

Commentary on THE PURPOSE OF POETRY

Author: Shirin Sabri

Published: *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 1.1 (1988): 39–58

The study of *ars poetica* from a Bahá'í perspective has until now received very little attention from either poets or scholars. Shirin Sabri's article as well as Roger White's "Poetry and Self-Transformation" (*The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 1.2[1988]:61–69) are thus both timely and pertinent papers on the subject of poetry by Bahá'ís.

I cannot totally subscribe, however, to all of the views that Shirin Sabri has expressed on the nature of poetry written by Bahá'ís and the role of the poet within the Bahá'í community. Since I am both a Bahá'í and a poet, I remain sympathetic to much of what she has written, and my comments are not meant to negate the validity of her paper, which raises the worthwhile question of the relationship of verse written by Bahá'ís to the Bahá'í Revelation. However, I believe that certain of her views need to be questioned or at least clarified.

The article is intended to be an encouragement to all Bahá'í poets who at times labor at a lonely task. Sabri rightly points out the potentially favorable position conferred upon a Bahá'í poet by the Bahá'í revelation, and she sees the Bahá'í poet as a privileged artist enjoying a readily available international audience in the Bahá'í community, a community that will respond to the poet's verse, a far cry from Verlaine's "poète maudit."¹ She quotes the reported tradition of the Báb to Mullá Husayn that indicates the spiritual nature of the poet's art as having the power to unveil the mysterious (46–47). She also quotes Shoghi Effendi, who alludes to the decisive role the arts are destined to play—and this surely includes poetry—in the rapid diffusion of the Bahá'í Faith (53). This much is indisputable and would appear to put the Bahá'í poet in an almost idyllic position.

What I feel needs to be questioned and/or clarified, however, are several other issues that the author raises in her article. These have to do with: (1) the influence of Bahá'í sacred scripture on poetry written by Bahá'ís; (2) the suggestion that much of modern verse is meaningless and devoid of spiritual sustenance; (3) the suggestion that poetry by Bahá'ís should have primarily didactic and devotional functions; (4) the role of the Bahá'í poet within the Bahá'í community; and (5) the moral calibre of non-Bahá'í poets.

1. The author suggests that Bahá'í poets enjoy the distinct advantage of the Bahá'í revelation with its universal worldview, its spiritual conception of the human being and a new set of religious symbols—in short, a whole new mythopoeic language that gives the Bahá'í poet the wherewithal to begin writing the poetry of the New Age. Her statement is basically true and gives us cause to feel justifiably optimistic and encouraged to write verse both now and in the future. Yet, the negative views that she has elsewhere expressed with respect to non-Bahá'í poetry would seem to suggest that some kind of radical, disjunctive break must take place between the poetry of the past and the poetry that will be written by poets who fall under the influence of the Bahá'í revelation. I think that this view, if I have interpreted it correctly, underestimates the integrative thread that binds together all great literature. Poetry by Bahá'ís will have to be in some sense a continuation of the finest poetry written in the past. The poetry of the New Age cannot somehow begin, as Sabri seems to be suggesting, with the Bahá'í revelation. Indeed, it began well over a century ago in the writings of Wordsworth, Shelley, Tennyson, Charles Kingsley, J. A. Symonds, and before that Blake, and more recently Yeats and all other poets who announced the coming of the New Age. The great poets and writers of all ages draw not only on their own experience but also from the world of existing literature by studying the works of other great poets and writers. The Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye, whose creative theories about the structure of literature have made him world renowned, states that "allusiveness runs all through our literary experience."²

By this, Frye explains that great authors and poets refer to the works of and are inspired by other great authors and poets:

Many people think that the original writer is always directly inspired by life, and that only commonplace or derivative writers get inspired by books. That's nonsense: the only inspiration worth having is an inspiration that clarifies the form of what's being written, and that's more likely to come from something that already has a literary form. (Frye 27)

Tennyson died with a volume of Shakespeare in his hand. When Shelley's body washed ashore near Viareggio, Italy, a volume of Keats's verse was found in his pocket. Poets and writers inspire one another. This is the way literature works. Of course, Frye's statement can be rightly applied as well to the Bahá'í revelation since it is sacred literature from whose "forms" Bahá'í poets will derive inspiration, but Frye refers primarily to secular literature, which he has also defined as "a human apocalypse, man's revelation to man" (Frye 44). This definition of secular literature would appear to be based on a parallel definition of religion, that is, God's revelation to humanity. One suspects that Frye was aware of the implication. Shoghi Effendi stated (in a letter to a Bahá'í who had sent him a poem) that a new era would dawn for the arts under the influence of the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh and that "there will be a glorious spirit embodied in a form immeasurably improved by the quickened genius of the world" (quoted in White 66). I am suggesting that this "form" will derive partly from the poetry of the past. Future poetry by Bahá'ís will derive from both the Bahá'í revelation and the great verse of the past. Any poetry by Bahá'ís that draws only on the Revelation and which does not reflect an awareness of the finest in all of poetry will be but poor imitation and a shallow field. Shirin Sabri herself has already recognized this danger in her article, and it has elsewhere been mentioned by Roger White ("Poetry" 65), but it needs to be stressed. Bahá'í poets have to make a conscious effort not to become mere imitators of the Revelation. They must finally create their own particular mythopoeic language, speak in their own voice and not in the voice of another, and construct not only their own "cosmology," their outer worldview, but also their own inner vision. Both perspectives are endorsed and validated by Bahá'u'lláh. In this view the self, as Bahá'u'lláh suggests, is to be loved: "On this plane, the self is not rejected but beloved...."³ The context is the search after God, and modern poets, like others, search for God although, like others, they do not always find Him.

2. The author also suggests that much of modern poetry is spiritually impoverished and hopelessly obscure and that modern poets are lost in the maze of their own cryptic symbolism and indecipherable allusions. Although no Bahá'í would seriously affirm that all contemporary poetry is in a healthy state (and I agree with Sabri that this is particularly true of "post—modern" verse), it is clear that much of the mainstream of modern verse, which inherits the best traditions of the past, deals precisely with spiritual and metaphysical themes accessible to all serious readers of poetry. Spiritual and metaphysical thematics are a basic substratum of a great deal of poetry, modern or otherwise. In this connection we might cite among modern verse Richard Eberhart's "The Soul Longs to Return Whence it Came," Robert Bridge's "The Psalm," Stephen Crane's "It Was Wrong to Do This, Said the Angel," Gene Derwood's "With God Conversing," Robert Lowell's "Where the Rainbow Ends," Edgar Lee Master's "The Village Atheist," George Meredith's "Lucifer in Starlight," Peter Quennell's "The Flight into Egypt," E.A. Robinson's "The Credo," Wallace Stevens's "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven." The vibrant spiritual imagery of Gerard Manley Hopkins; the metaphysical precision and restrained religious faith of Emily Dickinson; the Hindu, Platonic, and mythological interests of Yeats; and the folk wisdom of Robert Frost are well known and certainly qualify in some sense as spiritual verse. Yet the religiosity of these modern poets was passed over in the Sabri article. Even Dylan Thomas, to whom Sabri's only reference was that he had drunk himself to death, said that his poems were written "for the love of Man and in praise of God," adding with his typical abrupt mirth, "and I'd be a damn' fool if they weren't."⁴ I do not list here a host of modern poets whose compassionate humanism is quite compatible with a religious vision in poetry. The sometimes sad tones of Edna St. Vincent Millay could, however, be mentioned in this context. In short, I see a parallel in the work of the Bahá'í poet with the progressive unfoldment of spiritual truth by the Prophets. Bahá'í poets of the present and the future will also build on the foundations of the past but will compose unique and original works, which will bring to the fore both the humanity and the divinity of humankind.

The author also suggests that there has been a splintering in the "cosmologies" of the twentieth century, and because there is no common spiritual conception of the human being and no universal worldview, modern poets have been forced to turn inward to find meaning. She says that in doing so, they have found nothing other than a state of self that is indulgent and dispirited. Some modern critics have found the Romantics, particularly Shelley, self-indulgent, but Blake held that the nature of poetry itself overcame the self-world subject-object dichotomy. We should distinguish modern from "post-modern" poets in this context. She mentions that T. S. Eliot has purveyed a contained despair in "The Wasteland" (1922), yet she neglects to tell us that Eliot, in his later poetry ("Ash Wednesday" [1930]) reflects his own particular conception of Christianity as a way out of the spiritual morass of "The Wasteland" and that "The Four Quartets" (1943) dealt with high and difficult metaphysical themes, such as time and eternity. In this, Eliot was inspired by the Upanishads. In fact, the title of Part III, "The Fire Sermon," is taken directly from a sermon of the Buddha of the same name from which Eliot quotes directly. He also quotes from Augustine's "Confessions." There are several other religious allusions in the poem from both Christianity and Hinduism. Sabri's statement also ignores the fact that any distressing state of mind has to be recognized and verbalized before it can be healed. Voices of despair are as legitimate as voices of hope in the writing of poetry, for

they recognize and express the human condition. Even the Báb gave vent to his poignant grief in the mountain fortresses of Chihriq and Máh-Kú, and the writings of the Prophets likewise contain momentary expressions of despair. We are all at times subject to despair. The skill of the poet is that she or he is better able to articulate despair and thereby give voice to our own despair.

3. Sabri has an obvious preference for devotional poetry, and she sees the Bahá'í poet above all as an advocate of devotional poetry. "The voices of religious poets are therefore, voices of people 'crying in the wilderness'" (Jennings, quoted in Sabri 54). "In spite of this loneliness, it is the task of Bahá'í poets to do exactly that, to write the true religious poetry which is so thin on the ground in our age" (54–55). I sense her real interest lies in devotional poetry, and perhaps her paper would have made a better exposé of devotional poetry from a Bahá'í perspective. She quotes George Herbert's "The Collar." Herbert is the prototype of the Christian devotional poet, and along with Donne, Vaughan, and Cranshaw, Herbert is one of the "metaphysicals" of the Elizabethan era. Devotional poetry will, no doubt, have its own magnificent flowering at some future point within the Bahá'í revelation, and I join the author in her advocacy of this form of verse. It is, however, only one current in the total stream of poetry and as such should not be overvalued or too rigidly distinguished from "secular" poetry. Robert Hayden reminds us that 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not distinguish between "secular" and "religious" art (quoted in White 66). In that same introduction to "Portfolio of Recent American Poems" (*World Order* 5.3 [Spring 1971]:33) Hayden said: "And we may infer from this that poetry, for example, need not be limited to religious themes (in the usual sense of the term) in order to serve 'the Kingdom of God'" (quoted in White 66).

The author also seems to be advocating a dogmatic role for poetry as a means for teaching non-believers the Faith: "Teaching non-believers is not the only function available to the poet of our time. In the Writings, the devotional aspect of the poet's work is also pointed out" (54). The didactic use of poetry, even for the noble purpose of teaching non-believers, should not be viewed as the primary purpose of poetry. This is an activity that more properly belongs to religion or theology. Obviously, I am not suggesting that the religious element of poetry be excluded, but poetry by definition is above all an intensification of experience expressed metaphorically rather than an arguable set of beliefs, which is what is implied by the word *teaching*. When Shoghi Effendi states that the spirit and teachings of the Bahá'í Faith presented through the arts will greatly assist in the rapid diffusion of the Bahá'í Cause (53), I do not believe that he is envisioning the arts as being the handmaiden of religious ideology but rather that the teachings will be suffused into the various art forms by the creative interpretations of the artist and conveyed to the audience through more subtle and transformed means of expression. I think this is a crucial difference. In other words, it will not be like the situation that exists today in communist China where the creativity of the artist is limited to celebrating the glories of the people's party.

4. Sabri also seems to be suggesting that the Bahá'í community should be the preferred target for the Bahá'í poet since that community alone will be able to understand the symbols and literary allusions of the Bahá'í poet: "We must be prepared to admit that the shelter provided by this religion is sufficient, and then beneath its canopy we shall be able to speak freely to our people. . . . A poet, as a Bahá'í endeavoring to perfect his art, must be able to call on the core of his belief and write, as a Bahá'í, from that source" (43). If the Bahá'í community rather than the world at large is the preferred target of the Bahá'í poet, do we not run the risk of all speaking to one another in monotones? What would be more debilitating to the sublime vision the Bahá'í Faith offers than a kind of uniform writing style that will prompt observant critics to say: "Here is another typical example of Bahá'í poetry." Critics will label in any case. Even the greatest did not escape this. "Our people," however, must be all humanity. The themes, symbols, myths (sacred stories), teachings, figurative language, precepts, and dramatic history of the Bahá'í revelation that serve as "raw material" for poetry by Bahá'ís should be accessible to all serious readers of poetry on the planet. The end product of the influence of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation upon the poet, however, should emerge as the poet's own verse, bearing a personal stamp rather than being identified as Bahá'í poetry, a name that suggests a hollow imitation of the Revelation. Perhaps it was to avoid this natural tendency to imitate the Revelation and to employ art for utilitarian purposes that Shoghi Effendi did not wish to encourage the development of "Bahá'í Art."

5. Finally, Sabri makes a few references to non-Bahá'í poets that I feel are overgeneralized and disparaging. Although she quotes from George Herbert and Emily Dickinson, the former a devout Christian poet and the latter a strongly theistic poet; the other non-Bahá'í poets mentioned are presented generally as disturbed, misguided, or perverse individuals, or criers of despair. She alludes to the death of Dylan Thomas through alcoholism; Ezra Pound's Nazism; and Ann Sexton's, Stevie Smith's, and Sylvia Plath's deaths through suicide. She also states that homosexuality has become "commonplace among twentieth-century male poets" (44). In the interest of sexual equality, one wonders why did she not mention whether or not the female poets have had the same penchant for lesbianism? Poets have idiosyncratic ideas and moral defects. They are not infallible.

Quoting Ludwig Tuman, the author refers to "artists" of the Romantic era as being possessed by "boundless longing" and "unrequited desire." It is strange that in an article devoted to poetry, she should summarily dismiss the

whole Romantic movement and its poets, who have given the English language some of its most beautiful and technically adept verse, with an apparent allusion to their sexual frustrations. In the same context, there is also an ambiguity in her usage of the word artist. Does she mean specifically poets as the context suggests, or does the reference apply as well to playwrights, sculptors, painters, and musicians? Apparently the entire artistic community suffered from the same frustrations.

The specific cases of moral weakness to which she refers, although true, are individual cases, and we should not conclude from this that they represent an overall pattern. Otherwise, one would have to dismiss the whole community of poets of the twentieth century as being of defective moral calibre. I do not believe that isolated cases can stand to represent a pattern among the scores of distinguished British and American poets who have come to prominence in the twentieth century. Besides, we should not project the standard of saints onto the lives of creative artists or impose moral excellence as a criterion for the suitability of their work. The work of the artist stands as an objective value outside and beyond the artist. We know virtually nothing about Homer's life, but would we suddenly stop reading him if we were to find out that he was homosexual? Should we stop listening to *Tannhäuser* because Wagner was anti-Semitic? Northrop Frye put the matter succinctly, ". . . the poet as a person is no wiser or better than anyone else. He's a man with a special craft of putting words together, but he may have no claim on our attention beyond that" (Frye' 29). From an ideal point of view, the life of a poet should be as eloquent as his or her verse, but if we expect poets to be saints, we are bound to be disappointed.

I may well have misunderstood or distorted the author's point of view in my reading of her article. If so, perhaps a clarification on her part would enable us all to better understand "The Purpose of Poetry."

JACK McLEAN

1. The expression comes from a 1884 work called *Les Poètes maudits* [the accursed poets] by this leading French symbolist (Paris: C.D.U. et Sedes réunis, 1982).
2. Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Toronto: C.B.C. Publications, 1970), 27.
3. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, 3d ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978), 50.
4. Dylan Thomas, "Note," *Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas 1934–1952*, (London: J. M. Dent June 1956).