Social Renewal and the Power of the Feminine Wing
Marilyn Higgins

There are times in history when a woman’s touch is needed. How often has it occurred that when the social system of a civilization has run its course, when the forms of the past that were meant to build and move civilization forward, become entangled, and a show of force (which is often characteristic of the masculine wing) is just the wrong thing? It takes the receptive, nurturing and intuitive power of the feminine wing to untangle the knots, help reset the spiritual pattern, and set the bird of humanity on an upward course again.

This is the stuff of legends and this is the truth of history. All things are created through the interaction of an active force and a receptive force. If there is no reception, the action cannot take effect. In ancient China, the masculine element was considered the active force and the feminine was called the receptive. Within the individual human being, it is not quite so simple, for each of us, to be whole, must manifest qualities both of masculinity and femininity at times. But our relative strengths in interacting as male and female in society must be complementary. The Baha’i Writings explain:

The world of humanity consists of two parts: male and female. Each is the complement of the other. Therefore, if one is defective, the other will necessarily be incomplete, and perfection cannot be attained. There is a right hand and a left hand in the human body, functionally equal in service and administration. If either proves defective, the defect will naturally extend to the other by involving the completeness of the whole; for accomplishment is not normal unless both are perfect. (1)
Probably the most often quoted comment on the status of women from a Bahá’í perspective is the following:

And among the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh is the equality of women and men. The world of humanity has two wings—one is women and the other men. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly. Should one wing remain weak, flight is impossible. Not until the world of women becomes equal to the world of men in the acquisition of virtues and perfections, can success and prosperity be attained as they ought to be. (2)

What tends to happen in the historical ebb and flow, is that the masculine action becomes so carried away as to neglect and ride roughshod over the intuitive, receptive, nurturing qualities of the feminine. And this, I assert, is what spells the downfall of any society. On the other hand, it is the interaction of the intuitive and receptive feminine quality that unite with the spiritual forces of a new cycle of spiritual power that gives birth to a new era of social power and development of civilization.

Take the example of a creation story from Japanese mythology: Without going into the complexities of Japanese legends too much, the seemingly never-ending story, recorded in The Kojiki (3) starts with the mention of Active and Passive Essences that eventually create pairs of deities including Izanagi (the Male who Invites) and Izanami (the Female who Invites) who created jointly the Japanese Archipelago. As time goes on the female, Izanami, dies, and Izanagi goes all the way to Hades to bring her back. Later, he wants to purify himself, and a tear from his left eye brought forth the Sun Goddess – Amaterasu Omikami. But as we know, every victory comes with seeds of the next crisis. Amaterasu Omikami had a brother, Susanoo, who seems to have made his appearance from the water that came from Izanagi’s nose. This “snot” Susanoo ruled over the sea and storms was a very unstable fellow. At one point he made such a mess of Amaterasu’s garden, that she went into a cave and refused to come out. Darkness covered the world.

Disaster! Nothing grew. Nothing moved. Then all of the deities tried to solve the problem. And they came up with some ingenious plans. They set up Torii gates (literally, bird perches) so that the morning cock would come and crow and make the Sun Goddess believe that it was time to “rise and shine!” And a deity called Ame no Uzume – the spirit of merriment, put up a mirror, so that when the Sun Goddess did emerge, she might be attracted by her own reflection. And then all the spirits danced and played drums and made music
to attract Amaterasu from her cave. And when she did emerge, they closed the cave off with a Shimenawa, a straw rope – *like the ones you see in any Shinto Shrine, to make sure that Amaterasu would not go back into the cave and would continually bless them with her light*.

I love the symbolism represented in such legends. I cannot pass a Torii gate without thinking that it is time for the call of a new era of feminine spirit. Where is Amaterasu Omikami when we need her? Did not Baha’u’llah, Himself, often refer to the mystic, light-bearing Maid of Heaven who brought Him the tidings of the Revelation He was to impart to mankind in this age? However our understanding of these symbols and essences, we need to reflect the light of spirit into our lives more, and create stronger bonds of determination to see that spiritual virtues, “the Divine Fruits,” which are also noted in these legends, balance the material interests of our lives. You see, it is the woman’s touch – the radiance, the intuition, the beauty, the receptivity, the life-giving joy that is needed to banish the darkness of an era destroyed by heedless actions in the garden of the world.

In history, too, we can see that it was the noble policies instigated by the Empress Suiko in the 6th century that brought the mercy-filled teaching of the Buddha to official recognition in Japan at a time when Japan was literally destroying itself through the in-fighting of contending war-lords. Suiko’s nephew, Prince Shotoku, under her direction, created the constitutional framework. But it was her receptivity that made such a momentous change possible. By receiving this divine force, within the span of a generation or two, a new spirit of unity, of education and arts took hold in people’s lives throughout Japan, and the remarkable social and cultural achievements of the Heian and Nara eras brought forth a golden age of characteristic beauty of Japanese culture which gradually ripened into the “Samurai” spirit. That’s another story.

It is logical, if you think about it, how this characteristic pattern of rise and fall of civilizations takes place as if there are predictable seasons. A spring time of spirit rises with values of equality, education, and refinement. The union of the male and female forces brings the “soft-powers” of intuition and nurturance to support the “hard-powers” of active building in a positive direction for the future generations. But when the “building forces” or “active forces” become gradually separated and divorced from the “nurturing forces,” hard times and a loss of power ensues.

If women are kept in the background of society, and left under-educated, what happens to them? They must rely on tradition and pure imagination, gradually leading to superstition. As women are the first teachers of the children, the children are gradually undereducated and fed on superstition. Naturally, the intuitive, soul-power of women, left in the dark, is
lost and the material forces bury the society in useless debris. It takes more
than fertilizer to grow a garden. It takes water and sunshine, fresh breezes
and good seeds.

Do you know what time we are living in? We see forces of darkness and
forces of light in mighty combat throughout the world. We stand at the dark
end of social neglect, the material end of an old cycle and the dawn-tide of a
new cycle of civilization. Surely feminine power is needed.

Have you heard the story of Tahirih? Tahirih was the title given to
Fatimih Baraghani, a woman of 19th century Persia, whose courage,
passionate poetry and unflinching faith marked a turning point in the balance
of social power between men and women for the modern age. She is
sometimes called the Joan-of-Arc of the East. (6)

It may seem quite normal for you that I stand before you today, as
others of my gender have, to deliver educational talks. However, even in
Japan, and at that time in America, it would have seemed quite strange and
out of place for a woman to presume to make a public address and there are
places where it is not allowed even now. Shirin Ebadi, whose life work has
been inspired by Tahirih, and who won the Nobel Prize for her work on the
rights of women, is not able at this time to speak in her native land, Iran.

When Abdu’l-Baha, son of the Founder of the Baha’i Faith, was
predicting and explaining the rise of the status of women in the modern day
on his visit to the US, in 1912, he said:

The status of woman in former times was exceedingly deplorable, for it
was the belief of the Orient that it was best for woman to be ignorant.
It was considered preferable that she should not know reading or
writing in order that she might not be informed of events in the world.
Woman was considered to be created for rearing children and
attending to the duties of the household. If she pursued educational
courses, it was deemed contrary to chastity; hence women were made
prisoners of the household. The houses did not even have windows
opening upon the outside world. (5)

So, in a culture and time when women were mostly denied any sort of formal
education, Fatimih Baraghani (6), more or less by accident of birth, was well
educated in the Koran, in history, literature and poetry. She was the daughter
of an Islamic clergyman who ran a religious training school (or madras). She
would hang out and learn as the classes were being held. Actually, she was
the oldest of 4 sisters, and her father’s school even included a small section
for women to study. It is said that she could recite the Koran from memory
by the age of 9. However, being a female, her education was considered of
little value to her father. “If only she had been born a boy,” he is said to have lamented. She was married off to a cousin by the time she was 14 and he did not appreciate her intellectual gifts at all and considered them “unbecoming of a woman.” (7)

But Tahirih contemplated deeply the meaning of her life, and her moment in time. She used the power of her intuition and her education to guide herself and to guide the people that she encountered on an ever-upward path through the turmoil of her day.

She studied the sacred texts eagerly, and pondered the movements of her time. She became convinced that the Promised Qa’im spoken of in the Islamic scriptures (indeed the Great Spiritual Educator promised in all of the world’s scriptures) would soon appear. She knew this from her studies, and she knew it from her dreams. And she also knew that it meant that the time of the liberation of women was at hand.

Throughout her twenties, although tied to the role of wife and mother that allowed little freedom, she wrote poems of anticipation. “When the day comes, when the day comes, I will be the first to follow....” (6)

**WHEN THE DAY COMES** (circa 1837)

When the Day comes, when the Day comes
I shall be the first to follow. When the Day comes
I will be the first to follow the new laws for a new day!

When the Day comes, I know the Day will come, And I will be the first to follow.

I know the Day will come, soon;
I know the Day will come, And I shall be the first to follow, follow!

Although her husband disapproved of her controversial religious views, he was even more mortified by her active quest to teach the women of her communities to *read* and to *think* and to *speak* for themselves. “Rise up, dear friend...” she told them. She was convinced that when the Promised One appeared there would be a new-found freedom, not only for women, but for all people who had become oppressed by the injustices of the spiritual imitation and blind traditions in the morally bankrupt empire they lived in.

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Rise up, Dear Friend (circa 1844) (6)

Rise up, dear friend,
Like the strong branch of a tree,
Knowledge will bring you,
I will help guide you
To the One who will make all secrets free.

Rise up and sing, sing out your song
of all that will light your way.
He will come from eternity; He will come in this Day.
Sing a song of a Voice that will light your way...
He will come.

Rise up and fly on crystal wings.
The mystery is no more,
The heavens rejoice,
The heavens rejoice, for He will come.

Rise up dear friend, rise up and sing
Rise up and fly on your wings.
Sing out your song, with voices so strong,
That the heavens rejoice in this Day.

Now secrets will shine from a wakening sign, for He will come in this Day.

In 1844 she had a dream of the Promised One speaking directly to her. When she learned that her brother-in-law, who agreed with her views, was going out to try to find the Promised Qa‘im, she gave him a letter and instructed him to give it to that Promised One when and if He was found. (7)

What was it exactly that they were expecting to find? A person of “pure lineage” (that is, a descendant of the Prophet Mohammed), who would be excellent in every physical and moral attribute, who would be possessed of innate knowledge and a new Revelation of spiritual teachings to guide people to the age of unity of the human race, to equality and to justice.

In the summer of 1844, her brother-in-law, became the 16th person to independently recognize that Ali Muhammed of Shiraz, who became known to history as the Bab (the Door or Gate) was the Promised One whom they sought. When the Bab was given the letter of Fatimih Baraghani, she was
accepted as the 17th of His first disciples. He wrote a response to her, and as if to confirm her powers of intuition, that letter contained the exact words that He had spoken to her in her dream.

Qurratul’ Ayn, (the Solace of Eyes), as she had begun to be called, arose immediately to help spread the Bab’s teachings throughout the land of Persia and into Iraq all the way to Baghdad.

Although veiled and often having to give lectures from behind a curtain, she taught people, especially women, to take charge of their own education, to investigate reality without fear, to arise to serve the new social developments that would be possible in this new age. Her flawless logic, knowledge of religious teachings and clarity attracted many, and produced fear among her adversaries and especially in her own family. They feared for their own traditional positions. If people could seek truth for themselves, after all, perhaps the traditional clergy would not be needed.

But it was her tremendous mixture of this powerful intellect with the deep and passionate love for life, for God, her Lord, and for the knowledge of the unique moment in time in which she lived that gave her a conviction that attracted new followers by the scores and the hundreds. She was unstoppable. Eventually Fatimih was divorced by her husband and placed under house arrest. She continued to pour her heart out in prayers and poetry in praise of her Beloved.

One can imagine her sitting as a prisoner under house arrest in the cellar of her father’s house perhaps spending hours doing needle work, weaving tapestries or carpets that were the usual pastimes of women of that culture. Even in the rhythm of such mundane work Tahirih found symbolic meaning: “If we could meet, I would tell you of all my grief, dot-by-dot, and point-by-point.” “My tormented heart has woven your love to the fabric of my life.” (6)

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Dot-by-Dot (circa 1848)

I would tell you all my grief dot-by-dot and point-by-point,

If heart-to-heart and face-to-face we could meet.

If we could meet, to have a glimpse of you

I would wander like the breeze,

from house-to-house, street-to-street.
Just for a glimpse of you.

To be away from you,

My heart cries from my eyes, like stormy seas,

Like waves in the breeze how they keep me away from you.

My tormented heart has woven your love

to the fabric of my life;


The Bab had been imprisoned far to the North in the fortress of Makhu. But His preeminent follower, Husayn Ali, who became known to history as Baha’u’llah, was the one to rescue Tahirih from her house arrest. For a time, she lived with Baha’u’llah’s family, hosted by His wife Assiyih Khanum. From the poems she left behind, we can realize that Tahirih must have been aware that Baha’u’llah was indeed, the One for Whom the Bab was preparing humanity. But she knew that it was not yet time to unveil that secret.

Abdu’l-Baha was a child of about 3 or 4 years at that time and according to his later remembrances shared with Lady Blomfield who recorded them in her book, The Chosen Highway, he had a wonderful relationship with this remarkable woman, who loved him very much. Lady Blomfield describes Abdu’l-Baha’s reminiscence of sitting on Tahirih’s lap while Tahirih, spoke from behind the curtains to encourage the bravery of more hesitant male followers of the new Revelation. “This is not the time for arguments, for discussions... It is the time for deeds. For the day of words has passed!” (9).

It was Baha’u’llah who arranged for the conference at Badhasht, where Tahirih, representing the belief that the new Revelation was a clear break from the laws of the past, faced the male followers who believed that society just needed a few minor changes and some inspiration. Quratu’l’Ayn made her point very clear by appearing before them without a veil. This was 1848. And although there is an Islamic tradition that foreshadowed that when the new Day came Fatimih (daughter of the prophet Mohammed) would appear unveiled, this action was such a shock that some of the men left the new Faith, and one man even slit his own throat at the sight.

But Baha’u’llah saw nothing but purity in the act, and when the Bab was informed, that is when Quratu’l’Ayn (Solace of Eyes) was given the title
Tahirih (the Pure One) by which she has been known ever since.

There were to be more tests in her short life. When the Bab was martyred in 1850 and the country continued in its turmoil, Tahirih was again arrested and more demanding choices were put before her: Recant her faith or face death. At one point she was brought before the young Nasridin Shah, who was impressed with her intellect and her beauty. He offered her a good position in his harem if she would just recant her problematic beliefs. She wrote a poem in response (6):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Road to Nowhere. (circa 1852)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Heart-broken lovers tremble with desire for you.</td>
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<td>They would die in their chains on the path to get near you.</td>
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<tr>
<td>O Majestic One, the king who wants to delight me,</td>
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<td>I would rather stand before your sword, Hah! And glad to!</td>
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<td>You hate my Lover’s wine. You blame His “purity.”</td>
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<td>Well, choose your own redemption.</td>
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<td>Scorn what I know is true!</td>
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<td>I’ll walk that bitter walk, a walk for weak and weary folk.</td>
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<tr>
<td>You go ride with your riches, your nose held high as the sky.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I’ll keep the beggar’s path. It was made for me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>You can have Alexander’s rule. Wealth is what you pursue.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wealth is what you pursue.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pass by our resting place, on your road to “nowhere.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>May you have your wish! It’s no more than your due.</td>
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<td>It’s no more than your due.</td>
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I do not know if she actually delivered this poem, or a more circumspect version, but her refusal apparently brought a smile of respect from the Shah in any case. He directed his ministers to leave her alone. But as she had clearly denied the Shah’s offer, they over-rode his instructions and she was left unprotected to the forces who wanted her dead.

In 1852, Tahirih faced her martyrdom with a calm courage and fortitude that impressed even a western doctor who was called upon to witness it. She dressed like a bride. She handed her executioner her own silk scarf with which to strangle her. She is reported to have said, “You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women.”
Her body was thrown into a well. But from the well-spring of her life we still can hear her courageous and luminous voice describing the wonders of eternity and embracing her unique spot in history. Among her later poems is one in which she explains her thoughts on the patterns of history that rise above the limitations of life and death:

The Sands of Time (date uncertain) (6)

Stars will fall, the Sun will rise, like sands of time.
A thousand stars watch the moon rise,
On mystic shores of timeless delight
Our fate is our beginning, an endless circle of light.
On wings of silver the Bird takes flight, from a golden throne
We have only moments in time, before the Bird has flown.
Stars will fall, the Sun will rise.
That’s the way of the sands of time.
How many suns shine over clouds
that sleep beneath the stars?
Forever spinning around and around
in an ageless night – the stars...
It’s God whose Hand measure out the sands.
Like waves upon a shoreless sea, our end is our beginning.
The stars will fall, the Sun will rise, like sands of time,
Like sands of time.

Another western doctor, John Esselmont, who became a follower of Baha’u’llah in the early 1900’s wrote:

The world in the past has been ruled by force, and man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities both of body and mind. But the balance is already shifting; force is losing its dominance, and mental alertness, intuition, and the spiritual qualities of love and service, in which woman is strong, are gaining ascendancy. Hence the new age will be an age less masculine and more permeated with the feminine ideals, or, to speak more exactly, will be an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more evenly balanced. (10)

And surely, as if on an invisible global downbeat, from the moment Tahirih removed her veil in 1848, women around the world began to arise to
speak out for the right to participate in society – at first in towns and cities here and there, and gradually country-by-country. As one feminist movement of the 1960’s touted, “We’ve come a long way, baby” (a popular song by Loretta Lynn). But we still do have a long way to go to bring the wings into balance. Today, gender equality and the empowerment of women is listed as one of the central goals of the United Nations. There are structural and traditional barriers to remove. Women are said to do more than half of the world’s paid work, yet their salaries are still lag behind men’s salaries. It is said that 80% of the unpaid volunteer work is done by women. And at last count only 19% of the legislators of the world are women. But think of this – just 15 years ago (1996), that number was 11%. So we are witnessing the sea change, the tide is turning. (11)

But, surely, empowerment does not merely mean “political power.” Take note of the following comment by Abdu’l-Baha,

Ponder the manner in which Jinab-i-Tahirih used to teach. She was free from every concern, and for this reason she was resplendent. Now the world of women should be a spiritual world, not a political one, so that it will be radiant. The women of other nations are all immersed in political matters. Of what benefit is this, and what fruit doth it yield? To the extent ye can, ye should busy yourselves with spiritual matters which will be conducive to the exaltation of the Word of God and of the diffusion of His fragrances. Your demeanour should lead to harmony amongst all and to coalescence and the good-pleasure of all...” (12).

It is not that women should not be involved in the life of society, but mere material means and mechanisms are not adequate, and often mask the true qualities of the feminine to bring about the spirit the harmony.

About 100 years ago, the Baha’i Faith was brought to Japan, where among the first Japanese to embrace the Cause, were a number of young Japanese women. Actually, when Abdu’l-Baha was in Paris in 1912 he made a special effort to speak to a Japanese diplomat, Viscount Arakawa, and among the practical advice he gave in regard to Japan was that boys and girls must be equally educated. In 1920 Abdu’l-Baha wrote to Agnes Alexander, the American woman who settled in Japan at His request in order to teach the Cause of God, “I am supplicating God to help Mr. Fukuta progress day by day, to guide the Japanese women to tear up the curtains of superstitions, observe the Lights of Truth, seek Eternal Life, and long for everlasting Bestowals.” (13)

It is interesting that Abdu’l-Baha should note that a Japanese man should help to guide the women. It seems to me if we want to rehabilitate a
broken-winged bird of humanity, it will take both wings carefully working together. The women have to “tear up the curtains of superstition,” removing their spiritual veils as it were, and become receptive to the positive and active spiritual forces of the Spirit of this age. They need to be educated and involved in society, while at the same time giving careful attention to their powerful roles as nurturers and mothers. The men must also gain qualities of the feminine spirit and work on the structural changes in society that will allow men and women to work together to balance the spiritual and material wings of mankind.

Abdu’l-Baha also wrote to Saichiro Fujita, a young man from Yamaguchi Prefecture who discovered the Baha’i Faith when he left Yanai and went to Hawaii in the early 1900’s: “Japan has made wonderful progress in material civilization,” Abdu’l-Baha wrote, “But she will become perfect when she will also make spiritual developments and the Power of the Kingdom become manifest in her.” (13) I have read that statement many times, but until now I did not pay attention to the fact that Japan is called “she” by Abdu’l-Baha (at least that is how it was translated). I guess we do think of our “mother country” more often than our “father land.” I will let you ponder that thought and reflect on how the Powers of Heaven can become reflected more brightly in this dear land.

As a benediction to this presentation, I am moved to leave you with Tahirih’s own words on the occasion of her unveiling at Badasht that continue to call out to us today: “This day is the day of festivity and universal rejoicing,’ she added, ‘the day on which the fetters of the past are burst asunder. Let those who have shared in this great achievement arise and embrace each other.’” (14)

In closing, I would like to close with the sharing of a music video featuring a remarkably talented young female Japanese composer and singer, who has arisen to reflect the light of the Spirit of this new age on Japan. Those who attended 2009 ABS Conference in Tokyo may recognize Nao Hara as one who helped a group of youth produce the story of Tahirih’s life in the form of a play. Recently she and a friend added beautiful visual art to the music to bring the impact of the message to a wider audience (15). I hope the theme will resonate in your soul and that, whether you are a man or a woman, your heart will be inspired to arise and shine in the service of humanity in this wondrous age. Like Tahirih, let us be strong!

Notes


14. ibid, p. 19.

15. *Tahere no Youni [Like Tahirih]*. Available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rsPOVZ0dgNc&feature=plcp

**Recommended Sources**

Appendix: Poems in Translation (trans. by Edana Almanza)

その日が来れば
（1837年）

その日が来れば
その日が来れば
私は最初にあなたに続く
その日が来れば
最初に守る
新たな日の新たな法律を
私は信じる
必ず来ると
その日が来た時
私はあなたへ行きります
その日が来れば
必ずすぐに来る
そして私はあなたに続く
最初に

友よ立ち上がり（1844年）

強い枝のように上昇しないで
理解してあなたは来る
私が導いてあげる、秘密を
解放するあなた方へ

永遠から来る、この日からの
あなた方の声の歌を
歌いなさい、あなたの声で
光示されるすべての歌を

水晶の用な羽で 飛び立ちなさい
天は祝っている、あなた方の到来を
友よ立ち上がり 歌え
羽を広げて、強い声で、
目覚めの歌をみんなで
歌に託される秘密が輝く
友よ立ち上がり、歌え

会えるなら（1847年）

もしも会えるなら
心と心、顔と顔を合わせて
悲しみを告げる
一針、一針、点から点まで
もしも会えるなら
一目見るだけに
風の様にさまよう
家から家へ、道から道を
離れているのは心が泣く
でも引き離そうとするその思いは
荒れた海の様に、高い波の様に
苦しけど
私の心にあなたの愛が
縫いつける、命の縄に縫いつている
糸から糸、一針、一針、点から点まで
会えるなら、貴方に

何処にも行かない道

あなたの側に居たくて震える恋人たち
鎖に繋がれあなたの為でゆく

偉大なる王よ、私が欲しいと?
あなたの剣で殺された方が
よっぽどはだわ

（私の）愛する方のワインが好まないのね

彼の純粋さに負けて、真実を拒み、
いいわ、あなたは間違い道を進めば

私はつらくても貧民と歩みます

63
この道は私の為にあるのだから
金銀欲しさに誘惑されたあなたは
人を見下ろしている,
何処にも行かない道を進んでいる

私たちが眠る場所を通り過ぎる度
思い出がいいわ。
あなたが願った道の
あげくの果ては何もない... 
ふさわしいと思わないかしら?’

時の砂

星は落ち、日は昇り
時の砂のごとく
天を舞う月を幾千もの砂が見守る
時を超えた喜びのある不思議な浜で
終わりは始まり、永久に続く命の縁

御鳥は輝く翼で飛び放つ
黄金の玉座から御鳥が美しく飛び
もう一時しかないのだと、終わるまで

永久の海の波の様に希望は全ての始まり
星は落ち、日は昇り、それが時の砂の流れ

夜空の下でいくつもの日の光が
雲で隠されているのだろう?
永久に回り続ける時のない夜に
時の砂を計るのは神の御手である