The Path of Beauty: The Literary Life of Amatu'l-Bahá Rúḥíyyih Khánum

BY SANDRA HUTCHISON

I

"I AM going to meet a great lady. Would you like to come?" I asked Wu Ye as our plane flew high over the rice paddies of rural Anhui Province, headed for Shanghai.

"Yes, I would like to meet that great lady, too," she answered.

In this way, Wu Ye and I became members of the party of Amatu'l-Bahá Rúḥíyyih Khánum, traveling in China with more suitcases than anyone could hope to carry.

The next day, the anniversary of the Declaration of the Báb (the Prophet-Herald of the Bahá'í Faith), found us dodging the crowds of student protesters that thronged Shanghai's main river front street, the Bund, as we made our way to the Peace Hotel.

"Democracy and Freedom! Down with Nepotism! Stamp out Corruption!" shouted the thousands who packed the streets, stopping traffic, even public buses.

"We must be careful not to associate with the demonstrators," I told our group, echoing the warning of my university's Foreign Affairs' Office to outsiders who would involve themselves in China's internal politics.

"We aren't associating with anyone!" Amatu'l-Bahá laughed. "We are just going for lunch."

Lunch on the top floor of the Peace Hotel afforded us an unforgettable view of the students surging through the streets below and of the Huangpu River flowing beside them, witness to the many uprisings that have marked and made modern China. As I listened to the cries of the students shouting their slogans, I wondered how anyone could remain so unaffected by the political turmoil around us. Yet Amatu'l-Bahá appeared to move in the world but live beyond it, always conscious of a higher purpose.

The schedule we kept during the next five days was, I later learned, typical of Amatu'l-Bahá's travels in China: a blend of dinners with prominent people, lunches with friends, meetings with Bahá'ís, shopping for unique works of art to adorn the Bahá'í Holy Places in Israel, and trips to sites of social and historical significance, such as the mansion of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the founder and first president of the Republic of China, in the hope of finding opportunities to share the Bahá'í teachings on unity and peace. As we moved through Dr. Sun's mansion, noting this artifact and that book or painting, Amatu'l-Bahá, always a center of attraction because of her dignity and natural charisma, drew various other visitors to our group. Several professors from provincial universities joined our party, and, while we huddled together to read an ancient Chinese saying that hung framed on Dr. Sun's sitting room wall—"Between the four seas, all men are brothers"—she told them of

 I wish to thank Mrs. Violette Nakhjavani and Miss Nell Golden for their help as literary executors of The Estate of Amatu'l-Bahá Rúḥíyyih Khánum and Miss Golden for her personal assistance in answering numerous questions about Amatu'l-Bahá.

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the Bahá'í teaching on the oneness of humanity. After we left the mansion, I asked her if she had found the visit interesting. "Everything I do," she replied simply, "is for the good of the Cause."

Amatu'l-Bahá's assertion was certainly true of all the other activities scheduled during the five brief days I spent with her in Shanghai. But even in the midst of a life of such vigorous action there emerged, like bubbles rising to the surface of turbulent waters, moments for contemplation. During one such moment, the only time I was completely alone with her during the days in Shanghai, she called me into her room at the New Asia Hotel, where we stayed, to show me a book on Chinese art entitled The Path of Beauty. *Patiently, she turned the pages of the book, working her way through the various works of art pictured there and explaining to me the artistic significance of each. I may have commented on the simple grace of a porcelain vase or on the austere purity of a Chinese brush-stroke painting. I may have even ventured to express the hope that someday I would write about Chinese art. I scarcely recall. Looking back on that moment, I remember only being transfixed by the stillness of some beauty that was completely perceived and as fully absorbed, a beauty that could only have been conveyed to me by a mind capable of deep communion with the spirit of the art itself.*

II

IT IS rare in the modern age to find the spirit of action and that of contemplation married in one human being, let alone in a writer. Indeed, typically, twentieth-century writers have been defined by their social alienation and characterized by the sense of anxiety and absurdity such isolation can generate. Living in a world in which thought is divorced from feeling—what T. S. Eliot described as the "dissociation of sensibility"—modern poets have become increasingly divorced from their traditional social function.[1] Writers who have followed contemporary prescriptions for uniting these two somewhat opposite dimensions of human experience have often been described as "propagandists." But in the life of Amatu'l-Bahá action and contemplation were harmoniously wed, and in her literary work the fruit of that marriage is manifest: the weaving together of inner and outer worlds into a rich fabric of history that is, at once, personal, social, and spiritual.

In the course of a very public life replete with obligations and duties, Amatu'l-Bahá (née Mary Maxwell) had little time to devote to a "literary life" as such. Serving for sixteen years as the principal secretary of her husband, Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian and hereditary head of the Bahá'í Faith, she shared his rigorous schedule of administrative work for the burgeoning faith.[2] Appointed by Shoghi Effendi in 1952 to serve as a Hand of the Cause, a designation requiring her assumption of special duties for the propagation and protection of the Bahá'í Faith, she shouldered additional responsibilities.[3] Still she found time for writing that was, she explained when I interviewed her at her home in Haifa, "more inspirational," including a great deal of poetry.[4]

Despite his own pressing needs for her assistance, Shoghi Effendi valued her creative work sufficiently to encourage her to pursue it. Once, she recalls, when he saw her copying some of her own poems into a book, he

1. See T. S. Eliot, *The Metaphysical Poets* (1921).

2. Not only did Amatu'l-Bahá assist Shoghi Effendi with his correspondence, she also helped him with larger projects, such as editing and preparing *The Bahá'í World* volumes, comprehensive international records of the Bahá'í Faith's expansion and activities.

3. Bahá'u'lláh appointed eminent Bahá'ís as Hands of the Cause to stimulate the propagation and ensure the protection of the Bahá'í Faith. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in His Will and Testament, conferred authority on Shoghi Effendi to appoint Hands of the Cause.

4. Amatu'l-Bahá, personal interview, Haifa, Israel, 17 February 1995. Further references to this interview are included in the text as "(SH, Feb. 1995)."

asked if he could read them. The next morning he told her that some of the poems had "made him weep" (SH, Feb. 1995). Although, according to her long-time secretary, Nell Golden, she had little inclination for cultivating a literary circle—the prerequisite for ongoing literary production for many writers—Amatu'l-Bahá did entertain writers and artists of distinction in her home on Haparsim Street in Haifa.[5] Through such contacts, her reading, and her travels, she evolved her own aesthetic views, which included a conviction that cultural expression, whatever its form, cannot be "dictate[d]," but rather must "flower" naturally from a "deep root" (SH, Feb. 1995).

For Amatu'l-Bahá, the need to write was a lifelong "urge," expressed anytime, anywhere, during travels, even while in flight. When I asked her to elaborate, she explained: "Writing for anyone who really writes is a tremendous impulse. You don't deny it. You give it priority. . . . I write because I have to write, because I have something to say. . . . I can't get the paper and pencil fast enough" (SH, Feb. 1995). Originally an aspiring dramatist, Amatu'l-Bahá began to write plays at the age of sixteen and continued into her forties.[6] But over the years she expanded her literary repertoire as her themes required, working in a wide variety of genres, from poetry and didactic prose to literary criticism, history, biography, the epistle, and even film scripts, such as the four-part *Green Light Expedition of Rúḥíyyih Rabbani* (1976) and *The Pilgrimage* (1980).

Lively and instructive, plays such as *A Spiritual Assembly's Growing Pains* (c. 1956) and "Heard On High," which was begun in 1971 during her extended safari in Africa (NG, 11 May 2000), have been performed for audiences around the world.[7] In the first play the characters are caricatures, "types" as the narrator puts it in his introductory comments, of people who might sit on a Bahá'í spiritual assembly gathered to consult on community matters. Harriet Wisely, Elizabeth Brisk, Oscar J. Boom, Jane and Jack Smith, Clarence Friend, Martha Jones, Adelaide Cosmos, George Penhold, and Mary Lou Fervor—each character plays a predictable role in the very ordinary but engaging drama that unfolds as individual personalities clash in the course of a group discussion. Her later play, "Heard on High," gently critiques commonly held views of the afterlife as articulated by lost souls who come before "a fluoroscopic soul assessor" when they pass on to the next world. Perhaps best described as morality plays with a sense of humor, both dramas achieve their aim of inviting reflection on the spectacle of human folly at play in both individual and community life.

5. Information gleaned from e-mail correspondence with Amatu'l-Bahá's secretary, Nell Golden, Thursday, 11 May 2000. Further references to correspondence with Nell Golden are included in parentheses in the text as "(NG, 11 May 2000.)" Romanian poet and translator Hana Zantovska, for example, dined at Amatu'l-Bahá's home, and renowned artist Mark Tobey was feted there (NG, 11 May 2000).

6. The plays she wrote in her thirties and forties were mostly "character studies," to use her own term, and generally not on Bahá'í themes, except for one entitled "The Persian Wife," which dramatizes the experience of the wife of a man who was martyred for his belief in the Bahá'í Faith. These plays have never been circulated (SH, Jan. 1995).

7. Although *A Spiritual Assembly's Growing Pains* has no date of publication, an inscribed copy was found in Amatu'l-Bahá's papers dated December 1956 (NG, 11 May 2000). It was first published by the Bahá'í Publishing Trust in Delhi, India, n.d., and later by the Bahá'í Publishing Trust in Mona Vale, Australia, in 1976 and by Publications Australia in 1985. It has been performed in Haifa, Israel, and Africa. In February 1999 Amatu'l-Bahá gave the Bahá'ís of Honduras permission to translate the play into Spanish. "Heard on High" was performed in Haifa, Israel, on 15 April 1977 and again in 1991 and 1995. It has also been performed at Landegg Academy in Switzerland and in Kazahkstan and Peru. It has been translated into Spanish and Russian (NG, 11 May 2000).

Amatu'l-Bahá began to write poetry at a very young age —thirteen—and was encouraged to continue doing so by winning a poetry prize (SH, Feb. 1995). Unfortunately, the majority of her lyric poetry has never appeared in print, remaining a subterranean layer of private emotion in a very public life. The unearthing of that hidden layer of her literary expression will be essential to the full comprehension of Amatu'l-Bahá's life and contribution as a writer. For the time being, however, *Poems of the Passing*[8] stands as solitary testimony to the emotional intensity of a necessarily very private inner life. A collection of elegiac lyrics that, Amatu'l-Bahá recalls, "came out of the bottom of my sorrow" at the passing of Shoghi Effendi, the poems were published in the hope that the Bahá'í teachings on immortality might be conveyed in so doing. In the words of the editor: "It is the author's ardent hope that in sharing [the poems] with others they may echo the grief of separation in this world from our loved ones and the confident hope of reunion with them in an eternal realm of spiritual progress and mercy."[9]

A remarkably candid portrayal of personal grief, Amatu'l-Bahá's *Poems of the Passing* presents a panoramic view of the landscape of grief and loss. Traversing that shadowy terrain between steadfast faith and crippling despair, a land where "The airs are cleft / The seas are dry, / Day is dark / And night burns," the poems articulate the conflict between the human heart and soul as they confront the existential questions posed by death and loss. Permeated by a "strange music" the poet herself "dare[s] not . . . name"—the dissonant music of the spheres as they hobble off their rightful course, a music made of the agonized refrains of the mind near snapping from the burden of grief—the poems offer no easy answers.[10] Rather, they mark stages in a journey from desolation to consolation, from halting denial to the heartfelt acceptance of loss. Through their ultimate affirmation of the enduring life of the soul, the lyrics assert the triumph of the bereft human heart over the darkness of loss, attesting to the power of faith to transform the failures of human love into spiritual victory.

"Poetry," Amatu'l-Bahá has said, is a "marvelous emotional medium" and "can express things nothing else can express" (SH, Feb. 1995). Judging from her one volume of published poems, it seems clear that she taps "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" Wordsworth defined as the origin of poetry.[11] But unlike so many of her contemporaries, confessional poets who write in a style forged from inner anguish candidly expressed, her literary work has not characteristically found its subject in searing self-scrutiny or even in self-reflection. From the beginning, her literary gifts have been wed to the dominating purpose of her life: service to her faith. Anchored in conscience and a strong sense of public duty, the themes of her published work reflect her ongoing preoccupation with what she viewed as the central drama of our time: the emergence of the Bahá'í Faith; its rising fortunes; its heroes

8. London: George Ronald, 1996. In addition to the one volume of poetry, at least two other short lyrics by Amatu'l-Bahá have appeared in print: "On Hearing of Enoch's Murder," which was written in Limassol, Cyprus, on 17 September 1979 (NG, 22 May 2000) and published in *The Bahá'í World: An International Record, Volume XVIII, 1979–1983,* comp. The Universal House of Justice (Haifa, Isr.: Bahá'í World Centre, 1986] 983, and "This Is Faith," which was written on 4 April 1954 (NG, 22 May 2000) and published most recently in Violette Nakhjavani's "A Tribute to Hand of the Cause Amatu'l-Bahá Rúḥíyyih Khanum: Part 2" *Bahá'í Canada* May 2000: 8.

9. This quotation is drawn from the editor's description on the back cover, which Amatu'l-Bahá approved.

10. "What Is the Use," Rúḥíyyih Rabbani, *Poems of the Passing* (London: George Ronald, 1996) 24.

11. William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads,* 2nd. ed. (1800), preface.

and heroines; the lives of its Central Figures, the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá;[12] and the narrative of hope and transformation found in its sacred scripture.

Curiously, Amatu'l-Bahá did not start off by apprenticing herself to the art of writing but rather to that of portrait painting. Raised in a family the interests of which were shaped by the professional life of her father, the then well-known Canadian architect William Sutherland Maxwell, the young Mary found it natural to express her creativity through the visual arts. She studied with one of Canada's foremost portrait painters,[13] until the Great Depression set in and her parents could no longer afford the lessons. Had she been, she reflected, "a brilliant, top-flight, compulsive artist," it would have been "worth it" to pursue her art, but Amatu'l-Bahá felt that even had she become "a fairly well-known Canadian portrait painter," she would not have done "mankind much good" (SH, Feb. 1995). Consequently, she turned her attention to her other beloved art: writing. "As a writer," she asserted, "I can do a little more for my fellow man. Through writing, I can reach a great many more people" (SH, Feb. 1995).

The impulse to "do a little more for . . . [her] fellow man" lends much of Amatu'l-Bahá's work a strong sense of purpose, even urgency, rooted as it often is not so much in the moralist's need to teach others how to live as in the concerned writer's response to a specific "need perceived at the time" (SH, Feb. 1995). Clearly, an article such as "The Fragrance of Letters," a commentary on excerpts from "letters from the Guardian's mail bag," was written to inspire the then small and struggling Bahá'í community by providing news of achievements the world over.[14] Written for a wider audience, her first published book, *Prescription for Living*,[15] attempts to answer the existential quandaries of the postwar generation in its search for values to live by. In the foreword to her book, Amatu'l-Bahá explains:

> The thoughts advanced in these pages. . . . make no claim to be exhaustive, to even begin to cover the tremendous questions touched upon. They are offered by the writer because of a keen conviction that in spite of the apparent hopelessness of our present situation on this planet . . . in spite of our black horizons, there is yet hope that we can, if we will, turn the tide of evil threatening to engulf us. (p. 9)

The most practical of all her books, *A Manual for Pioneering*,[16] serves as a primer for prospective Bahá'í traveling teachers on how to live in and adapt to foreign cultures. Touching upon a wide range of topics, from depression and culture shock to tribal customs and recipes for lamb stew and rice pudding, this book offers "A Short Course on How to Love Your Fellow Man" and practical advice on "How to Speak" and "How to Furnish a Nice Place to Hold Meetings." In progress at the time of her death, another work in this genre reflects Amatu'l-Bahá's recent concern with presenting the Bahá'í teachings to Chinese speakers. Written by Amatu'l-Bahá for "the average middle-aged, middle-class, literate Chinese housewife," "The Wondrous Tale" aims to tell the story of the lives of the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith in a simple, accessible way and to relate the Bahá'í concept of the immortality of the soul to the Chinese tradition of ancestor worship (SH, Feb. 1995).

Like *A Manual for Pioneering,* short essays such as *Teaching Problems* address, in the same encouraging and down-to-earth fashion, the

12. Bahá'u'lláh is the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith; He appointed His son 'Abdu'l-Bahá to be the designated Interpreter of His writings.

13. A "Mrs. Newton."

14. *Herald of the South* 1st ser. (Jan. 1946): 6–15.

15. Oxford: George Ronald, 1950.

16. New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974.

central concern of Amatu'l-Bahá's life: sharing the Bahá'í teachings with others.[17] A practical tool for achieving this goal, *The Good Message,* her simplified rendering of Shoghi Effendi's translation *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh,* has been used with success in countries such as Samoa and in Africa.[18] Finally, the numerous talks and lectures Amatu'l-Bahá delivered throughout the world, as well as various epistles, such as her 1948 circular letter to Bahá'í youth,[19] form a whole other corpus of work on teaching the Bahá'í Faith and related subjects, the detailed examination of which will undoubtedly shed light on the breadth and scope of her life's work.

Of special note is her moving epistle *A Message to the Indian and Eskimo Bahá'ís of the Western Hemisphere*.[20] The intimate tone of the letter and Amatu'l-Bahá's ability in it to find a voice so well suited to her audience reflects her lifelong concern with the fate of indigenous peoples as well as her broad knowledge of their cultures, a knowledge gained by years of experience as a traveling teacher. Of their past cultural greatness, she writes:

> You are a great race, your people in the New World, before the white man came, built mighty cities, beautiful cities and temples. You made with your hands wonderful statues and vessels of pottery, of gold, of silver and of jewels, as well as dresses and head-dresses of bead work and feathers, of woven wool and other materials. So beautiful were the ornaments you made of all these materials, that the white man has collected them in special houses where thousands of people pay to enter and look at them. . . . (p. 2)

But the bulk of the epistle deals not with the past achievements of the Indians and Eskimos of the Western Hemisphere but with the important role they will play in the transformation of the world community. Amatu'l-Bahá invokes the promise of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as proof of the great destiny awaiting them:

> What 'Abdul-Bahá wrote was this: "You must attach great importance to the Indians, the original inhabitants of America" and this was followed by His sure promise to you: "should these Indians be educated and properly guided, there can be no doubt that through the Divine teachings they will become so enlightened that the whole world will be illumined." (p. 4)

For the true poet, the writing of literary criticism may well be an anomaly, embodying as it so often does an analytic process foreign to the spontaneous acts of creative synthesis characteristic of the imagination. However, Amatu'l-Bahá's commentary is far from the coldly analytical deconstruction of literary works practiced by some contemporary critics. Rather, by bringing her poetic sensitivity to bear on texts from Bahá'í history and scripture, she transforms literary criticism into meditation, appreciation, and,

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17. Originally published by the Bahá'í Publishing Trust in Manchester, Eng., 1949, it was later published as *Success in Teaching: An Intimate Talk with Bahá'ís Who Long To Serve the Faith* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, n.d.).

18. Amatu'l-Bahá's correspondence suggests 1960 or 1961 as the date of publication of the English version of *The Good Message* by the Bahá'í Publishing Trust of India. The booklet was begun in 1958 when Amatu'l-Bahá was in Kampala, Uganda, for the dedication of the Bahá'í House of Worship and was completed in Haifa. It has since been translated into Samoan as well as the African languages of Swahili, Ateso, and Luganda (NG, 11 May 2000)

19. See "What It is To Be a Bahá'í," www.Bahai-Library.org/letters/Khanum.letters.1948.html.

20. Toronto: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, 1969. Over the decades since her husband's death in 1957 until shortly before her own death, Amatu'l-Bahá traveled extensively, meeting with indigenous peoples in a wide variety of settings, from the snow-covered Andes in Peru to the desert dwellings of the Navajo in the Southwest of the United States of America to the plains of Western Canada.

ultimately, celebration. Published in the 1930s, her first piece of literary commentary, "The Re-Florescence of Historical Romance in Nabíl," offers insight not only into Nabíl's tale about the heroes and heroines of the Bábí movement, *The Dawn-Breakers,* but into the temperament of the young Mary Maxwell herself, whose passionate intensity attracted her to the courage and self-abnegation their lives exemplified.[21]

For the young Mary, however, *The Dawn-Breakers* was not only morally instructive: in addition to providing a practical "key to a 'way' of living and being," it laid before her a rich mythological landscape through which her burgeoning literary imagination could roam—in her own words, "a stage which was a nation and an epoch in history, on which a pageant of romance, of adventure and heroism unequalled by any crusade plays itself before us" (p. 595). In her view, the ultimate meaning of the narrative could not be discerned by reading it as "a fascinating historical document" or as "great literature" but only by looking with the inner "eye," the soul itself: "Only those who have through some experience in life touched to their lips the cup of divine love, will fully grasp the purport of this mighty pageant" (p. 599).

The product of a more mature understanding, later works of literary commentary, such as "The Prayers of Bahá'u'llah,"[22] reveal little of their author's opinions of or response to the texts at hand, in this case the Bahá'í scriptures. Instead, they demonstrate Amatu'l-Bahá's growing self-effacement before the sacred word. In a spirit of humility and concomitant tentativeness, she thus begins her commentary: "If one could be so presumptuous as to try and comment on a subject so vast . . . , one might say that one of His [Bahá'u'lláh's] masterpieces is the long prayer for the Nineteen Day Fast" (p. 792). In this piece of commentary the passionate enthusiasm she expressed for the sacrificial lives of the heroes and heroines of *The Dawn-Breakers* is replaced by an awareness that behind the glittering veil of heroism lies the face of suffering. She concludes with a poignant vignette drawn from the days of Bahá'u'lláh's exile in Baghdad. Of His reluctant return from a self-imposed isolation among the dervishes in the remote mountain region of Sulamániyyih, she writes:

> Now He headed back into the inky blackness of an implacable hatred and jealousy, where attempts against His very life were to be plotted and even prove partially successful. As He tramped along through the wilderness, beautiful in its dress of spring, the messenger that had gone to fetch Him back testified that He chanted over and over again this prayer. It rolled forth like thunder from His agonized heart:
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> "O God, my God! Be Thou not far from me, for tribulation upon tribulation hath gathered about me. O God, my God! Leave me not to myself, for the extreme of adversity hath come upon me. Out of the pure milk, drawn from the breasts of Thy loving-kindness, give me to drink, for my thirst hath utterly consumed me. . . ." (p. 802)

In a compilation of her favorite prayers and passages from the Bahá'í writings, *The Desire of the World: Materials for the contemplation of God and His Manifestation for this*

21. "The Re-Florescence of Historical Romance in Nabíl" was published in *The Bahá'í World: A Biennial International Record, Volume V, 1932–1934,* comp. National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1936) 595–99, a few years after the publication of Nabíl-i A'ẓam [Muḥammad-i Zarandí], *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabíl's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation,* trans. and ed. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1932).

22. Published in *The Bahá'í World: A Biennial International Record, Volume IX, 1940–1944,* comp. National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1945) 792–801.

Day,[23] Amatu'l-Bahá takes the impulse toward self-effacement even further, eschewing any real commentary for a simple presentation of the texts themselves. In the following passage, for example, she interjects only long enough to set the stage for the "words" that are "place[d] in our mouths" by a power beyond scrutiny, the power of the divine:

> In innumerable prayers Bahá'u'lláh places in our mouths words supplicating for strength to be given in time of trial, for steadfastness in His path, for consecration to His Cause. "Cause me, O my Lord, to be reckoned among them who have been so stirred up by the sweet savours that have been wafted in Thy days that they have laid down their lives for Thee and hastened to the scene of their death in their longing to gaze on Thy beauty and in their yearning to attain Thy presence. And were any one to say unto them on their way, 'Whither go ye?' they would say, 'Unto God, the All-Possessing, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.'" (p. 104)

It would be surprising if the range of Amatu'l-Bahá's literary endeavors did not include forays into the writing of history. How rare are those who find themselves at the heart of an important historical moment, let alone at the very center of a religious movement struggling to be born. Rarer still are those who, finding themselves so positioned, are able to write about it. Such was the role of the illustrious Nabíl, and such was the role to which the young Mary Maxwell seemed born, even destined. Alive at the very vortex of such a moment and movement, and possessed of a rare talent for writing, had she not written history, that fact would have been more surprising than had she written copious volumes of it.

Amatu'l-Bahá knew many of the great figures of the first century of Bahá'í history, such as Bahíyyih Khanum, the daughter of Bahá'u'lláh and the foremost woman of the Bahá'í dispensation, and many of the prominent ones of its second century, such as Enoch Olinga, an African who was appointed by Shoghi Effendi to serve as a Hand of the Cause. Consequently, she was often asked to speak or write about them.[24] But it was through her marriage that Amatu'l-Bahá would gain an intimate understanding of the foremost Bahá'í figure of her day: Shoghi Effendi. And from their life together she would draw the most important theme of her literary work: his role in shaping what was viewed in the early part of the twentieth century as an obscure sect of Islam into what is now recognized as an independent world religion.

For the task of chronicler, Amatu'l-Bahá was admirably well situated. Born at the beginning of a century so bursting with newness that it fairly exploded into time, she stepped into life on the very threshold of the modern period, just a few years after Einstein proposed the theory of relativity and in the very year the Post-Impressionist Exhibition, shown at the Grafton Galleries, shook the London art world and galvanized the small group of intellectuals later to be called "the Bloomsbury Group" into a prodigiously creative solidarity against conventional artistic as well as literary standards.[25] Moreover, she had her beginnings in Canada, a country only a few decades away from Confederation when she was born and, therefore, still in the process of forming its national identity. It

23. Oxford: George Ronald, 1982.

24. See "Bahíyyih Khanúm, the Greatest Holy Leaf," Malawi, Bahá'í International Summer School, Malawi, 1982 (Lilongwe: Extension Aids Branch, Ministry of Agriculture) ix pp.; "The Hand of the Cause Enoch Olinga, In Memoriam," (Freetown: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Sierra Leone, n.d. [1984]) [3], 14 pp.; and "The Story of Enoch Olinga." ([Umtata]: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Transkei, Apr. 1984) 38pp.

25. See Quentin Bell, *Bloomsbury* (London: Futura Publications, 1974).

was against this background of sociocultural flux and intellectual freshness that her disposition was shaped and her spirit prepared for her role in another remarkable drama, the stage of which had already been set by her parents' deep conviction about the truth of the Bahá'í teachings.

For many of Amatu'l-Bahá's contemporaries, the time for commitment would come when the Great Depression and, a decade later, World War II dawned on the horizon of modern history, but for the young Mary, the moment of commitment arrived much earlier. The seeds had been sown as far back as 1899 when her mother, May Ellis Bolles Maxwell, made a pilgrimage to the Bahá'í Holy Places in Palestine and met 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In her published memoirs May writes:

> Of that first meeting I can remember neither joy nor pain nor anything that I can name. I had been carried suddenly to too great a height; my soul had come in contact with the Divine Spirit; and this force so pure, so holy, so mighty, had overwhelmed me. . . .
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> . . . We could not remove our eyes from His glorious face: we heard all He said; we drank tea with Him at His bidding; but existence seemed suspended, and when He arose and suddenly left us we came back with a start to life: but never again, thank God, to the same life on this earth! We had "beheld the King in His beauty. We had seen the land which is very far off."[26]

May Maxwell's awakening set into motion several decades of fervent activity aimed at expanding the communities of the nascent faith, culminating at the time of Mary's birth in the work of strengthening and enlarging the Bahá'í community in Canada. But the full impact of the spiritual commitment, passed from mother to daughter, would not become evident until several decades later. No outsider watching the young girl grow up in the vibrant world circumscribed by her parents' Pine Street home in downtown Montreal, a world alive with discussions of art as well as Bahá'í meetings and activities, could have predicted the remarkable destiny that lay before the young Mary Maxwell.

Even her intensely devout mother could scarcely have believed that her only child—the sheltered child of older parents and a child who had little formal schooling—would undergo the remarkable transformation from Mary Maxwell into Amatu'l-Bahá Rúḥíyyih Khánum, the title by which she was most often addressed after her marriage to Shoghi Effendi.[27] Nor would they have guessed that it would be she who would be privileged to witness firsthand and later document for posterity the practical plans, the thoughts, the achievements as well as the inner struggles of a man who stood as the hereditary head of a new world religion that claimed to have the power to bring about the long-awaited, much-promised millennium of peace foretold in all the world's scriptures. As May Maxwell herself has written:

> There was a time that I agonized with a mother's weakness and instinctive protectiveness over the terrific deprivation in all her outer human ways, and the austere discipline of the life of my child. It is she herself (combined with a ray of common sense of my own), who taught me the spartan spirit of that Persian mother who threw back the head of her martyred son to his executioner. . . . And as I have witnessed, from year to year, the profound and mystic change in Rúḥíyyih Khánum. . . . I have marvelled at the grace of God

26. May Maxwell, *An Early Pilgrimage* (London: George Ronald, 1969) 12–13.

27. In Persian "Amatu'l-Bahá" means "Handmaiden of Bahá." "Rúḥíyyih" means "Spiritual" or "Spirit-Like" and "Khánum" means "Lady."

and His delicate and perfect handiwork. . . ."[28]

Yet, in her life with Shoghi Effendi, Amatu'l-Bahá's passionate nature and adventurous spirit, the very qualities that had drawn her to the study of Nabíl's *Dawn-Breakers*, would find consummation; and in their shared work, the work of expanding the Bahá'í community and building up the administrative structure to sustain it, her single-minded devotion to her faith would find its fullest expression. As she wrote in a letter to her mother less than one year after her marriage:

> If any one asked me what was my theme in life, I should say, "Shoghi Effendi."—I not only feel absorbed in him! I do not mean for a moment as a wife in a husband, but feel that I want to be more absorbed in him, and that in this way he's all my Salvation.[29]

It is, perhaps, not a mystery that a person of such sensibility and temperament, one who was so single-minded in her focus, so deeply committed to her beliefs, so tenacious in her engagement with each task before her, so keenly observant, and with such a rich imagination and gift for words, was destined to be the Guardian's intimate for the span of some of his most productive years. As Violette Nakhjavani, Amatu'l-Bahá's assistant and constant companion for several decades, points out in her recent "A Tribute to Hand of the Cause of God Amatu'l-Bahá Rúḥíyyih Khánum," it was Shoghi Effendi himself who oversaw her spiritual education and who, in a sense, cultivated her from the beginning of her maturity for her special role.[30]

Embodying such an unusual blend of qualities and abilities, Mary Maxwell was, indeed, uniquely suited to serve both as Shoghi Effendi's coworker and as the chronicler of his life and work. Thus prepared for the challenging mission that awaited her when she married in 1937, the once aspiring portrait painter found before her her greatest subject: Shoghi Effendi. The skills of her literary art would become well honed through years of practice, and her powers of observation, developed and refined during her apprenticeship to portrait painting, would find a fresh and unforeseen application in the task of sketching, in all its fine detail, the life and work of the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith in her biography, *The Priceless Pearl*.[31]

In 1946, less than ten years after her marriage to Shoghi Effendi, Amatu'l-Bahá published her first work about the Guardian: a booklet entitled *Twenty-Five Years of the Guardianship*.[32] In it she expounds upon the institution of the Guardianship and reflects, in a celebratory and optimistic fashion, on the many achievements of Shoghi Effendi:

> As we look back over these twenty-five years, it is with feelings of profound contentment. . . . We have stood close to that tree which overshadowed all mankind, and come to realize how live and great it is, how dense its foliage, how heavy its yield

28. May Ellis Maxwell, quoted in Marion Holley, "In Memoriam: May Ellis Maxwell," *The Bahá'í World: A Biennial International Record, Volume VIII, 1938–1940,* comp. National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1942) 641.

29. Rúḥíyyih Khánum, letter to May Maxwell, 2 Mar. 1938 (U.S. National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Illinois).

30. From Part I published in *Bahá'í Canada* Apr. 2000: 6–7.

31. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969. The forerunner of *The Priceless Pearl* appeared in *The Bahá'í World: An International Record, Volume XIII, 1954–1963,* comp. The Universal House of Justice, (Haifa, Isr.: The Universal House of Justice, 1970) 59–206, as an article entitled "The Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith"; Amatu'l-Bahá wrote it in response to a request by the Universal House of Justice for an article "in connection with the passing of Shoghi Effendi" (information found in a talk given by Amatu'l-Bahá at the Bahá'í World Center, Haifa, Israel, 18 October 1991). Later she published a revised version of *The Priceless Pearl,* edited and streamlined for a wider audience, under the title *The Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988).

32. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1948.

> of fruits—the tree of our first Guardian, our Shoghi Effendi." (p. 23)

Just over a decade later, in 1958, Amatu'l-Bahá would be called upon, unexpectedly, to write about Shoghi Effendi again. This time her tone was different, as was her theme: his sudden and expected passing.

Written in collaboration with fellow Hand of the Cause John Ferraby, *The Passing of the Guardian*[33] describes the events of the days immediately before and after the Guardian's death. It is in this essay that Amatu'l-Bahá's gifts as a documentarist begin to emerge. After a brief sketch of his thoughts, feelings, and activities on his final days, she sets down the time, place, and cause of his death, recording with remarkable courage and detail the moment of her own dawning awareness of his death:

> She [Amatu'l-Bahá] saw the beloved Guardian lying on his left side facing her. . . . His eyes were three-quarters open and she thought he was drowsy. . . . She asked him how he had slept, and if he felt better. When he neither moved nor replied, and he seemed unnaturally still, a wave of agonizing terror swept over her; she leaned over him and seized his hand. He was ice-cold and absolutely rigid. . . . (p. 10)

She follows with an equally detailed account of the funeral arrangements and ceremony, then ends with a poignant description of Shoghi Effendi's tomb:

> Over his tomb, at his feet, like a shield of crimson and white, lay the fragrant sheath of blooms which had covered his casket, and heaped about was a rich carpet of exquisite flowers, symbols of the love, the suffering, of so many hearts, and no doubt the silent bearers of vows to make the Spirit of the Guardian happy now, to fulfil his plans, carry on his work, be worthy at last of the love and inspired self-sacrificing leadership he gave them for thirty-six years of his life." (p. 24)

It was not until some years later, in 1967, that Amatu'l-Bahá "plunged into" her research for and writing of *The Priceless Pearl,* which took two years to complete (SH, Feb. 1995). The idea for her biography of Shoghi Effendi, she jokingly recalled, arose from a description she once read of the Guardian's "beautiful blue eyes."[34] In fact, his eyes were hazel. In addition to the sense of obligation born of the tremendous privilege she felt at being married to the hereditary head of her faith, nothing more motivated her than the desire to "avoid misinterpretation and misstatements" (SH, Feb. 1995). Her method of research and writing was modeled after Shoghi Effendi's own, as she had observed it in the course of his work on *God Passes By*[35] (SH, Feb. 1995). First, she read everything she could find on her subject. As she did, she made copious notes, which she then drew upon as she wrote the book (SH, Feb. 1995). Her motive was to "put down what . . . [she] knew after twenty years of marriage about the head of the faith" and to share her "intimate knowledge" (SH, Feb. 1995).

What emerges from her interweaving of intimate perceptions, historical facts, and a firsthand knowledge of the man and his times is what Amatu'l-Bahá herself has described as a "living document" (SH, Feb. 1995). Born as if from the very matrix of the burgeoning new religion, Shoghi Effendi rises, starlike, to assume his role in the vibrant pageant of history:

> *Salutation and praise, blessing and glory rest upon that primal branch of the Divine and Sacred Lote-Tree, grown out, blest, tender, verdant and flourishing from the Twin Holy Trees; the most wondrous, unique and priceless pearl that doth gleam from out the Twin Surging Seas.*

33. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1958.

34. Amatu'l-Bahá, talk on Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í World Center, Haifa, Israel, 18 October 1991.

35. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1944; rev. ed. 1974.

> Like a cloud-break in a stormy sky these words, even as a mighty shaft of sunlight, broke through the gloom and tempest of dangerous years and shone from on high upon a small boy, the grandson of a prisoner of the Sultan of Turkey, living in the prison-city of Akka in the Turkish province of Syria. The words were written by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the first part of His *Will and Testament* and referred to His eldest grandchild, Shoghi Effendi. (p. 1)

In substance, the book might be described as an "eyewitness account" of Shoghi Effendi's life, work, and times. Many biographies are based on exhaustive and comprehensive research, but few enshrine memory itself. Yet drawn from daily details, *The Priceless Pearl* gives "Intimate Glimpses," as one chapter heading has it, of the Guardian's everyday life. To reconstruct the details that give sharp focus to these glimpses, Amatu'l-Bahá turns to her own diary. The following excerpt is dated January 30, 1943:

> I am really worried over Shoghi Effendi. When he used to get so very distressed and upset in the past it affected him, but not as it does now. Sometimes I think it will lead to his premature death . . . he breathes so hard, almost like one who has been running, and he has such huge shadows under his eyes. He forces himself to go on and finish the letters he has had piled for days on his desk—but he reads a thing sometimes ten minutes over and over because he can't concentrate! I think no suffering is worse than seeing someone you love suffer. And I can't remedy it. All I wonder is how God can stand to see him suffer so. (p. 163)

But more often, such moments of insight are sketched on a larger canvas until there gradually emerges a compellingly lifelike portrait. Witness, for example, how Amatu'l-Bahá's recollection of a story told her by Shoghi Effendi becomes the basis for an incisive analysis of one aspect of his character:

> The other story surprised me—and enlightened me—very much; I heard it more than once: Shoghi Effendi said that one day he was driving back from Alexandria to Ramleh with the Master in a rented carriage, accompanied by a Pasha who was going to the Master's house as His guest; when they arrived and got out and the Master asked the strapping big coachman how much He owed him the man asked an exorbitant price; 'Abdu'l-Bahá refused to pay it, the man insisted and became abusive to such an extent that he grasped the Master by the sash around His waist and pulled Him roughly back and forth, insisting on this price. Shoghi Effendi said this scene in front of a distinguished guest embarrassed him terribly. He was too small to do anything himself to help the Master and felt horrified and humiliated. Not so 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who remained perfectly calm and refused to give in. When the man finally released his hold the Master paid him exactly what He owed him, told him his conduct had forfeited the good tip He had planned to give him, and walked off followed by Shoghi Effendi and the Pasha! There is no doubt that such things left a lifelong imprint on the Guardian's character, who never allowed himself to be browbeaten or cheated, no matter whether or not this embarrassed or inconvenienced him, and those who were working for him. (p. 23)

The dialogue generated in the biography by Amatu'l-Bahá's own voice and the voices of others, by personal memory and historical research, gives *The Priceless Pearl* value both as a primary and as a secondary source: not only is it the memoir of an eyewitness and the record of the impressions of one who knew Shoghi Effendi intimately, it also offers an informed and intelligent interpretation of the Guardian's life and work. Through Amatu'l-Bahá's eyes, the sharp eyes of the portrait painter, the penetrating eyes of the

writer, eyes privileged to witness at close range his inner and outer life, we see Shoghi Effendi in all his complexity—emotionally sensitive yet leonine, intelligent yet vulnerable, visionary yet beset with worry about the future of the new-born Faith he was destined to shepherd through some of the most turbulent years of the twentieth century.

Without doubt, Amatu'l-Bahá's vivid evocation of Shoghi Effendi's life and detailed documentation of his work in *The Priceless Pearl* holds a special place in the current and the future scholarship on the life and work of the Guardian. Moreover, her intimate knowledge of him confers upon her a special role in the custodianship of his memory. Her interpretation of the events of his life as well as of his temperament and character has value beyond even biography: it creates the foundation upon and structure within which Shoghi Effendi's life and work will be understood by others.

With the completion of her biography of Shoghi Effendi, Amatu'l-Bahá had satisfied the sense of obligation she felt to set down what she knew of the one who would be the last hereditary head of her faith, but her work as documentarist of the Bahá'í Faith was still not complete. The Universal House of Justice, the administrative body that heads the Bahá'í Faith, requested her and her fellow Hands of the Cause to come together and comment upon the multitude of important documents from the interregnum period between the passing of Shoghi Effendi in 1957 and the formation of the Universal House of Justice in 1963.[36] Thus, in the final decade of her life, Amatu'l-Bahá produced one more historical work: *The Ministry of the Custodians, 1957–1963: An Account of the Stewardship of the Hands of the Cause*.[37] A compilation of documents that record the events of a critical period in the history of the Bahá'í Faith, the book clearly stems from the same impulse behind so much of Amatu'l- Bahá's later writing: to set down for future generations her firsthand knowledge of key events in Bahá'í history. In the same spirit, one final book-length manuscript, in progress at the time of her death, "The Maxwells of Montreal," documents her own early life and the lives of her parents.

Throughout the many decades of her writing life, Amatu'l-Bahá walked the path of beauty with a rare combination of poetic sensitivity and practical good sense. A self-described "doer" and "extrovert," she, nevertheless, found time in a busy public life for pursuing a broad range of literary projects, some requiring vigorous research (SH, Feb. 1995). Moreover, in a supremely secular age in which writers of faith have so often struggled and failed to harmonize their religious commitments with their creative impulses, she has achieved in her literary work a natural and seamless integration of art and belief. Faith has served as the wellspring of her creative inspiration and conscience as its channel for expression in literature. Her prose work is born of a deep sense of commitment to her beliefs and written in a spirit of unwavering dedication to the one cause that served as the unifying thread in her life: the Bahá'í Faith. Similarly, her few published poems reflect an inner life in which even the most private emotions of the heart orbit around the concerns of the soul. The result is a literature shaped by that rare incarnation of conscience: a life of spiritual integrity. What stands at last is a body of work devoted to transmuting the base alloys of human experience into spiritual riches, doubt into certitude, and idle hope into a luminous and enduring joy.

36. The Hands of the Cause whom Shoghi Effendi appointed arose, on his passing, to set in motion the processes leading to the formation of the Universal House of Justice.

37. Introd., Amatu'l-Bahá Rúḥíyyih Khánum (Haifa, Isr.: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992).