

THE CREATIVE CIRCLE: ART, LITERATURE AND MUSIC IN THE BAHÁ'Í PERSPECTIVE

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This collection of ten essays contains a rich accumulation of knowledge and experience concerning the creative arts and the Bahá'í Revelation. Perhaps the best way for the reader to deal with the broad diversity of approaches and levels of abstraction is to recognize the important thematic links among the essays. The role of creativity in the Bahá'í Revelation and the special problems of the artist are the two themes dealt with most frequently and most diversely. "We create because God creates," as Maya Bohnhoff succinctly phrases it in her fine autobiographical essay "But . . . My Mother was a Singer." "He has endowed us with His most basic attribute, the very cause of our own existence—creative power" (44). She goes on to correlate this attribute with our spiritual nature and purpose. In part, we recognize God through recognizing his attributes in us. Hence, to recognize our creative potential is to know God the Creator better. But Bohnhoff notes that recognizing God is not sufficient. We must also worship Him. One way we can do this is by using the spiritual attribute of creativity to fulfill a collective purpose—"to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization" (*Gleanings* 215). Thus, for Bohnhoff, using our creative potential to serve humanity fulfills, in part, the purpose of our creation.

But how does one realize one's creative potential? Duane Herrmann's essay "Poetry and the Arts in Rebuilding Society" offers a firm theoretical foundation for the discussion. To use one's creative potential, according to Herrmann, is to "allow the divine impulses to flow through our being. . . . To deny this [these impulses] is to deny our true selves, that channel to our Creator" (183). Herrmann posits that while all people are capable of this kind of creative openness, artists who express themselves through the creation of symbolic forms such as music, art, and literature have a special role to play in healing and transforming. Herrmann begins by quoting Bahá'u'lláh that the "source of crafts, sciences and arts is the power of reflection" (187). Another quotation from Bahá'u'lláh explains how artists are stimulated by this "power of reflection." They become receptive to the spiritual energy generated by those detached souls who have responded to the teachings of God's Prophets and turned themselves wholly toward God at the moment of their death.¹ These pure souls "constitute

1. Herrmann, when discussing the force through which the "arts and wonders of the world" are manifest, quotes from *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* concerning "The light which these souls radiate is responsible for the progress of the world . . ." (187), and identifies "these souls" as "the Prophets and Messengers of God." This attribution is open to interpretation given the two preceding sentences in *Gleanings* on pages 156–57:

The Prophets and Messengers of God have been sent down for the sole purpose of guiding mankind to the straight Path of Truth. The purpose underlying their [Prophets'] revelation hath

the animating force through which all the arts and wonders of the world are made manifest" (187). Artists are then able to translate their spiritual receptivity into symbols that have the power to move and speak to the generality of humankind. Herrmann argues clearly and powerfully that the artist's role of articulating and creating the vision of society must be recognized and valued. In an earlier essay in the collection, "The Dilemma of the Artist," Anne Gordon Atkinson quotes Jung's statement that "the artist is the mouthpiece of the secrets of the psyche of his time . . . the spirit of the age speaks through him" (71). In a similar vein, Herrmann notes that the distinguished Bahá'í poet Robert Hayden once told a student, art "by its very nature . . . is revolutionary, because it seeks to change the consciousness, perceptions, and [the] very beings of those who open themselves to it" (188). But Herrmann muses, "perhaps even the Bahá'ís themselves . . . are still but dimly aware of the significance of the arts and their use in the education and awakening of society" (185-86).

One of the difficulties for Bahá'ís in recognizing art's transforming power may be their observation that much of contemporary artistic endeavor seems ugly and sordid. Roger White in the first essay in the volume quotes British critic and poet Kathleen Raine on the predominance of the ugly over the beautiful in the present age. Raine questions whether this is not because "the low and the sordid in contemporary writing is a kind of . . . avoidance of that reproach which would call us, silently, to [aspire to] a self-perfection it would cost us too much to undertake" (7). Herrmann places a different perspective on this perception of the ugly in modern artistic productions. While not ignoring the fact that "the arts can be perverted, like anything else at our disposal" (182), he also notes that

the artist probes into the human spirit, and emotions, with the divine spark. When the human condition is not in tune, the experience can be painful, but conducive to healing. The artist highlights the discrepancies between our behavior and our morals. (188)

Herrmann further quotes Dennis Schimeld that "the artist, like the surgeon at times, probes deeply and cleansingly into the disease" to "'tone up' the mind"

been to educate all men, that *they* [human beings] may, at the hour of death, ascend, in the utmost purity and sanctity and with absolute detachment, to the throne of the Most High. The light which *these souls radiate* . . . (156-57). (Italics added.)

Thus, "these souls" may well refer to those who "at the hour of death, ascend, . . . to the throne of the Most High" rather than to the Prophets as Herrmann suggests. This argument is strengthened by a passage four pages later in which Bahá'u'lláh again refers to the soul who remains faithful to God at the hour of death:

The soul that hath remained faithful to the Cause of God, and stood unwaveringly firm in His Path shall, after his ascension, be possessed of such power that all the worlds which the Almighty hath created can benefit through him. Such a soul provideth, at the bidding of the Ideal King and Divine Educator, the pure leaven that leaveneth the world of being, and furnisheth the power through which the arts and wonders of the world are made manifest. Consider how meal needeth leaven to be leavened with. Those souls that are the symbols of detachment are the leaven of the world. (161)

of the individual to "be capable of the insight necessary to effect changes of attitude in society" (188). Perhaps the difference between the artist who takes the easy way out in portraying the ugly and the artist who portrays the ugly to awaken society to its diseased state and prepare it for change lies in the quality of the artist and his or her sensitivity to the "power of reflection." For the receptive artist not only "reflect[s] or sustain[s] . . . [society's] spiritual condition" but also "infuses new elements into the society" (179). Herrmann further notes that "this infusion of creativity perpetuates the further development of the whole. For this reason the involvement of Bahá'ís in the arts is crucial to the rebuilding and rebirth of human society all over the planet" (179).

The Bahá'í community's need for a new appreciation of the power of the arts to transform society runs through many essays—one concrete example occurs in the Bohnhoff essay where she recalls her struggles to become a popular singer. Neither family, community, nor her music professor at university appreciated her dedication to writing and performing her own music. But she finally acted on self-knowledge and her sense of purpose in having and using her talents. She discovered that "when I sang my own music, the product of my own creative impulse, people reacted with more than just pleasure at being entertained. . . . Music was a spark that jumped from Burning Bush to human heart, and I had some ability to pass the spark along" (45).

The fullest discussion of the relationship between the artist and the Bahá'í community is found in Atkinson's essay. She notes that Shoghi Effendi predicted that some day there will be a link between the spread of the Bahá'í cause and the development of the arts (57). In the meantime Atkinson notes that there is a delicate balance between the artist and the community. She quotes from the recent letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the United States on the subject of individual rights and freedoms. The House of Justice notes that

Bahá'u'lláh has extended the scope and deepened the meaning of self-expression. In His elevation of art and of work performed in the service of humanity to acts of worship can be discerned enormous prospects for a new birth of expression in the civilization anticipated by His World Order. (64)

But as Atkinson notes, it is not easy for either artists or institutions to obey the House of Justice's letter, which calls for "institutions truly to honor and draw upon the talents and expressions of the friends and for individuals to exercise discipline, moderation, and absolute respect for the authority of our institutions" (64).

She further notes that the life of the artist is often a lonely one and that Bahá'í artists are not immune to this problem. She quotes from Yeats concerning the courage it takes to enter "the abyss of self" and also from Otto Donald Rogers, painter and member of the Continental Board of Counsellors, who notes that "the creative act which alone can transform the work and the artist," can be frightening. However, Rogers goes on to say, "when we sacrifice our immediate

likes and dislikes to an order greater than ourselves, we are surprised to find in ourselves a depth of individuality we had dared not hope for" (67-68). But getting in touch with this level of the self can be a lonely process, not easily understood by others. Hence Atkinson notes that despite the shared commitment of artist and community to the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, the artist must also be "committed to the cultivation of his or her soul without the reassurance that there will be others who will understand . . ." (68).²

Geoffrey Nash in "Restating the Idealist Theory of Art" brings up another problem for the Bahá'í who is an artist. He notes that "art, through its realization of [our] . . . spiritual faculty in the realm of the material, appeals to us through the senses, while at the same time it aims to transcend them" (162). But for the artists who are inspired "with a vision of the perfect, the danger lies in detaching [themselves] . . . from the real world" (170). Thus, he cautions artists not to neglect "the reality of the world in which . . . [they are] working" (171).

In an essay by Bonnie Wilder, we are given a personal example of how the spiritual faculty found in art can appear in an unlikely place in the material world. She discusses her experience as a high school art teacher with a young student who was able to risk his pride and overcome his inexperience to communicate his sense of how and why art was so important to him. During a class project to redecorate the art room, he painted the following words in five-inch letters across the fifty-foot span of the room:

My first love is art. It is life to me. I seek not the money that is in art, nor do I seek the glory that it might give. I find truth and understanding through the things I draw. What I draw is a part of me and a gift from me to you and the world to share. My gift is simple. It's the gift of love that can't be described. Art is the only way I can truly express my feeling to you. I try to show you the world today and my world that is in my mind. My gift is true. It is a gift of love. My gift is a part of me to you. (35)

Turning from the personal to the theoretical, the composer Lasse Thoresen explains in an interview that music as "a nonverbal, symbolic language that allows us to understand spiritual dimensions that go beyond words" (209). The painter Fritz Mann makes a similar claim for the visual arts, giving numerous examples of how he and other artists seek to express inner feelings and insights through the medium of the visual arts (213-39).

Other essays address theoretical questions such as the possible reasons why Plato banished artists from his ideal Republic and practical concerns such as the nature of the responsibility of artists when putting their art to the service of the Bahá'í Faith. The juxtaposition of theoretical, personal, and practical understandings of creating art is one of the interesting features of this collection. However, it is sometimes difficult for the reader to connect the different

2. A similar point is made by David Erickson and Jack McLean in their respective commentaries in volume 2.1 of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*.

approaches. The book would have benefitted from an introduction that brought together the insights of the different essays concerning creativity and the role of the artist as well as that linked the theoretical and practical concerns of the contributors. Furthermore, the order of the essays makes it difficult for readers to do this linking themselves. The book would have been easier to read if the more theoretical essays by Herrmann, Nash, Thoresen, and Lysaght had preceded the more concrete and personal essays in the volume. However, the book does begin very effectively with Roger White's witty essay "Poetry and Self-Transformation," which sets the stage for the later discussions of art's transforming power. White, commenting on Raine's observations about the power of beauty in art, notes that her words suggest art's almost universally forgotten power "to hold up to us a mirror of our own spiritual and human potential, to strengthen our will to aspire and to transform our vision of ourselves" (12). But White also notes that "growth and change, rescue from stasis, are achieved at a cost," (12) and that for the transforming power of art to work, we must not only desire to change but also realize that this change "must passionately engage our volition" (13). The foreword, dictated by Charles Wolcott* on the day of his death, provides a powerful example of the power of volition to overcome physical weakness. Both the general public and those with a particular interest in the arts should gain a new understanding of the power and potentiality of the arts from these varied essays.

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* Member of the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1987.