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## 23. A Profusion of Songs

My parents wanted me to be a painter;
But I read poets and wished to be like them,
And lived until my twelfth summer
In romanticism's somber melody.

Then came India, early enough; the poet
Still had his say, but never in the foreground;
Then he kept silent for many years.
In old age
The poet awoke again — not in order to dream —
But to sing new songs sprung from the Spirit.[1]

"Since from childhood I had delighted in drawing and painting . . . my father cherished the wish that I should become an artist". However, contrary to the wish of his parents—in particular his father—Schuon found that he wanted to be a poet, not a painter. "What spurred me towards poetry was my discovery in my father's bookcase of all the German lyricists, and I eagerly read in them; the melancholic folksong style specially appealed to me." A poem written at the age of ninety incorporates one of the first poems to flow from his pen:

Late summer has now kissed the land;
With weary rustling in the woods;
The little flowers on the hill
Bow their heads towards autumn.
The rose glows in the evening light,
And fades away — spring is long past;
A man stands there and, quite alone,
Harkens to the Creator's song.

This poem — not the last two lines —
I wrote as a child almost eighty years ago.
When I was a child, I wanted to be a poet —
God can also reveal Himself in little flowers.[2]

Schuon's poetic gift continued to manifest itself at various points throughout his life, and he acknowledged that some of his poems were written "in the ecstasy of an inspiration". In 1947 he published two small volumes of poetry written between the years 1932 and 1942.[3] "I was a poet, then, during a long and unhappy period of my life. . . . When it happens that, looking back, I read these poems, I meet in them on the one hand a person

who no longer exists, and on the other the music of my immutable soul, depending upon which poems, passages, or words I read."[4]

After some twenty years of silence, there suddenly came the series of Arabic poems mentioned previously, written by Schuon in the wake of the graces he received from the Holy Virgin. Then for many years the poet again remained silent, until at the age of 86, he wrote a small series of poems in English, which were subsequently published in the collection called *Road to the Heart*. The following year, returning to his native German, he began his last, unimaginably rich, and unforeseen poetic cycle. During the next three years, Schuon wrote more than three thousand "teaching poems" (*Lehrgedichte*), their inspiration coming in such abundance that it was not unusual for him to complete several poems in a day.[5] William Stoddart, in his Introduction to a bilingual (German-English) volume of Schuon's poetry entitled *Adastra & Stella Maris*, speaks of the inexhaustible wealth of these "last songs":[6]

> A blessing lies not only in the quality of the poems, but also in the quantity—they constitute an all-inclusive totality. . . . The poems cover every possible aspect of metaphysical doctrine, spiritual method, spiritual virtue, and the role and function of beauty. They express every conceivable subtlety of spiritual and moral counsel—and this not merely in general terms, but with uncanny intimacy, detail, and precision. They exhibit incredible sharpness, profundity, comprehensiveness, and compassion.
>
> Some of the poems are autobiographical, with reminiscences of places experienced: Basle and Paris, the fairy tale-streets of old German towns, Morocco and Andalusia, Turkey and Greece, the American West. Others evoke the genius of certain peoples, such as the Hindus, the Japanese, the Arabs, the American Indians, and also the Cossacks and the Gypsies. Yet other poems elucidate the role of music, dance, and poetry itself. In one or two poems, the godless modern world comes in for biting, and sometimes fiercely humorous, comment.[7]

In her Foreword to the same work, Annemarie Schimmel,[8] herself a native German speaker, describes the way in which "the great mystics all over the world used the language of poetry when trying to beckon to a mystery that lies beyond normal human experience. . . . Taking this fact into consideration", Schimmel continues, "we are not surprised that Frithjof Schuon too felt compelled to write poetry. . .". After comparing the ideas, images, and sound of Schuon's German verses to those of Rilke, Schimmel notes:

> This sound [of the German] could not be maintained in the English translations of his poetry. Yet, as he himself explains, what really matters is the content, and here we listen to the thinker who, far from the intricate and complex scholarly sentences of his learned prose works

> sings the simple prayers of the longing soul: God is the center, the primordial ground which comprehends everything, manifesting Himself through the colorful play of His creations. And it is the human heart which alone can reflect the incomprehensible Being, for humanity's central quality is divinely inspired love, which is the axis of our life.
>
> I hope that Schuon's mystical verse will be read not only by English speaking readers but even more by those who understand German. They will enjoy many of these tender lyrics which show the famous thinker in a very different light and from an unexpected side.[9]

Echoing Schimmel's view, the editors of a collection of his poems affirm that "The poetic expressions in this volume offer an insight into the mind and heart of a sage, and one is able to enter more closely into contact with the personality and soul of the author. His poems derive, he says, not from mental effort, but from an interior vision: 'I have Paradise written in the ground of my being — I have only to go there to see it.' And the creative process, he tells us in several poems, is like stepping into a river—a river of song, whose irresistible current is the love that flows, beyond name and time, from God to God."[10]

This final poetical opus is in many ways a synthesis of his life's written work and provides a complement to the sage's articles. "Why did Schuon write poetry", one might ask, "when he had already expounded his message in his metaphysical books?" To which question, "One can only reply that a simple reading of these poems will furnish their own answer, for as with any great artistic production, theirs is a language at once direct and synthetic, which speaks straight to the heart. Readers familiar with Schuon's many books and articles will find here the same elements that characterize the rest of his vast corpus: universality, essentiality, primordiality; yet in a form that makes his message more easily accessible, and they speak to the heart, the mind, the soul with compelling immediacy."[11]

Frithjof Schuon's last poem was written on March 12, 1998, fewer than two months before his death:

> I have for long wished to end this book —
> I could not do so; I had to write more poems.
> But this time my pen lies down of itself,
> For there are other preoccupations, other duties;
> Be that as it may, whatever we may wish to do:
> Let us follow the call of the Most High —
>
> Let us repose in God's deep Peace.[12]

During the last two years of the philosopher's life, he had several times predicted that the flow of poems would soon stop, but inspiration constantly returned. When, however, the ninety year old poet wrote his last

poem, few doubted that Heaven had "other preoccupations" in store and that this cycle of his poetic inspiration had come to a close; for Schuon, as always, remained obedient to the call of the Most High. The last seven weeks of his life were a peaceful period spent in the remembrance of God, his vital forces gradually withdrawing.

In April he wrote his final spiritual text, entitled "Hope and Faith":

> How can the spiritual man conquer the natural tendency to sadness that old age entails? It will be said: by the hope of a better hereafter; but this is not enough, for the elderly person must find already in the here-below a reason to be happy, and it is Faith. Faith is our relationship with God; if this relationship is living, then the possibility of dominating our purely natural tendencies is already there.
>
> Man lives in time; God is the Eternal. In prayer, the human and the Divine meet—when we say Yes to God in the depths of our heart.

***Notes***

[1] *World Wheel*, First Collection, CXIV, 39.

[2] *Songs without Names*, Eleventh Collection, XLV, 207.

[3] *Sulamith* and *Tage-und Nächtebuch*. Schuon's *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty* includes an English translation of the final poem of each volume ("Confession" and "Layla"). *The Essential Frithjof Schuon* also includes translations of these and two additional poems from *Tage-und Nächtebuch* ("Shaykh Ahmad" and "Mostaghanem").

[4] Schuon continues, "With the poet, his work must be the expression of an inner nobility; the work must express the man himself, and not just an isolated and over-accentuated corner of the man." In a letter to Martin Lings, Schuon speaks further of the nature of poetry and of the duties of the poet: "Poetry is the 'language of the gods'; and 'noblesse oblige'; what I mean by this is that the poet has certain responsibilities. In poetry, the musicality of things, or their cosmic essentiality, erupts onto the plane of language; and this process requires grandeur, hence also authenticity, both of the image and of the sentiment. The poet spontaneously has the intuition of the underlying musicality of phenomena; under the pressure of an image or an emotion—the emotion, moreover, being naturally combined with concordant images—the poet expresses an archetypal beauty; without this pressure, there is no poetry, which implies that true poetry always has an aspect of inward necessity, whence its irreplaceable perfume." (letter dated January 1971, quoted in *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, "Appendix", 233)

[5] While Schuon was not immune to the normal physical ailments for a person of his age, he nevertheless manifested a remarkable vitality during this period: "I know a man who is ninety years old. / His body is as if he had drunk nectar — / It is almost young; with new black hairs in his beard, / With a sharp glance and a strong voice, / He comes forth, immersed in the Eternal Now." (*Songs without Names*, Fifth Collection, CXII, 241)

[6] *Autumn Leaves* & *The Ring*, "Midwest", 151.

[7] William Stoddart, "Introduction", in *Adastra* & *Stella Maris*, ix.

[8] Annemarie Schimmel (1922-2003) is among the twentieth century's foremost Rūmī scholars and interpreters. Schimmel also wrote a Foreword for Schuon's *Understanding Islam*.

[9] Annemarie Schimmel, "Foreword", in *Adastra* & *Stella Maris*, vii-viii.

[10] *Songs for a Spiritual Traveler*, "Editors' Foreword", x. And also: "A ray comes over thee and makes thee write poetry / At early dawn, and deep into the night; / Thou weary one, who wouldst repose — thou must accomplish / The work, which the Spirit ever kindles anew. / Let me then harken to the Spirit's voice —/ And my despondency may God forgive. / I do not wish to interfere with a God-given gift — / What He expects of me, that I will be." (*Adastra* & *Stella*

*Maris*, "The Poet", 229)

[11] *Songs for a Spiritual Traveler*, "Editors' Foreword", xii-xiii. Schuon himself has said: "Why all these didactic poems / After all that I have said in my books? / Because poetry speaks a language / That is for everyone — educated and uneducated alike — / Because it goes directly to the heart. / However, what I have to say here / Has different levels, according to Heaven's gift." (*Songs without Names*, Twelfth Collection, CXXV, 280) Schuon, for example, wrote a number of articles exploring the subtle questions of the posthumous states of being, while a didactic poem pierces through to an essential teaching in just a few words: "Earth, Heaven, and hell; purgatory, / And transmigration. Do not rack / Your brain over these. / The good go to Heaven and the wicked go to hell. / You would like to know what no eye can see; / God knows best what will happen with you — / What lies in the destiny of creatures, / In Eternity. And that He knows, suffices." (*World Wheel*, First Collection, LXXX, 28) His articles on this subject include: *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, "Universal Eschatology", *Eye of the Heart*, "Concerning the Posthumous States", *Form and Substance in the Religions*, "Comments on an Eschatological Problem", and *Treasures of Buddhism*, "Cosmological and Eschatological Viewpoints".

[12] *World Wheel*, Seventh Collection, CXXX, 167.

"A Profusion of Songs"
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by Michael Oren Fitzgerald
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Note from the Preface:
"In the text, all of Schuon's words, whether written or spoken, are displayed in colored lettering; my wish is to emphasize the value of listening to Schuon himself when considering his life's story and its meaning."