

Poetry and Self-Transformation*

by Roger White

MY NON-BAHÁ'Í FRIENDS who are poets frequently complain that among friends and members of their families to whom they show their work they encounter indifference, contempt, embarrassment, or sometimes hostility, which heightens their sense of alienation and uselessness. They are made to feel frivolous and somewhat less than respectable. They have no experience of audience and feel that they are writing in a void, speaking to themselves in a vacuum, presenting their private view of the world with no confidence that anyone else might see the world as they do.

Poetry is no longer very accessible to the average reader; it is rare to find families and groups of friends gathering together to read poetry; it is increasingly seen as a specialized and elitist interest divorced from real life, and few consider it a source of pleasure and insight. Poetry is still written and read, of course, but it has taken refuge in universities, creative writing workshops, and obscure coffeehouses. Seldom is it recognized as a vital means of communicating information of a kind that is found only in poems—bulletins

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from the unconscious, "those sly reports on private experience, voices of the inner self . . ." as Louise Bernikow has remarked.¹

Poets are in part to blame for the diminished regard in which poetry is held that results in society's impoverishment and deprives the poet of an audience. Without a common world perspective, poets are forced to delve in to their own psyches with the result that much modern poetry is despairing or seemingly deliberately difficult—one might say written in a private code. Many modern poets who write confessional verse invite us charmlessly to follow them not only into the bedroom but also the bathroom, and might dismiss our reluctance to do so as squeamishness, not noticing our yawns. Poetry that celebrates natural speech and activity can make unnatural demands on our sympathy and psychic fastidiousness. In an age of instant gratification a consumer society seeks consumer-oriented entertainments; we have perhaps deserved the disposable poems and novels we are given in such abundance, thirst as we might for literature that affirms life and identity, and reinforces our humanity in its struggle to resist the assault of all that is mechanistic and robotic. It remains the task of poetry to translate into words, with intensity and economy, the inexpressible with an immediacy that is not achieved in other art forms. The poet must not just describe the loaf but provide readers with the experience of eating it; the poet places the bread on the tongue. When the poet fails in this duty, readers will turn to films and novels for the kind of information about life that it is the poet's responsibility and privilege to provide.

Poets learn to live with the disquieting knowledge that more people aspire to write poetry than read it, and that more read it than buy it. This situation, it might be supposed, will gradually change in a Bahá'í society whose members are trained not to confuse who they are with what they do; who accept the necessity of inhabiting a social persona without

having it overshadow the soul within that stands naked before its Creator; and whose interior lives are privately called into account each day, not morbidly, but in a spirit of creative self-interest that fosters growth towards fuller human development. If the best poets are indeed, as has been said of them, the antennae of civilization, we might do well to consult them. Their wisdom, Inder Nath Kher insists, "cannot be translated into discursive prose."² One of the highest services they perform is to reacquaint us with our true feelings which we put away in our need to manipulate our workaday world. But if we are correct in respecting poets as servants, we err in demanding that they be slaves to or propagandists of our view of reality. Very fine poetry has been created by poets writing both within and without a religious framework. It is chastening for the Bahá'í poet rising rapturously from devotions, and bent on "committing literature" (I accept blame for the phrase) by enshrining pious thoughts in poems, to recall T.S. Eliot's admonition that people who write devotional verse are usually writing as they want to feel, rather than as they do feel.

Many serious poets and other artists feel that they are at war with the age. Through this estrangement, both the poet and potential readers are the losers. Most of us have forgotten our discovery of poetry as children through nursery rhymes when we were fascinated to learn that words dance and resonate and have the capacity to provide the epiphanic moment, to transport, to express something we didn't know how to say, to reveal something we didn't know we knew. If the writer has done a valid job, the act of writing a poem has changed the writer, and we in reading it are put in touch with a power that transforms us—if only by reminding us that transformation is possible. This is what we look for in art. Cyril Connolly would have it that, "The true function of a writer is to produce a masterpiece . . . no other task is of any consequence . . . writers engaged in any literary task which

is not an assault on perfection . . . might as well be peeling potatoes.”³

Carol Sternhell, writing in the *New York Times*, relates how her friend, Michael, aged two, tried to climb inside a book. “Unwilling to believe that so wonderful a world [as described in the story he had heard read to him] was unreachable, he simply opened the tale to his favorite page, carefully arranged his choice on the floor and stepped in. He tried again and again, certain he would soon get it right, and each time he was left standing out in the cold he cried in bewilderment.” Few of us are as innocent as Michael: we take revenge on the authors by refusing to read them, study them with calculation in order to expose their tricks, or withdraw from magic transport to take refuge in reading what we fondly believe are facts, revered because so manipulable. Most newspapers, how-to manuals, and interoffice memos have the virtue of being written in mind-numbing, heavisome prose. They have designs on our opinions and attitudes, and sometimes on our purses and our votes, but they are not usually concerned with our interior selves on any profound level. Newspapers and periodicals are adored by politicians. Emily Dickinson’s father, who was a politician, displayed a misplaced kindness in indulgently allowing her to read the local newspaper, while urging her not to read books—especially the poetry she loved—lest they “jostle” her mind. Dickinson herself was, of course, a great poet although her father appears to have successfully avoided recognizing this. “Everybody must have wished at some time that poetry were written by nice ordinary people instead of poets—and, in a better world, it may be,” as Randall Jarrell ruefully observes.

But the cockroaches of poetry lurk beneath the floorboards of even the loftiest mansions of the rational mind. It fell to my lot, as Associate Editor of *Hansard*, the record of the debates of the Canadian Parliament, to edit the following sentences, given here in the pristine form in which they fell from the honorable orators’ lips:

Hon. Member for Grey North: Yes, Mr. Speaker, pessimism is the scarecrow that fear erects in the watermelon patch of the future to frighten away the timid souls so the feast may be richer for the few who are not afraid.

Hon. Member for Niagara Falls: I have thrown the Minister an orchid, and if you think I am throwing him a beanball at any time, merely point it out to me, and I will try to get the engine back on the track.

Hon. Member for Halifax: [In Divorce Bill Committee] It is extremely difficult to track down adultery and you seize upon it if you are lucky enough to find it.

Hon. Member for Timiskaming: Gossip sometimes creates a condition, a condition that would mean a man's reincarnation [*sic*] in prison. Parolees are not supposed to drink, go into public houses or associate with women of easy virtues—there are a number of conditions they are asked to observe that are not necessarily conducive to rehabilitation.

Hon. Member for Cartier: It is possible by law to say that only those who are born are qualified to serve in Her Majesty's Forces.

An Hon. Member for a Maritime Constituency: It is my privilege to represent fishermen, those brave men who go down to the sea in ships and do their business in great waters.

If a capacity to jostle the mind were a characteristic exclusive to poetry, these utterances might be considered poetry of the highest order.

Bahá'ís who write poetry—indeed any Bahá'í artists—are able to look forward to a different reception from that which my friends describe, and this will be increasingly true as the Bahá'í community expands and matures. Not only do Bahá'í

poets have a common worldview shared with a community towards whose members they have a family feeling, but they are also aware of the high regard in which their craft has been held since the beginning of the Revelation. Without in any way confusing the Creative Word with poetry—one does not pun in saying they are a “kingdom” apart—Bahá’í poets might rejoice to remember that Nabíl records the Báb as saying that exalted or inspired poetry is the result of “the immediate influence of the Holy Spirit,” and the Báb was heard to quote the tradition “Treasures lie hidden beneath the throne of God; the key to those treasures is the tongue of poets.”⁴ Writers of verse also know that many of the early Bábís were poets, including Ṭáhirih—at least a stanza from one of whose odes we have in the Guardian’s own translation.⁵ They also know that Bahá’u’lláh Himself wrote poetry; that, indeed, ten years before revealing his station to his followers, He alluded to it in Odes.⁶

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, too, wrote poetry of a most exalted and devotional nature which, admire it though we may, we should resist imitating, just as we should resist writing poems in the style of the Revealed Word, which does not need our attempted compliment.

I am convinced there exists in the Sacred Writings and in the recorded talks of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá a foundation upon which will be built a greater system of aesthetics for all the arts than the world has yet known, and that time and the patient researches of scholars and the creative efforts of artists will bring it to light. At this early stage in the development of the Bahá’í world community, one can only speculate that before Bahá’í artists can contribute significant advances they must dedicate themselves to the restoration and preservation of the ideals of beauty and perfection and order. In describing the high calling of the artist, David Bosworth hints at the intensity of the creative engagement: “To bear witness, to be an author, to make art, is a profound act; there is no work more serious or demanding or finally audacious.”⁷ Bahá’ís who

write should not be surprised to discover that in addition to audacity the task confronting them may require heroism—Bahá'ís in almost everything they do are pioneering in one form or another. Kathleen Raine, the British poet and critic, laments:

I have found myself wondering why the present age seems positively to shrink from beauty, to prefer the ugly, to feel safer, more at home with it; and I have come to realize that there is a reproach in the beautiful and the perfect; it passes its continual silent judgement and it requires perhaps a kind of courage to love what is perfect, since to do so is an implicit confession of our own imperfection. Can it be that the prevalence of the low and the sordid in contemporary writing is a kind of easy way, a form of sloth, an avoidance of that reproach which would call us, silently, to [aspire to] a self-perfection it would cost us too much to undertake? And yet it is in order to work upon us that transformation . . . that works which embody the beautiful alone exist. That is their function . . . ⁸

The situation obtaining in the arts is too well known to require comment. The Universal House of Justice on 10 February 1980, in a general letter to Iranian Bahá'ís “resident in other countries throughout the world,” did not labor the point. After drawing attention to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s reference to deepening chaos and confusion, the House of Justice stated: “Even music, art and literature, which are to represent and inspire the noblest sentiments and highest aspirations and should be a source of comfort and tranquillity for troubled souls . . . are now the mirrors of the soiled hearts of this confused, unprincipled, and disordered age.”

Unquestionably, Bahá'í writers have their work cut out for them. Alex Aronson, a respected Shakespearian scholar, observing from outside the Bahá'í community, has been quick to discern that Bahá'í authors may play a role in addressing

themselves to “dimensions of living reality . . . long ago consigned to oblivion” under the weight of “the triviality of our everyday experience” and in restoring the “grammar of belief.”⁹

Language is the medium of the poet. One has only to turn to the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to discover its purpose: “. . . the function of language is to portray the mysteries and secrets of human hearts. The heart is like a box, and language is the key.”⁹ And since, in *The Hidden Words*, Bahá’u’lláh tells us, “*Thy heart is My home*” (No. 59, Arabic), and that “*All that is in heaven and earth I have ordained for thee, except the human heart, which I have made the habitation of My beauty and glory . . .*” (No. 27, Persian), Bahá’í poets will not lack for subject matter and will be challenged to excellence of diction. Nor are they restricted to the solemn and devotional, for the heart is the seat also of joy and laughter and passion. Bahá’í poets might well write of “the intimate presence of the divine in the lives of men”¹⁰ but will not confine their appreciation to poetry of that stamp, for they will probably recognize with Louis MacNeice, who felt “the drunkenness of things being various,” that the world is “incorrigibly plural” and “suddener than we fancy it.”¹¹ Humility will inform Bahá’í artists that they do not possess truth, though they may feel they have glimpsed its wellspring and will remain receptive to the poetry of quest. An emergent Bahá’í community, grown secure, will not, dare I guess, content itself with didactic and exhortative verse but will espouse poetry that celebrates an improved quality of life and will explore its ceremonial and recreational uses, its capacity to delight, inform, and inspire. Yeats pleaded for “the old passion felt as new” and declared heroic and religious themes, passed down from age to age, modified by individual talent, to be the unchanging substance of sublime poetry. Louise Bogan noted sadly that the generation of rising young poets in America whose work she reviewed wrote unambitious poems and were “positively terrified” of the sublime.

“It is certain that with the spread of the spirit of Bahá’u’lláh a new era will dawn in art and literature,” Shoghi Effendi’s secretary wrote on his behalf to a Bahá’í who had sent him a poem. “Whereas before the form was perfect but the spirit was lacking, now there will be a glorious spirit embodied in a form immeasurably improved by the quickened genius of the world.”¹²

It remains for the poets and other artists of today and tomorrow to give expression to that spirit. The distinguished black poet, Robert Hayden, who was a Bahá’í, writing in *World Order* a publication he served as poetry editor, said of this process: “The making of a poem, like all other creative endeavors, is in the Bahá’í view a spiritual act, a form of worship,” and reminded us of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words that, “If a man engages with all his power in the acquisition of a science or in the perfection of an art, it is as if he has been worshipping God. . . . What bounty greater than this that science should be considered as an act of worship and art as service to the Kingdom of God?”¹³ Would that not be, human society so ordered as to reflect divine ideals and virtues?

Hayden continued:

It seems especially significant that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes no distinction between “secular” and “religious” art. 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.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sees the creative act as essentially a religious act. The serious artist is involved in a spiritual enterprise. The poet’s efforts to master form and technique are in themselves a kind of prayer. . . . If there exists a “poetry of despair” and rejection, there is also a poetry that affirms the humane and spiritual.¹⁴

It could also be pointed out that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes no distinction between women and men writers and artists, nor



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ROBERT HAYDEN (1913–1980)
a distinguished Bahá'í poet.

does he make any other invidious distinctions. Bahá'í writers should have no need to write out of anger and frustration occasioned by discrimination against them on the grounds of race or sex; they should have no need to engage in special pleading. The Bahá'í woman poet will not find it necessary to adopt the humiliating and dissembling device of appending to her work a self-deprecating note like that which appeared in the first volume of poetry published by an Englishwoman, Katherine Philips (1631–1664), a tactic employed in various guises by women writers well into the nineteenth century because of their vulnerability in a literary world dominated by men:

I am so far from expecting applause for any thing I scribble that I can hardly expect pardon; and sometimes I think that employment so far above my reach and unfit for my sex that I am going to resolve against it for ever. . . . The truth is I have an incorrigible inclination to that folly of rhyming and intending the effects of that humour only for my own amusement in a retired life, I did not so much resist it as a wiser woman would have done.¹⁵

The male writer will not be disconcerted or threatened by the news that the earliest poet whose work survives is the Sumerian moon priestess, Enheduanna, born circa 2300 BC, of whom a detailed likeness has come down to us on a stone disc. To mention that she was the daughter of a king would merely serve to underline the pernicious tradition of defining women and their achievements as minor subordinate stars in relation to the galaxy of great male planets. And the male writer might respectfully regard, as an early ancestor-in-craft, Anne Bradstreet (1612?–1672), the first published poet of the New World.

We should not doubt that the world needs and will accept what we fashion with our best effort. Kathleen Raine states it well:

. . . people crave for the heroic and the beautiful; and when they cease to do so . . . can our civilization long survive? The ugly and the vulgar enable us not to feel, not to think, not to live; they save us from the anguish of living. Let us admit that our society as a whole has chosen death—death in small, painless doses. Fortunes are made by selling it.¹⁶

She points to the almost universally forgotten use of poetry and the other arts 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. The true work of art, Rilke said, addresses humanity saying: You must change your life.

But note that he says *you* must change it. That is a great truth which many of us spend our lives evading. Transformation, we vainly hope, will come from an outside agent—the princess will kiss the frog—and it will be painless. But Rilke has the support of Bahá'u'lláh in saying that we must transform ourselves. He makes it clear that growth and change, rescue from stasis, are achieved at a cost. In one of his odes written in Sulaymáníyyih, Bahá'u'lláh declares:

*If thine aim be to cherish thy life,
 approach not our court;
 but if sacrifice be thy heart's desire,
 come and let others come with thee.
 For such is the way of Faith,
 if in thy heart thou seekest reunion with Bahá;
 shouldst thou refuse to tread this path,
 why trouble us? Begone!*¹⁷

And again, in the afterword to the *Hidden Words*:

I bear witness, O friends! that the favor is complete, the argument fulfilled, the proof manifest and the evidence estab-

lished. Let it now be seen what your endeavors in the path of detachment will reveal.

Because I believe in the truth of the statement that change must be self-initiated, I have made it the theme of a poem in which I hope I have made a legitimate use of irony in depicting rescue as I think many of us would have it be: effortless, dramatic, and imposed by a congenially romantic agent who yet tells us, had we ears to hear, that transformation and transcendence must passionately engage our volition:

RESCUE

It cannot continue like this.
Surely the stranger will come at midnight
burst into the room on quick light feet
shake spring rain spangles from his ripe-wheat hair
the eyes blue opals iridescent with decision
to draw you from your reading chair
to say—the words hard-edged, distinct as
gems on velvet, his voice ascending in excitement—
You must change all of this!

Or next Thursday come
pensively at twilight
to sit coiled in silence on the low divan
then rise with lithe grace
dark locks luxuriant above the flawless brow
grave eyes mushy with thought
to say in slurred excruciating tenderness—
the tone a dreamer's—
Come away, this will not do!

Or come the Morn of Popinjay
stride through the sunlit garden

appear suddenly, filling the doorway,
a lean column, urgent and ebony—
his strong white teeth a keyboard of annunciation—
to clasp your wrist, to say—the voice
a snapping twig—*Look, you must escape!*
his grasp resolute, compelling,
the bronzy knuckles deceptively shell-delicate
come to say—the voice precise,
huskily constricted—*This is the time for risks!*
to say, *Listen, there is no formula!*
to say, *There is a better way!*
to say, *It cannot continue like this!*



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ROGER WHITE (center)

Canadian-born author and poet, with Anne Gordon Atkinson (left) and Deborah Chicurel Conow (right) who frequently give dramatic readings of his poetry.