits,” “Once More Tomorrow,” and “Connections”—he feels (or maybe he is deluding himself) he can begin to sing some of the fruits that life has bestowed upon him.

IT: Some of your recent poems seem to reveal that your constant striving toward the Ideal has borne some fruit. Do you agree?

JS: I think you are right. Some of the most recent poems testify to this change. “Whose Son Am I?” (14.24) speaks of the social goals vigorously pursued by the Bahá’í Faith, sometimes presented as twelve points:

1. Unfettered search after truth.
2. The oneness of mankind.
3. Religion a cause of love and harmony
4. Religion hand in hand with science.
5. Universal peace.
6. An international language.
7. Education for all.
8. Equal opportunities for both sexes.
9. Justice for all.
10. Work for all.
11. Abolition of extremes of poverty and wealth.
12. The Holy Spirit to be the prime motive power in life. (Townshend ix)

“Ode to Life” (14.36), an evident response to “To Life” (1.14), which we have already mentioned, speaks of the personal goals achieved in the constant pursuit of the Ideal: service to the Ideal, family, work, and friendship, but also joys of study, joys of art, joys “in the unison between

My heart and the eternal,
Ever-changing pulsations of life,

¹⁰ Bahá’u’lláh, in CC2: 407, no.2212.

Each moment an opportunity
 For the heart to abide by a Primal
 Will, which always towards
 Unity and Love does steer it.

IT: In your article on “Poetry in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Writings and Utterances” (491-528), you summarize what you found about poetry in the works of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. I read in this book seven components, “inspiration, beauty, eloquence, a versified language, novelty, expressivity, depth and loftiness of meanings” (485), three aims, to strengthen, edify, and delight readers (see 513) and seven requirements of beauty, an essential element of poetry, “rhythm, symmetry, harmony, elegance, sweetness, delicacy, and perfection” (492). Do you find all this, or part of it, in your poetry?

JS: Poetry is first and foremost “inspiration,” and inspiration does not leave much room for reasoning. Thus, if my poems reflect all these aspects, it is not my conscious and voluntary act but only a consequence of the idea of poetry that has matured within me. In reality, all this was part, albeit confusedly, of my view of poetry since—sitting at the desks of the Liceo Ginnasio “Ferdinando Martini” in Asmara—I listened with great interest to lessons and recitations of Italian, Latin, Greek, and to a lesser extent English poems, dreaming of being able to emulate one day those who for me were personifications of all these aspects of the art of any good versifier. However, today, many critics think, like Domenico Pisana, teacher, literary critic, and theologian, that inspiration also continues in what he calls *labor limae*, filing work, “that every artist makes after sketching the work, the minutia in the choice of words at the centre of poetic creation” (“Poesia,” RTMNews). As to me, *labor limae* had a different weight in my poems. In some, it was minimal. In others, it was more time-consuming. I prefer those of my poems that required no *labor limae*. However, when elaborating on the first draft is necessary, I always remember what I learned from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Writings and utterances. I hope to have at least partly managed to respect them without being a

pedestrian imitator of anyone, ancient or modern, but to have assimilated to the core the lesson of the past and expressed it in new forms adapted to the time and place in which I live.

IT: You have confided to me that some critics have disapproved of the language of some of your poems, which they consider more suitable for an essayist than a poet.

JS: That's true. As early as 1964, Mario Donadoni wrote: "There is still the discursiveness that you must reduce." In 2006, a magazine published "The Scents of the Beloved" (9.58) but asked me to omit the last stanza, whose language it did not consider up to the previous ones. For the same reasons, in 2016, another magazine published "Once More Tomorrow" (13.32) in an abridged version. In 2016, a literary critic rejected "Chorale and Counterpoint" (14.22), which I had sent with the request to publish it also because "the poem uses too many abstractions." A poet friend with whom I was trying to start a dialogue that would help me find a new language in the present phase of my life wrote to me in 2019: "The fact is . . . that you are thinking of poetry as 'content' or what you want to convey. However, the poet is not a journalist or scholar but a language guardian. You have to think long and hard about that." He told me about the revolution in the poetic world that swept away the classical world and concluded by saying, "Either we enter into new 'tunes' or we remain as relics of the past."

IT: Have these criticisms been helpful to you in any way?

JS: They helped me reflect on this aspect of my poetry. In my opinion, this "discursive" aspect already present in my earlier poems, which later became a vehicle for "abstractions" and "contents," is an essential part of at least my most recent poetic vein. However, I think that the parts that those critics have judged to be discursive do not imply an "abuse . . . of descriptive traits, intended to 'expand' and detail as much as possible the evocation that [the poet] proposes himself" (Fo 21) which is one of the defects of the bad poets that Fo includes in his "synthesis on some of the main

aspects of the poetic” (ibidem) of which we have already spoken. I do not consider “superfluous” the parts removed from my above-mentioned poems. While writing them, I did not ignore the words of the Nobel Prize laureate Joseph Brodsky (1940-1996) when he said, “The discarding of the superfluous is in itself the first cry of poetry” (184). As I told you, Donadoni has identified lyrical moments “of absolute value” in my early poems. Maria Organtini, founder and president of the Cenacolo dei Poeti e Artisti di Monza e Brianza [Cenacle of Monza and Brianza’s Poets and Artists], writes of the first edition of *Remoteness*: “In the dialectic of the Spirit he rises to higher thoughts where the metaphysical image of the Supreme Being seems more concrete and closer than we can imagine and, while so doing, he wisely builds on the poetic canons with adequate use of his solitude: Ivory tower of the great poets” (“Poesia”). And I certainly recognize myself in this lyrical vein. But now as an “octogenarian” I am a different person. I feel more than ever the need to poeticize differently.

IT: How is this inner change reflected in your poetic vein?

JS: This change appears starting with the collection “Routes and Landscapes.” Until then, the words of poets such as Eugenio Montale (1896–1981) also applied to my lyric when he said that “every great poem is born from . . . a dissatisfaction . . . an internal void that the expression reached, provisionally, fills” (587); or Alda Merini (1931–2009) when she affirms that “the most beautiful poems \ are written above the stones \ with wounded knees” (in *Poeti italiani*¹⁹⁹⁶ 290). However, the inner change I have undergone in the last few years has transported me to different poetic territories, territories that I discovered through Persian and Arabic poems of the golden age of Islam, Rûmî and Ḥâfîz, in the first place, and the poetic form of the *qasîdih* that Edward G. Browne¹¹ defined “purpose-poems” (2:18) which in Persia was used above all as an instrument of panegyric or even philosophical and moralizing poetry.

¹¹ Edward G. Browne (1862–1926), a renowned British orientalist.

IT: These ideas may seem unusual to the world of contemporary critics, for whom poetry is only lyrical.

JS: Why should we think that poetry today should only be lyrical? At this moment, I have no complaints, disappointments, or other such feelings, let alone protests, to express that may unite me with the voices of my contemporaries. I need to sing the joys of family, of service to others in any way rendered, gratitude for the gift of life, and similar feelings without falling into triumphalism or banality, without yielding to “poetese.”¹² Will I be able to do this without lapsing into the “poetichese” (see note 3)? I feel more than ever the need to convey not only sensations but also ideas and thoughts while respecting five of the seven requirements which I have drawn from the work of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and which depend on my commitment: “beauty, eloquence, a versified language, novelty, expressivity.” To put it in the language of modern literary critics, I feel the need to trespass the “boundaries of lyric and literary” that exclude “from the protected area . . . whatever is dissonant, burdened with thought or psychological or ethical hurdles, far from the pure song” (Lorenzini, 100), within which many want to cage poetry. And I have tried to do this in my most recent poems. It seems to me, therefore, that I have passed the stage in which I wrote: “There is no high / noon in my days” (I am of the Children of Half-Light 7.38), “Shall I always sing / unappeased longings?” (Psyche and Poetry 7.44), or “it is as yet too early / for a heart that may be fit / to sing the praise of oneness” (Two Hearts 7.22).

IT: Do you feel satisfied with this change in your poetic vein?

JS: Dissatisfaction is part of every artist’s personality. In some, it expresses itself in an almost maniacal *labor limae*, hoping to get as

¹² A neologism created by the Italian poet Edoardo Sanguineti (1930-2010): “a language that in some way automatically speculates on a sort of automaticity of the poetic fact, because of the contents it proposes, because of the form in which it proposes them, because of the linguistic selection that it proposes: I say this, and I already know that it will produce a poetic effect” (34).

close as possible to that “perfect exemplar / flashing at times / from the depths of the heart” (Yearning. III 5.48). Often, therefore, I wonder if I have managed to elaborate a language suitable to leave a poetic description of moments of inner joy and fulfilment closely linked to concepts and abstractions unfamiliar to modern readers. For example, see “Has That Day Come?” (14.44). The criticism I have received seems to give a negative answer to my question. However, I cannot help but follow this new path. Thus, I concluded that my verses are just an experiment, an attempt to overcome the images of the poet that, from the end of the nineteenth century onward, have been created in the Western imagination. They attempt to develop alongside the noble, pure lyric to which I have indeed listened, more sober poetry, more suitable for a human being who has understood the difference between legitimate emotions and the much more essential feelings. I have just read with great interest what the Milanese poet Tommaso Di Dio wrote, commenting on the poetry of contemporary Italy (1971–2021). In retrospect, I feel that what he explains in the chapter entitled “Conglomerates and Dispersions” (483–501) also happened to me. Perhaps in my particular way, with my intention to make “explicit the ethical component” that sustains me (Lorenzini 140), I also participate in the “anti-lyric front” (Di Dio 494). Nevertheless, I continue to appreciate the lyrics and try to avoid any excess.

- IT: You have written books and essays on various spirituality-related topics. You have already spoken about how your studies influenced your way of poeticizing. Would you like to add something?
- JS: An old friend, playing on the meaning of my family name, often distinguished between Julio, a poet, and Savi, an essayist. Have I succeeded (or will I succeed) in bringing together these two aspects of my personality in a poetic work that reflects that unity between heart and mind to which I have aspired all my life (see *Two Hearts* 7.22)? No more a heart painfully transported like a feather by the gales of passions—of which I would say: for heaven’s sake, do not go where that heart takes you, but a mirror

heart capable of reverberating serenely in this nether world the lights that always come from the world beyond—to which one can entrust oneself. The words written by Bahá'u'lláh to Mírzá Maqṣúd come to my mind: “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” (TB175-6). I wish the same could be said of mine.

IT: Do you mean you still have other things to say?

JS: Yes, I do. I feel that I still have many things to say. But I do not know whether I can or will be able to do so. The muse is a demanding and jealous friend. She grants her favours when and how she wants. She does not respond to solicitations. Here is what Giuseppe Ungaretti says, “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). And ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains it even more incisively: “All art is a gift of the Holy Spirit” (in CH167). To deepen this theme, I refer you to my article “Shedding Light in the Hearts” (see Chap.17.2).

Will I receive this gift again? I have written several poems in which I ask myself this question; see, for example, “Silences. II,” dated 7 February 2015 (13.10), and “Make Yourself Heard,” dated 25 July 2015 (13.18). But is it the muse who does not speak or me who cannot hear her voice? I do not know. However,

I am looking forward
to that day—if it will
ever come—when
so strong will be
the song of Love that even
the noblest thoughts won’t
distract me from its melody. (Has That Day Come? 14.44)

Indeed, my intimate, spiritual intercourse with poetry, even if recurrent, is one of the most rewarding aspects of my life. Milli Graffi has understood what poetry means for me when she writes in her afterword to *Chiaroscuro*: “For Savi, poetry is like a lantern that he holds high in front of him, an aid to see and understand, etc.” (15.20).

True, in 2016, the hope of being useful or only of comfort for people who share with me and struggle to realize this “yearning for beauty / harmony perfection” (Yearning for Beauty 1.4) convinced me to become an “SFA . . . self-financing author”¹³ and therefore to run the risk of being labelled by critics such as Simone P. Barillari, essayist, editor, and translator, as a consumer of the “ego’s Viagra” (in Tanda 177). But I hope with all my heart that my capitulation has little to do with that “facelift of withered ambitions” he speaks of (ibid.). My life is already fulfilling, even if, as a poet, I have not entered the “third dimension . . . that of success” described by Umberto Eco.¹⁴ Therefore, still unanswered remains the question that already in 1997 I asked myself about my poems (Yesterday a Kindly Friend 8.14):

Which voice
will ever intone them?
Which heart will beat
together with mine at their sound?

¹³ Eco, *Foucault’s Pendulum* 245.

¹⁴ “L’industria del genio italico” 18.