

Reflections on the Art of My Poetry

ROGER WHITE (1929–1993)

Abstract

In 1991, well-known Bahá'í poet Roger White retired from his work at the Bahá'í World Centre because he was dying of cancer. John Hatcher had always intended to write a piece on Roger's poetry, and suddenly aware of the brief chance he had to pose all the relevant questions to Roger about his art, Hatcher talked to Roger on the phone, recorded his responses on tape, and had the results of that Q&A transcribed. The following dialogue is the result of Hatcher's original objective and Roger's willingness, despite his failing health, to participate in creating what is a remarkably frank and revealing conversation. While some of the discussion involves Bahá'í terms, it provides a glimpse into the mind of a gifted poet and the struggles that he, like so many other Bahá'í artists, encountered in trying to respond to the exhortation from Bahá'u'lláh that art best serves humanity when it elevates and edifies the soul and its spiritual receptivity. Surely Roger's poetry accomplished that objective for many Bahá'ís, and doubtless it will continue to do so well into the future.

Resumé

En 1991, le poète bahá'í bien connu Roger White a mis fin à son travail au Centre mondial bahá'í car il était en train de mourir du cancer. John Hatcher avait toujours eu l'intention d'écrire un article sur la poésie de Roger White. Prenant soudainement conscience qu'il ne lui

restait qu'une chance de lui poser toutes les questions pertinentes sur son art, il a mené une entrevue téléphonique avec M. White, et a fait transcrire le contenu de leurs échanges. Le dialogue suivant est le fruit de l'objectif initial de M. Hatcher et de la volonté de M. White, malgré son état de santé défaillant, de participer à une conversation extrêmement franche et révélatrice. Bien qu'une partie de leur discussion fasse appel à une terminologie bahá'íe, leur échange laisse entrevoir la pensée d'un poète talentueux et des obstacles qu'il a dû surmonter, comme bien d'autres artistes bahá'ís, pour s'efforcer de répondre à l'exhortation de Bahá'u'lláh selon laquelle l'art peut le mieux servir l'humanité lorsqu'il élève et édifie l'âme et sa réceptivité spirituelle. Il ne fait aucun doute que la poésie de Roger White a su atteindre ce but, et qu'elle continuera si bien de le faire dans l'avenir.

Resumen

En 1991, el conocido poeta bahá'í Roger White se retiró de su trabajo en el Centro Mundial Bahá'í porque se estaba muriendo de cáncer. John Hatcher siempre había tenido la intención de escribir una pieza sobre la poesía de Roger. Repentinamente consciente de la oportunidad breve que tenía para plantearle a White todas las preguntas relevantes sobre su arte, Hatcher lo entrevistó por teléfono y transcribió la grabación de ese intercambio. El siguiente diálogo es el resultado del objetivo original de Hatcher y la disposición de White, a pesar de su delicado estado de salud, de participar de una conversación notablemente franca y reveladora. Mientras parte de la discusión involucra terminología bahá'í, este discurso provee una mirada dentro de la mente de un poeta dotado y las luchas que él, como tantos artistas

bahá'ís, enfrentó al tratar de responder a la exhortación de Bahá'u'lláh que el arte mejor sirve a la humanidad cuando eleva y edifica al alma y a su receptividad espiritual. Seguramente la poesía de Roger White logró ese objetivo y sin duda su verso continuará lográndolo en el futuro.

HOW I BEGAN TO WRITE

Hatcher: Roger, how did you become a Bahá'í, and what impact did that have on your life?

White: When I consider my life and its relationship to my work, it occurs to me that perhaps the only thing that need be said is that I was fortunate enough to encounter the Bahá'í revelation and to be given the gift of accepting it while I was young. And from that point in my mid-thirties onward—presumably to the end of my life—I have had the opportunity to devote my full time to the work of the Faith.

Because of this transformation in my life, I was able to serve as secretary and research assistant to very dear figures in the Bahá'í Cause, including the Hands of the Cause in Africa, the Hands of the Cause of God residing in the Holy Land, Mr. William Sears, and member of the Universal House of Justice Mr. David Hofman.

I consider myself blessed to have had an opportunity for such close associations, and for the last twenty years of my life to have been of service to the Universal House of Justice. That, in a nutshell, is the reality of my life.

The rest is vain imaginings and idle fancies, rumors and gossip, and none of it is really important.

Hatcher: But what about your early life? What influences prepared you to accept the Bahá'í Faith and also led you to become interested in writing poetry?

White: I was born in Toronto, Canada, in 1929. As a child I moved with my family to a small town in Central Ontario called Belleville, sort of half-way between Kingston and Toronto. It was then a small railroading town, but very attractive, with a church on every street corner, and filled with virtuous people.

The environment in which I grew up was not particularly conducive to activity in the arts, so although I wrote poetry as a youth of fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen, I soon recognized that this was considered a “frivolous activity,” something not likely to produce money. And in the environment in which I grew up, North American men were “achievers” and were expected to engage in activities that would earn them a living. So I early put to rest the child in me and got on with the task of making a living, and I succeeded in that very well for one of my rank and station.

As a young a man, it was apparent that I wouldn't be able to afford to go to college or university, so I took commercial courses. I had been born into a Roman Catholic family, and the commercial courses were conducted in a

nondenominational school—probably run by “evil people” like the Protestants—so I was a “criminal” from the very beginning and very suspect in the godly village.

In any case, I excelled at what I was doing—working as a court reporter. And after a few years, I went on to serve in the House of Commons in Canada, recording the debates there in my Pitman shorthand. (The shorthand machine had not yet come into use in Canada.) Indeed, according to a book written by John Ward, the present editor of *Hansard*,¹ titled *The Hansard Chronicles*, I was considered “one of the finest shorthand writers ever to serve his Country” (173).

But that’s really all that needs to be said of my “career,” if such it can be called. I was never very interested in it. I fell into it. I had the skill to do it. I did it because it was a financial necessity. Court reporters and those capable of writing shorthand at speeds exceeding the speed of sound were few and far between, so we were a bunch of prima donnas. We were well paid, and people took care of our every need.

There was lots of work to be done, and one could literally work night and day doing Royal Commissions and moonlighting in one way or another. Nothing else much needs to be said about it because, as I said, it didn’t really interest me. And who knows? Perhaps my boredom—political speeches

have never been my favorite thing—probably led to my success in the field because I was totally detached from it.

Hatcher: But did any of this spur you into thinking of yourself as a writer?

White: I saw myself as required to sit down and record what these nice gentlemen said, but correcting their grammar and spelling to give it a little polish so they all sounded like Winston Churchill. And that was that. And yet perhaps you know that Dickens was a court reporter in his day, and I have read that we are to be grateful for this fact because it was the boredom of his work that drove him to write.

And as I mentioned, I had written as a youngster, but I put away that childhood “frivolous nonsense” to get on with the business of my career. But my career, such as it was, came to an end in 1964 when I was called to serve as secretary to Hand of the Cause William Sears, first in Africa—in Nairobi, Kenya—and then in California.² Then in 1971 he “loaned” me to the Universal House of Justice for a six-month period and never got me back again.

I used to wonder whether he never asked to have me back, or whether he did and the answer was, “No! We’re never going to let that man out of our sight to interfere with the progress of

1 *Hansard* is the official edited report of the proceedings of both the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

2 The Hands of the Cause of God were a select group of Bahá’ís appointed to this role for life and whose main function was to propagate and protect the Bahá’í Faith.

the teaching work. We shall keep him in Haifa under close observation!" I used to speculate about those things, although William Sears has been kind enough to say that he really *did* ask and was told I was "otherwise occupied."

Hatcher: What was your early experience as a Bahá'í?

White: I became a Bahá'í in 1952 and did all the usual things. I began life as an isolated believer in Belleville. Then, after raising an Assembly there, I went on to live in Ottawa. I then moved to Vancouver, British Columbia, where I pioneered³ to make up the Assembly in a town called North Vancouver and a town called West Vancouver. Then I met William Sears and began working as his secretary.

I spent twenty years in the Holy Land there and retired in May 1991, to Richmond, British Columbia, in order to be closer to my mother, my sister, and her family. In addition to my sister in Richmond, I also have a sister pioneering in Hay River, Northwest Territories, Canada. She's been there since she was a young bride and has raised her family there. She's a very active Bahá'í in the community, and indeed, she is the mother of the community.

My work with William Sears consisted of running the office of the Hand of the Cause, doing his personal secretarial work, and helping research his books and typing the manuscripts.

3 Any Bahá'í who rises and leaves his home and journeys to another place for the purpose of teaching the Bahá'í Faith.

My work in Haifa began in the office of the Hands of the Cause of God residing in the Holy Land, where I had the pleasure of serving Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum, Abu'l-Qásim Faizi, Paul Haney, and Mr. Furútan.

After six months, the House of Justice invited me to remain and to serve in the publishing department, where my assignment was to research and compile proposed content for *The Bahá'í World* volumes, beginning with Volume 14. Without being in any way qualified to do this, I accepted, and I enjoyed the work very much, although it always stretched me. And I was often disappointed with the appearance of the books because I did it in my spare time, even typed the manuscripts, and had to rely on voluntary proofreaders. So the result wasn't always perfect. In addition, sometimes the information we were provided was not entirely accurate, and back then it was beyond our power to check its accuracy.

Nevertheless, I enjoyed the work. For a time I also edited, compiled, and typed the *Bahá'í International News Service* newsletter, which goes from the Holy Land to all National Spiritual Assemblies with the objective of having them share it with the friends, by one means or another, to provide them with an international view of the accomplishments of the Bahá'ís around the world. My other function was to serve as secretary to House of Justice member Mr. David Hofman. So I was kept busy and did whatever writing I did between the hours of midnight and seven a.m.

GETTING MY POETIC LICENSE

The permission to write came about in an unusual way. One day, about 1977, David Hofman asked me out of the blue whether I wrote poetry. When I confessed that I had as a youngster, he said, “Well, I wish you would start again!”

He explained to me that he felt that the Bahá'ís were not writing from within a Bahá'í perspective. He went on to say that so much of our music—and indeed, much of our poetry—was derivative of Christian hymns and that the time had come to make a beginning on work that was distinctively Bahá'í, or at least that employed Bahá'í imagery to pay tribute to our own historical characters and that sort of thing.

When I stopped to think about it, I found that I fully agreed with him, and I went home that same night in a state of great indignation, saying to myself, “Well, of course, as the Guardian said through his secretary, we will not have distinctive Bahá'í art or music until the Golden Age of the Bahá'í Era, but surely a beginning must be made. Whatever is wrong with those Bahá'ís? What are they waiting for?”

And, of course, when you say things like that, invariably you hear a little voice saying, “Why don't *you* do something about it?” So, honoring David Hofman's request, I dashed off a poem. It was called “New Song.” And he was kind enough to say he liked it, and he asked me to do some more.

With that encouragement, I thought, “Why not?” So I began immediately to write in order to quiet all the voices of ridicule that I heard in my head—the voices of those crones who stood in a long unlit corridor, sniggering and pointing fingers and ridiculing. I longed to silence all my doubts, and put to rest the refrains, “Who are you? What qualifications have you? What are your educational qualifications to write poetry?”

I had to dispense with all those voices, and I did it in part by prayer and in part by issuing myself verbally—and mentally visualizing—an actual license that gave me full permission and consent to begin. Once I had that license and could firmly visualize it in my head, it became easier to write. In fact, I didn't have to struggle with these voices for very long at all.

And increasingly the poems began to present themselves to me—at first, usually just a line, or sometimes two or three lines; but on other occasions, a full verse. And if I listened and strained with great concentration, usually the rest of the poem would come, as it were, without my having to “write it.” Though naturally, sometimes it came to that process as well.

DISCUSSING MY POETICS

The only essay that I have written about art or poetic theory was published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* (1.2 [1988]) and titled “Poetry and Self-Transformation.” But the fact is that I tend not to have any gift

for expounding on these things, nor inclination to do so. I'm not inclined to discourse, and certainly I have no qualifications to do so. In fact, you will probably find the essay very unscholarly, though I hope you will enjoy the fun of it.

But you ask why, in general, I choose formal or set structures rather than the free verse that typifies most contemporary poetry. I would have thought that when you look at all three of my books, you would sense there to be a division—probably half and half—of free verse and set structures. And the fact is that I don't know precisely what poetics generally contribute by employing a fixed pattern, or why it's worth working around the difficulties of English syntax to comply with a pattern. In fact, I'm not really sure that I think that way at all.

My experience with poetry is that it's not an intellectual exercise. I don't begin by saying, "Aha! I shall now begin to write a sonnet!" Usually, the first line or two of the poem presents itself to me, and it is then that I discover I'm in the midst of a sonnet, or possibly I appear to be heading toward a quatrain, or whatever.

Also, because I'm singularly lacking in training in poetic theory (or even in literature courses, not having completed high school), I have little knowledge of set forms, so I'm not really competent to talk about any of this, though I do like the idea of poems arriving in suggested set forms, as if perhaps they were written in an earlier

time, as though the history of poetry with Bahá'í things written in English goes back much further than it does.

THE DISCIPLINE OF FORM

I suppose the importance of set patterns to my work is that I admire and enjoy the discipline they require. I seem to have been responsible for writing three villanelles,⁴ all of very recent date—but before writing them, I had no idea what a villanelle was, except that I stumbled upon one in a book and liked the music of it.

For me it is worthwhile working around the difficulties of English syntax because I love the concision and the discipline imposed by some of the set forms. But again, I cannot emphasize too strongly that the poem visits me (usually) already in the form in which it chooses to be written, and I become its amanuensis.

Offhand, I'm not sure I can recall all the forms I have employed. I know I have written sonnets. I know I have written quatrains. I recognize the villanelle form, but that's about all. The rest of my work, although some of it rhymes, is written in established forms whose names I don't know.

For instance, a poem called "The Other Shore" (*Witness of Pebbles* 119) may be in an established form, but I don't recognize its name, though you are welcome to supply one if you know

4 A villanelle is a fixed nineteen-line poem that employs only two rhymes with the rhyme scheme *aba aba aba aba aba abaa*.

it. This one is, incidentally, a poem I like very much without being able to claim that I understand or know much about it. It was one of those pieces that “arrived” fully formed:

The Other Shore

Let us not stroke too swiftly toward
 the green opposite shore
 where death rehearses. We have tried these
 pearl-promising waves before
 and might guess the danger.

Recall how always we turn back spent
 to the sun-warmed sand
 and stand anguished in separate solitudes,
 though hand in hand,
 each to each grown stranger.

Not that the brave bird lied. But that
 we, young, too soon said
Land! Land! And, plunging, did not see
 his torn pinion, his bloodied head.
 Ease us, wise love, toward this wet danger.

Another poem that I have perhaps written in an established form, though the name of the form I also do not know, is “Song of the Cup” in *The Witness of Pebbles* (54–55). I liked the music of this piece, and I have imagined that it might well lend itself to being set to music:

Song of the Cup

Sweet wild words my true-love sang,
 His sugared voice endearing.
 Clear on the perfumed air it rang

But I was not for hearing.
 Gay was my song
 in the noisy throng
 and I was not for hearing.

White was the rose my true-love cast,
 White as his hand which cast it,
 I trod underfoot the bloom that lasts,
 Disdainfully I danced past it.
 My laughter was loud
 In the whirling crowd,
 Disdainfully I danced past it.

Tender the kiss my true-love blew,
 Piercingly tinged with sorrow.
 Deeming all hearts, like mine, untrue
 I sought new lips each morrow.
 Swift in the dance
 I paid no glance
 And sought new lips each morrow.

Honeyed the cup my true-love gave
 From grape unknown to men.
 Who pause to taste will love enslave
 And linger to taste again.
 Captive of wine
 From unslaking vine
 I linger to drink again.

Part of my interest in writing in forms that are formal or recognized is that I like the idea of building a bridge to what has happened before in English literature. I don’t think Bahá’ís should suddenly thrust themselves full center stage with exclusively free verse or verse that derives from, say, T. S. Eliot, a man whose Anglican wincing and negativity tend to bore me. He may have been one of my influences, but I don’t think of him that way. In fact, I

conceive of writing against him, as it were—of employing irony in what I hope is a constructive and sometimes amusing way.

I have the suspicion that it is true to say that I am the first poet to have been published in English who has made use of irony and the sardonic in poems with spiritual or with Bahá'í themes. I suspect that to be true. You may know of others who have written in similar ways and could prove me wrong, but I've always thought with a smile that I should like that as a footnote in the history of Bahá'í literature—to have attributed to me the pioneering, as it were, of Bahá'í literature into the field of irony.

INFLUENCES ON MY WRITING

If I may speak of influences, there are few poets I have read in depth, one exception being Emily Dickinson. I must say that she annoys me much of the time because of her excesses. In fact, her excesses annoy me almost as much as my own do, or maybe even more.

I have read considerably the works by Yeats and by Blake and by that other nice man I like, Ogden Nash—and then there's Robert Graves—but I don't know how much these poets have influenced me. You might be better able to judge that than I, but I think even in paying tribute to Dickinson and attempting to use her voice, I impose my own accents, and certainly I impose a sort of Bahá'í perspective on her work—although I think in some

of her own poems that same view is there implicitly.

She seems to me to be a woman who recognized that it's no longer possible to worship an angry god, an old man in the sky who hopes to catch you in his trap of sin. I think of her as a sister to Táhiriḥ⁵—Táhiriḥ, of course, being blessed by recognizing the Manifestation and employing her talents, her poetry, in disseminating His Cause. And I believe that Emily recognized at some level that a new day had dawned, even though she had no opportunity to use her skills to proclaim God.

For example, I love her idea of calling God a “burglar” in one of her poems.⁶ I don't know of anyone else having said that about God, and I like the idea very much. I play with the idea of Táhiriḥ and Emily being spiritual sisters in a poem called “Figures in a Garden” in *The Witness of Pebbles* (137–42).

5 Táhiriḥ (1817–1852) was a follower of the Báb, though she indicates in her poetry that she also recognized Bahá'u'lláh as the Promised One the writings of the Báb foretell as “Him Whom God Shall Make Manifest.” Dickinson (1830–1886) was writing during this same period.

6 Dickinson's poem “39 (49)” is one that deals with some of the many deaths that plagued her throughout childhood and on into adulthood. God is thus a “burglar” because Emily lost a lot of people who were very important to her at a young age, which would be traumatic for any child. These losses fostered an interest in morbidity, which she would hold on to throughout her life.

My other influences go back to before I began to read poetry—and I began to read poetry extensively only in my late forties. Those influences are undoubtedly Ira Gershwin, the lyricist, and Johnny Mercer, who wrote some of the wittiest lyrics I know of—and some of the most profound. And another great lyricist whom I adore is Cole Porter. I think these are the men I would beg to be descended from, if I were to concern myself with that sort of question.

But getting back to the notion of recognized forms, I think of my poem “Inscription for the Head of a Pin” (*Witness of Pebbles* 62–63). I suppose it could be said it’s written in tercets, but I’ve not seen any work—that I remember, at least—written quite like this, where the second part extends and the first comprises just two words:

Inscription for the Head of a Pin

To Persian mystics all writing emanates from a single calligraphic dot on the page. The Báb is the Primal Point, “from which have been generated all created things.”

—Marzieh Gail

One dot:
From this
All else begot.
Take pains:
This sign
All else contains.

Rave well:
This mark
Worlds will tell.

Eloquent pin!
One dot—
Infinitude within.

THE SONNET AND I

It could also be said that I feel very virtuous when I use an established form. Writing a sonnet and pulling it off—or having it arrive full blown, as they often do with me—is like getting up early in the morning and scrubbing the kitchen floor, and washing the car, and running several errands successfully, and getting to the bank on time, and getting home in time for dinner, and having performed innumerable favors for people along the way.

I just feel so virtuous when I write a sonnet; I don’t know why that is. It’s just that its discipline appeals to me, and I love the form. And I’m grateful that occasionally poems visit me in that form because I think the sonnet lends itself particularly well to the expression of spiritual concerns. The sonnet seems to possess a kind of chastity, a pristine purity, and it requires such compression that, if it is successful at all, it usually says something of merit in a memorable way.

I would have difficulty selecting any of my own sonnets as examples, but I am really happy with them all. If I retain them, if I publish them, it’s probably because I like them—or did, at least, when they were written—and I felt virtuous and victorious in bringing them off. So you may be unhappy about this, but I do toss the ball back in your court. If you can

find any of my sonnets that appeal to you, by all means, use them, if you will, as illustrations; I think “Sonnets for the Friend” in *Another Song, Another Season* (119–20) is relatively well accomplished:

Sonnets for the Friend

I

To whom am I to sing if not to You
 Who know, well know, the singer and the
 season
 And listen still and know the verse be true
 Who are Himself the music and its reason.
 My barren fields lie parched beneath the
 sun
 Nor orange and olive yield in arid earth
 And fallow stay till husbanded by One
 Whose pledge embodies all of death and
 birth.
 Of what then shall I sing if not of this:
 I learn the ancient patience of the land,
 Mute witness to misfortune's scorching
 kiss
 And reach for rain, as reached I for Your
 hand.
 When I but sound Your name in prayer or
 dream
 Behold! My rivers run, my orchards teem.

II

Why would You have my feeble, feckless
 love?
 Another's charm compellingly holds sway.
 Inconstant, from Your kiss I'd turn away
 Often and often to him, the mated dove
 Truer than I, more passionately whole.
 I share another's wine-cup and embrace.
 Encouched with You, I'd helplessly extol
 The enslaving power of that other's grace.

Your song would not hold me. With half
 my heart
 I'd hear You and at faintest first call flee
 Truckling and groveling to my sweet, tart
 And jealous love how asks fidelity.
 Yet, faithfully, You call this faithless one
 And stumbling, halt, at last to You I run.

III

What love exacts I had not thought to
 yield,
 Nor guessed the crazing dart the Hunter
 hurled,
 Or might have found indifference a shield
 And built of gold and pride a dullard's
 world.
 But sure the Marksman's aim and keen His
 sight;
 I could but dress His raven locks the night.
 I might have fled His perfumed, silken tent
 But for the madding blandishment of
 grape;
 Heart ravished by His voice, resistance rent
 And, flagon drained, I could not seek
 escape.
 In passion's sweeping tide I lost all fear
 And could but stroke my Captor's brow
 the year.
 What love demands I had not thought to
 give
 Who, dead of this, am yet left here to live.

Sonnets appeal to me again in these days—as does the quatrain used in Emily Dickinson's poetry—because they are well suited to the expression of spiritual matters that are so difficult to talk about in an everyday voice. It seems to me that in much of the poetry I've read, including modernized sonnets, where the spiritual question is approached, a kind of triviality sets in.

I don't know—to me, it's like the need to preserve the sacred text written in the kind of English Shoghi Effendi used in the translation.⁷ I just think that some things the poem wants to say can be better said in established forms. They command for me, or in me, a degree of respect that free verse does not always achieve.

In my book dedicated to the work of Emily Dickinson, *One Bird, One Cage, One Flight: An Interpretation, in Verse, of the Themes and Images from the Letters of Emily Dickinson*, I can refer you to some of my poems which I think are good examples of quatrains that echo the voice of Emily Dickinson relatively successfully, yet say something more than she might have said. I'm thinking of "Spring Song,"⁸

7 Sometimes alluded to as Royal English, the language Shoghi Effendi used to translate Bahá'í scripture is a remarkable synthesis that is ultimately of his own devising: "Many of the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá are in exalted and highly poetic language in the original Persian and Arabic and you will see, for example, that when translating Bahá'u'lláh's Writings into English the beloved Guardian did not use present-day colloquial English but evolved a highly poetic and beautiful style, using numbers of archaic expressions reminiscent of the translations of the Bible" (from a letter dated 7 October 1973, written by the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly printed *Lights of Guidance*, p. 108).

8 *One Bird*, p. 20. Each of these four poems introduces a successive section that covers a stage in Dickinson's life. This piece introduces the period 1841–1859.

"Summer Song,"⁹ "Autumn Song,"¹⁰ and "Winter Song,"¹¹ which are used as section dividers in the book:

Spring Song

My hope put out white petals
In tentative delight
But twice there came concussive frost,
Obliterating blight

Which, blotting out my April,
Stirred wisdom in my root.
Should another burgeoning come
Will twig renew? 'Tis moot.

Summer Song

No pebble mars the brook today,
No film subtracts from noon
And should I faint in daylight
My pillow would be June.

My skin receives the evening,
My eye owns all it scans
And should I faint beneath the moon
She'll reach out long white hands.

Autumn Song

Odors tangled in the trees,
The sky was full of south,
Leaves raced headlong on the lawn,
One rose to kiss my mouth.

9 *One Bird*, p. 50. This piece introduces the period 1860–1869.

10 *One Bird*, p. 80. This piece introduces the period 1870–1879.

11 *One Bird*, p. 106. This piece introduces the period 1880–1886.

Its taste was tart as memory,
 Its aroma was goodbye,
 I felt a soft astonishment
 It should so gladly die.

Immortality was hinted
 In its flutter at my lip
 No one shrewd foot in sure pursuit
 But cautious lest it slip.

Winter Song

Peace is such a deep place
 And life so small a spoon
 Though we dig with fervor
 We cannot reach it soon.

Heaven's such a high place
 And shank of hope so short
 Though we jump forever
 'Tis unrewarded sport.

Winter's such a cold place,
 Igniting faith and art,
 I clasp my warming vision
 Of the swift thaw of the heart.

Another poem in which I pay tribute to Emily is called "The Criminal" in *One Bird, One Cage, One Flight* (51). I like it very much, but it just occurred to me the other day what the poem is really about: the "criminal," of course, is the child in us, the creative self, that very self which, as children, many of us slaughter. And I realized with a start that this is a theme I have written on in other poems, and I've never even noticed this connection before:

The Criminal

*It is a criminal thing to be a boy in a
 godly village,
 But maybe he will be forgiven.*

—Emily Dickinson

It is criminal to be a boy
 (The village won't approve!)
 The accomplice of disruptive joy
 And unselective love.

Boys leap, or dawdle, dreaming,
 A whistle on their lips,
 Tell of distant dazzling worlds,
 Lost treasure and foreign ships.

Boys rustle so with secrets—
 We wince and look askance;
 They're intimates of eagles' nests
 And may, unbidden, dance.

Small fervors bulge their pockets,
 Their grace is all awry
 They blurt of fabled things and sob
 Because the phoenix dies.

They are fugitives from duty,
 Shun our harsh pieties
 Yet without pageantry they serve
 No less our deity.

The fox knows their sly longing,
 The trees have heard them pray;
 I've known one store his lawless hopes
 Where nothing may decay.

Bareheaded all the summer long
 The boy, pell-mell, will pass,
 Till criminal, betrayed like us,
 Confess himself to grass.

I guess I'm as thick as a plank. Occasionally I have this little ray of light that dawns on my consciousness. I think "The Criminal" is a little, clever

one, and it works on a number of levels: it reinforces Emily's use of irony, yet it goes beyond the immediate concern of the activity of a little boy in a godly village. But for me, it's an urgent plea not to destroy the creative self, a mistake I nearly made myself, but there's no need to go into that. Suffice it to say that I'm glad I've found a way to rediscover the creative child in myself, the little criminal of whom the godly village would not approve.

An example of another poem on this theme is "Lines on an Unlamented Death" in *The Witness of Pebbles*. Two other examples of poems about the creative self in this same volume are "Recovery" and "Confrontation." These are also about the "criminal" in whose death we often collude as children. And many, as you know, unfortunately never rediscover this aspect of their nature, or else cover it over. And what a loss that is!

One Bird, One Cage, One Flight is, of course, a collection of poems I've written in homage to Emily Dickinson. And I would point out that Part One of the book contains poems drawing on some of her early work and her early letters, and I don't think they have much merit except to recapture the kind of tone she used, a kind of mock-heroic effect. But there are a couple of good ones among them. I think "A Modest Glass" is admirable, if I may say so. I also like "Dancing" and "The Weather in Amherst."

In Part Two, in addition to "The Criminal," I like "The Shipwreck," "A Glee among the Garrets," "A Feast of Absence," "The Infatuation of

Sameness," and "Notes from a Yankee Kitchen." In Part Three, "Love Fare" appeals to me, along with "Sight," and there are various others I think deserve attention.

I have found it useful to use Emily's voice and her quatrain pattern to say things that contemporary people are not much interested in hearing—things for which there seems to be only circumlocutious expressions. I like the directness of a quatrain, and I have hoped that some of mine might have an original quality—that they not only pay tribute to Emily, but also let me impose my own mark on them.

SOME OF MY FAVORITES

Some poems I have a real crush on, even after all these years, but these are pieces that don't appear to have been written in any established form. I think one of these, "Prayer for the True Believer" in *The Witness of Pebbles* (72–73), has the potential to be an important poem. In *The Witness of Pebbles* I also like "Lines for a New Believer" (95) and "The Artifact" (96), but probably because they deal with things that are close to my heart: the need to avoid rigidity, and formulae, and inflexibility, both spiritually and administratively.

David Hofman has mentioned to me, on two or three occasions, that he is of the opinion that *One Bird, One Cage, One Flight* is my "masterwork." I don't ask everyone to agree with his decision, but I find it interesting for him to say so, especially because it was published by George Ronald.¹²

A poem which I suspect might survive me and which is such fun to read (I can never resist reading this on any occasion when I'm asked to read publicly) is called "The Pioneer" in *Another Song, Another Season* (37–40).¹³ It isn't written in any established form, but it's a poem I enjoy because I've known so many of the ladies who are the subject of this piece.

WHAT THE POETIC PROCESS MEANS TO ME

Already I suspect all I am saying is disappointing or inadequate. I suspect it doesn't begin to answer the kind of questions one might need to write a scholarly paper. I just rattle off thoughts as they occur to me. After all, I have never made a claim to profundity and certainly not to scholarship. However, in the last few sentences I've probably answered your question in which you ask me to describe my best, my strongest, and my favorite work. But then you ask why I consider them so.

I think the poems I've mentioned are my strongest and my favorite pieces because they are successful and they deal with themes that are closer to my heart than almost any other. I suspect I am never too tired of persuading people in my poetry—urging them, at least—to stay away from the false

founded by David Hofman in 1943.

13 Though a delightful piece, this four-page poem is too lengthy to include and too coherent to be represented by a mere excerpt.

and to look for the authentic, to avoid the fake. It even occurs to me that's probably one of the roles of the artist, whether he knows it consciously or not. But if he does his job properly, he may be doing that very thing.

And in that vein, another poem I still like after all these years—which I think is strong and which is certainly the most autobiographical poem I've written—is called "New Song" (*Another Song* 116). It's free verse—and probably not very good free verse at that. However, I like what the poem says, and it certainly describes my experience in the years before I found the Bahá'í Faith and has as its climax my discovery of it. David Hofman on a number of occasions attempted to persuade me that this is one of my best poems.

David also likes very much "Lines from a Battlefield" in *Another Song* (111). This, too, is autobiographical, I suppose. And it may be a fresh expression of a very ancient theme—the struggle of the lower and higher self, again a subject of keen interest to me and one I have treated in any number of ways in any number of poems, when I stop and look back at them.

The reward, of course, was the reception accorded to my work—not only by the Bahá'í community, but by some outside it, because it had not occurred to me that what a Bahá'í might say might be of the remotest interest, or even understood, by a non-Bahá'í reader. However, I received support through my association in Haifa with the group called Voices, a poetry

association consisting mostly of Jews, but from all parts of Europe and the rest of the world, who choose to write in English. Their support and considerable encouragement helped a great deal.

But when I think of the publishing of *Another Song, Another Season*—my first work, which appeared in 1979, when I finally consented to David Hofman's request to give him enough poems for a book (he had asked that several times)—it occurred to me that perhaps it was just the right time for it. Perhaps the Bahá'í community needed a book of this kind, and someone had to write it. It just fell to my lot to do it; and I was grateful that it had occurred, and I enjoyed it hugely.

With the issuing of my "license," the poems came as if a floodgate had been opened, and I've been at it ever since. In addition to *Another Song, Another Season; The Witness of Pebbles* (1981); and *One Bird, One Cage, One Flight* (1983), there is, of course, my novella *A Sudden Music* (1983), which contains some poetry, a lot of it bad. There is also on the horizon for publication next year a new collection of my work called *Occasions of Grace*, which George Ronald has said it hopes to publish.¹⁴

Now having heard me on the subject of the internal voices of ridicule and the ghosts one must slay in order to write one's work—the voices that say, "Ah, but look at the poets of the past. How dare you raise your pen to

paper?"—you will appreciate why the poem "The Criminal" means so much to me. It was, I suppose, one way of setting the score straight in that regard.

I suppose every poet has things which he holds dear to his heart as a result of comments on his work, and I have to admit that there are three that are favorites of mine. A girl, a Bahá'í unknown to me, once wrote, saying, "It is as though you have lived my life." Then a young man, also a Bahá'í whom I have not met, wrote, saying, "It is as though you have read my entrails." And then there's the much more frequent experience of having someone sidle up to me after a poetry reading to say: "Well, ordinarily I don't like poetry—I don't have any use for it at all—but yours isn't bad!"

REACHING OUT

I very much enjoy the idea of cross-pollination in the arts, and I'm happy to say that in recent years, a number of the friends in various parts of the world have begun to set some of my poems to music. I feel so honored by this and, of course, detached from it in the same breath, because once a poem leaves your hands—and certainly after it is published—it takes on a life of its own and is no longer yours, and what it becomes isn't really the author's business. But still, it's nice to have someone say, in effect, "I met that kid you sent away to college, and he's all right." I always feel that's what one is really saying about the poem

¹⁴ George Ronald published this work in 1992.

when someone says something kind about my work.

Most notably, a Bahá'í pioneer to Luxembourg, Jean South, has begun to set my work to music. I'm told by professional musicians that her work is thus far unique in the Bahá'í revelation in that it departs from the forms we have grown accustomed to, including folk music, and approaches more closely the *lieder*.¹⁵ They are songs that could be sung by professional singers without embarrassment in a concert, or as recital songs, or as encores. This has made me very happy, particularly when I realize that Jane is a senior citizen, a pioneer, and a woman—I mean, what more could one ask for? And as Ethel Merman is said to have said of Mary Martin, "She's OK, if you like talent."

I enjoy readings, and I'm often asked to give them. I suppose, being fresh from the Holy Land, I am considered something of a resource in the community. In any case, I delight when the Bahá'ís ring and ask if I would like to speak at a fireside or give a reading. After those long years of abstinence from direct teaching work in Israel, it brings great pleasure.¹⁶ But I was

asked, not long before leaving the Holy Land, to address the youth on the subject of the arts, and notably on poetry, so I created this spiel and I offer it to you for whatever amusement it may bring. I can't imagine that it holds any ideas that have not already occurred to anyone interested in poetry, and probably many others could articulate the ideas more eloquently. I call the piece "Bring Chocolate":

Art has a message for us. It says: "Care, grow, develop, adapt, overcome, nurture, protect, foster, cherish." It says: "Your reality is spiritual." It says: "Achieve your full humanness." It invites us to laugh, cry, reflect, strive, persevere. It says: "Rejoice!" Above all, it says to us to be! We cannot turn our backs on art.

I am of the conviction that, in the future, increasingly, one important measure of the spiritual maturity and health of the Bahá'í world community will be its capacity to attract and win the allegiance of artists of all kinds and its sensitivity and imaginativeness in making creative use of them.

15 "Lied" is a German and Dutch word that means "song." In English, the term often alludes to the "art song" and refers to those works that have been influenced by romantic poems from other languages. The themes of the *lied* more often than not involve romantic love as set in a pastoral context.

16 Because the Bahá'í World Centre is

in Israel and is effectively a "guest" in that country, it has long been the wisdom of the Guardian, and now of the House of Justice, that Bahá'ís visiting on pilgrimage or residing there to work at the World Centre should refrain from actively teaching in order to not be perceived as proselytes and thereby become obnoxious to the government and citizenry of Israel.

Artists—not tricksters and conjurers, but committed artists—will be a vital force in preventing inflexibility in our community. They will be a source of rejuvenation. They will serve as a bulwark against fundamentalism, stagnation, and administrative sterility. Artists call us away from formulas, caution us against the fake, and accustom us to unpredictability—that trait which so characterizes life. They validate our senses. They link us to our own history. They clothe and give expression to our dreams and aspirations. They teach us impatience with stasis. They aid us to befriend our private experiences and heed our inner voices. They reveal how we may subvert our unexamined mechanistic responses to the world. They sabotage our smugness. They alert us to divine intimations. Art conveys information about ourselves and our universe which can be found nowhere else. Our artists are our benefactors.

To the degree the Bahá'í community views its artists as a gift rather than a problem will it witness the spread of the Faith “like wildfire” as promised by Shoghi Effendi, through their talents being harnessed to the dissemination of the spirit of the Cause.

In general society, artists are often at war with their world and live on its fringes. Their lack of discretion in expressing their

criticism—which may be hostile, vituperative, negative, and offer no solutions—may lead to their rejection and dismissal by the very society they long to influence. Artists are frequently seen as troublemakers, menaces, destroyers of order, or frivolous clowns. Sometimes the kindest thing said of them is that they are neurotic or mad. In the Bahá'í community, it must be different. Bahá'u'lláh said so. Consider that the Bahá'í Writings state that “[a]ll art is a gift of the Holy Spirit” and exhort us to respect those engaged in sciences, arts, and crafts.

Artists have, among other responsibilities, that of questioning our values, of leading us to new insights that release our potential for growth, of illuminating our humanity, of renewing our authenticity by putting us in touch with our inner selves, and of creating works of art that challenge us—as Rilke says—to change our lives. They are a stimulus to transformation.

In the Bahá'í Order, the artists will find their home at the center of their community, free to interact constructively with the people who are served by their art, free to give and to receive strength and inspiration. It is my hope that the young people gathered here tonight will be in the vanguard of this reconciliation between artists and their world. As Bahá'u'lláh foretells, the artists

are coming home to claim their place. I urge you: Be there! Welcome them! Bring chocolate!

Now, John, perhaps you will understand why I resist discoursing unless coerced into doing so. I hope that some of this will be of use. Thank you, John, for your intentions. Good bye.

That tape was recorded in the late fall of 1991. Roger White hung on to life for a little over a year, dying on April 10, 1993.

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