

## **The Age of Anxiety and the Century of Light: Twentieth-Century Literature, the Poet's Mission, and the Vision of World Unity**

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### **Abstract**

The twentieth century was a period of crisis and promise, a Century of Light and an "Age of Anxiety." Among the literary figures who recognized and confronted the spiritual and intellectual crisis of their time were W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, and Kahlil Gibran, among others. Through reference to their works, this article examines the mission of the poet—to bear witness, to maintain the integrity of language, to express and to live those eternal truths and values that lift and inspire the human spirit and which can serve as the basis of a culture of peace and unity.

### **Résumé**

Le XXe siècle aura été une période de crise mais aussi de promesse, un siècle lumineux à une époque d'anxiété. Parmi les figures littéraires qui ont su reconnaître et confronter la crise spirituelle et intellectuelle qui marquait leur époque, il y avait W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, et Kahlil Gibran, entre autres. Par des renvois à des extraits de leurs oeuvres, l'auteur examine ici la mission du poète, qui est de porter témoignage, de maintenir l'intégrité de la langue, ainsi que d'exprimer et de vivre ces vérités et valeurs éternelles qui inspirent et élèvent l'esprit humain et qui peuvent servir de fondement à une culture de paix et d'unité.

### **Resumen**

El siglo veinte fue un período de crisis y promesa, tanto un Siglo de Luz como una "Edad de Ansiedad." Entre las figuras literarias quienes reconocieron e hicieron frente a la crisis espiritual e intelectual de su época figuran W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, y Kahlil Gibran. Mediante referencia a sus obras, este artículo investiga la misión del poeta: atestiguar, mantener la integridad del lenguaje, y expresar y vivir aquellas verdades y valores eternos que elevan e inspiran el espíritu humano y que pueden aportarse como base de una cultura de paz y unidad.

### INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1944, while he was staying in New York, W. H. Auden began work on what he originally conceived as a one-page poem in a particular metrical pattern. Over the next few weeks, as he fled the stifling heat of the city to write in air-conditioned cafeterias, he found that the poem was expanding far beyond the confines he had envisaged, and was developing into a major work in dramatic form, recalling his earlier works "For the Time Being" and "The Sea and the Mirror." Like them, this work was a study of the human condition; while they had examined aspects of religion and art, the new poem concentrated on the human consciousness, personified by four strangers (Malin, Rosetta, Quant, and Emble) who meet by chance in a New York bar in wartime and gradually reveal their innermost hopes, fears, and memories. Each of them typifies one of Jung's faculties of the human personality: thinking, feeling, intuition, and sensation. Not surprisingly, this complex and many-layered poem occupied Auden for a long time, and was finally completed in mid-February 1947 and published by Random House in July of that year under the title *The Age of Anxiety*.

It was to be Auden's last long poem, and critical opinions of it were divided. It achieved greater popularity in America than in Britain where Patric Dickinson condemned it as "persistently boring." In America, however, the work won the Pulitzer Prize in 1948 and inspired Leonard Bernstein's second symphony and a ballet by Jerome Robbins. But even here not all critics were favorable; Delmore Schwartz found it self-indulgent and Randall Jarrell considered it one of Auden's worst pieces. Auden himself did not care for either the symphony or the ballet based on his poem. In time, the poem gradually achieved greater recognition, not only for Auden's poetic gifts but as a perceptive portrayal of the spirit of the 1940s.

I have described the background to this poem and the reactions which it aroused in some detail because, although its title is well known as a pithy summing-up of Auden's times and indeed of much of the twentieth century, its very length makes it less familiar to the average reader than many of Auden's shorter and more

accessible works. The title is frequently quoted without reference to its context, and an understanding of that context is essential if we are to grasp exactly what Auden meant by “anxiety” and its map of associations throughout the literature and culture of that age.

In 1944, the same year in which he began *The Age of Anxiety*, Auden published a review in which he declared: “The basic human problem is man’s anxiety in time; e.g. his present anxiety over himself in relation to his past and his parents (Freud), his present anxiety over himself in relation to his future and his neighbors (Marx), his present anxiety over himself in relation to eternity and God (Kierkegaard)” (qtd. in Carpenter 332). On a more personal level, he explored in the poem his own experience of loneliness, which he had come to perceive as a universal condition: “As everybody knows, we live today in one world; but not everybody realizes that to live in one world is to live in a lonely world. . . . All the old charms and cosiness have vanished forever. . . . Each must go his way alone, every step of it” (qtd. in Carpenter 332).<sup>1</sup>

At the same time as Auden was giving voice to prevailing, and profound, responses to the twentieth century, there were other poets who regarded the age, and their relationship to it, quite differently. No less perceptive than Auden, these others cultivated a broader view of the predicament of modern man. For them, the role of the poet was not restricted to describing the ailments of the time in which they lived, but included diagnosing the causes. Some went even further, raising their vision to the most remote extent of the moral and historical horizons, and seeing in the present agonies the birth pangs of a new age, not of anxiety, but of unity and light. Moreover, they saw poets, and poetry itself, not in the passive role of bystander, but as an active participant in the response to the evils and darkness that were convulsing every corner of the planet. But this view represented the terminus of poetic development; to begin, we must return to the point at which Auden understood his times to have reached their most acute stage of disintegration.

#### POETIC ASSESSMENTS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

By the 1950s, the epoch we know as the twentieth century had already developed its personality and character. Everything that has followed since only confirmed those salient features that were well in place at the midway point of the century. Jacob Isaacs, in his 1951 book entitled *An Assessment of Twentieth-Century Literature*, offered the following observation:

An epoch is known by the catchwords it bandies about, whether they represent a real epitome of the time or only a fancied malady. The seventeenth century was concerned with “reason,” the eighteenth century with “nature,” and our concern in the twentieth century is with “the human predicament.” Our preoccupations are shown by the frequency with which we talk of frustration, bewilderment, maladjustment and disintegration, the intensity with which we discuss and are aware of cruelty, violence and sadism, the all-pervading sense of anxiety, and in the background a feeling of guilt, sin, humiliation and despair. Never faith, hope or charity. (45)

This concern with “the human predicament” was responsible to a large extent for a psychological and spiritual malady which manifested itself in a condition of anxiety, neurosis, and an intense sense of insecurity. It was a collective malady affecting the whole world and an entire century. The analysis of the cultural predicament of modern man, however, had already been provided more than a hundred years before by Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, and it included all those problems that have<sup>4</sup> become “the stock talking-points of cultural Jeremiahs in our own day and age”:

the evils of specialization, whether of knowledge or skill, or of one function of the psyche at the expense of the others; the dissociation of what once was united—sensibility and thought, feeling and morality, body and mind; the cleavage between different branches of learning, between the sciences and the arts, between the development of the individual and the welfare of the community, between those who are too exhausted by the struggle for existence to think for themselves and those who are too indolent to make creative use of their leisure; the reduction of man to a mere cog in the wheel of an over-developed society; the de-humanization of the citizen in a State where he is valued for the function he performs rather than the being that he is, treated as a classifiable abstraction and administered by laws which seem irrelevant to him as a person. (xii)

By the end of the Victorian age the foundations of faith had been shaken; man lost faith in himself, in nature, in immortality, in progress, and in salvation. A cynical and skeptical frame of mind led to the overthrow of absolute

standards in morality, religion, and art, resulting in an attitude of flagrant permissiveness affecting all human behavior. By the dawn of the twentieth century a state of spiritual desiccation had enveloped the world. "The Neutralization of Nature," as I. A. Richards called it, changed the magical view of the world into a scientific one. Scientific rationalism ruled the day. Astronomical researches widened the physical but narrowed the spiritual universe. A modern barrenness permeated life, a barrenness derived from Marx and Freud compounded by the lack of compassion generated by Darwinian theories. It was the dark night of the soul, everywhere there was a sense of inevitable crisis, and the great poets of the time—Yeats, Eliot, Auden—lamented in anguish, "the lost vision, the lost purpose, the lost meaning, the lost sense of fellowship and the lost sense of self." In the midst of all this, modern man found himself "wavering between a feeling of boundless power in determining his own fate [suggested by the great discoveries of science] and a feeling of entire helplessness [intimated to him by political, economic and social experience]" (Horney 289). All this became the neurosis of the age of anxiety in what has been called the "apocalypso-technic age, the age of explosives."

Out of this agony a decadent society was born, the characteristics of which were aptly described by Shoghi Effendi in the 1930s:

The recrudescence of religious intolerance, of racial animosity, and of patriotic arrogance; the increasing evidences of selfishness, of suspicion, of fear, and of fraud; the spread of terrorism, of lawlessness, of drunkenness, and of crime; the unquenchable thirst for, and the feverish pursuit after, earthly vanities, riches, and pleasures; the weakening of family solidarity; the laxity in parental control; the lapse into luxurious indulgence; the irresponsible attitude towards marriage and the consequent rising tide of divorce; the degeneracy of art and music, the infection of literature, and the corruption of the press; the extension of the influence and activities of those "prophets of decadence" who advocate companionate marriage, who preach the philosophy of nudism, who call modesty an intellectual fiction, who refuse to regard the procreation of children as the sacred and primary purpose of marriage, who denounce religion as an opiate of the people, who would, if given free rein, lead back the human race to barbarism, chaos, and ultimate extinction—these appear as the outstanding characteristics of a decadent society, a society that must either be reborn or perish. (*World Order* 187–88)

The characteristics described here were universal, and defined a society that had lost touch with the spirit and had fallen victim to the tyranny of the new intellectual theories and notions of the time. Horrified by the new tyranny of the intellect and doubting whether it could be trusted as a reliable organ of truth, the greatest poet of the century defied his age and announced: "I have always considered myself a voice of what I believe to be a greater renaissance—the revolt of the soul against the intellect—now beginning in the world" (Yeats, in Wade 211). The exuberance of these words uttered by W. B. Yeats was inspired by a profound belief in the existence of a universal "great mind" and a "great memory," in the Unity of Being and in a poetic vision of World Unity. In one of the clearest statements about the spiritual vacuum that the poets of the twentieth century experienced, Yeats confessed, "I was unlike others of my generation in one thing only—I [was] very religious." He also blamed Huxley and Tyndall, whom he detested, for robbing him of "the simple-minded religion of his childhood" (*Autobiographies* 142). No twentieth-century poet of Yeats' stature spent more time and energy than Yeats himself searching for a spiritual philosophy. In his search for truth, he explored recondite and, at times, bizarre fields of knowledge. Oriental religion and philosophy, the ancient Irish religion derived from myth and folklore, mysticism, magic, occult practices, and psychic research—from these he forged his own esoteric faith. His spiritual travels took him to India, Arabia, and Japan, and no poet of the twentieth century has embraced India's culture and spiritual heritage with such tenacity and zeal. Yeats' intention in all his researches was appropriately observed by F. A. C. Wilson as being a search for a universal faith:

He accepted the Christian revelation; but, . . . he could not accept it as exclusive; the Upanishads, Buddhism, the religion of Platonism, the Jewish Kabbala and the Neoplatonic tradition of alchemy (of all of which he had made himself a student) seemed to him also meaningful and valid; and he finished with a philosophy that would enable him to connect all these traditions, and to concur with Blake's maxim that "all religions are one." (16)

Although the last decades of the twentieth century have seen a revival of interest in, and social acceptance of, the mystical attitude, many Western critics are still embarrassed by Yeats' esoteric pursuits. Many still feel, even today, that the recognition of a supernatural world, reincarnation, and other Eastern concepts of the Universe, is too remote from a "rational," post-Christian, and "scientific" age.

T. S. Eliot, however, was the first English-speaking poet of genius to be profoundly struck by the intense hatred and hostility Western society professed against the spiritual life. He feared the implications of such hatred and saw the modern world “in all its naked horror unmasked by the impact of war”; he expressed his growing disgust with modern manners and his aversion to the abject sterility of our civilization in the most notable single poem of the century, “The Waste Land” (1922):

Here is no water but only rock  
Rock and no water and the sandy road  
The road winding above among the mountains  
Which are mountains of rock without water

(1793)

Although “The Waste Land” provides us with a new idiom for expressing the new chaos of Western Culture, the poem itself reflected the poet’s personal order imposed on chaos. His poetry, however, showed how far the cosmopolitan influences have become an integral part of the twentieth-century poetic landscape, and we begin to observe the breakdown of insularity which becomes one of the most important features of twentieth-century English literature. This development, in turn, opened the door before a whole world represented in the growth of a literature written in English by Africans and West Indians in the 1960s.

The main themes of Eliot’s poetry were the vision of a devitalized world robbed of its spiritual life. His realization of how society “is very deeply affected morally and spiritually by material conditions” (*Selected Prose* 205) urged him strongly to write on unbelief and the appalling need for a faith, a tradition, “something which will supply to reality a life quite opposed to that cynical unreliable actuality he saw in the world.” His solution was a personal one. He declared his commitment to the Anglo-Catholic faith, and this new element in his work was the spirit that lit the darkness of the world with which he found himself forced to deal.

By the end of the 1930s, the disease diagnosed by Eliot and Yeats had become chronic. W. H. Auden, arriving on the scene during Europe’s darkest hour, woke up to the fact that the healing of “the schism in the soul” (Toynbee’s phrase) defied all the prescriptions of humanism, individualism, capitalism, liberalism, Marxism, existentialism, surrealism, humanist agnosticism, and social democracy. He bitterly criticized the English intellectuals who were horrified by Hitler, saying: “The English intellectuals who now cry to Heaven against the evil incarnated in Hitler have no Heaven to cry to, they have nothing to offer and their prospects echo in empty space” (qtd. in Carpenter 283). For him liberalism and humanism seemed to have a fatal flaw in them, as this statement of his in 1940 suggests: “The whole trend of liberal thought has been to undermine faith in the absolute. . . . It has tried to make reason the judge. . . . But since life is a changing process . . . the attempt to find a humanistic basis for keeping a promise, works logically with the conclusion, ‘I can break it whenever I feel it convenient’” (qtd. in Carpenter 283).

It was essential therefore to renew that “faith in the absolute” which according to him seemed to be the only possible ground for moral judgments. Auden was in search of “the vision that objectifies”: “Either we serve the Unconditional / Or some Hitlerian monster will supply / An iron convention to do evil by” (qtd. in Carpenter 283).

His solution to this spiritual crisis, then, was like that of Yeats and Eliot a personal one: he converted to Christianity and began to attend the Episcopalian Church. Nevertheless, he found it necessary to declare:

Whether determined by God or their neural structure, still  
All men have one common creed, account for it as you will:  
The Truth is one and incapable of self-contradiction;  
All knowledge that conflicts with itself is Poetic Fiction.

(*Collected Poems* 231)

#### KHLIL GIBRAN—POET OF THE AGE

But the most impressive intellectual and spiritual revolution in the West during the twentieth century against the materialistic, atheistic, secular, market-oriented culture was led by a man from the East. It provided an alternative to the cultural chauvinism and religious exclusivism which is associated with the colonial worldview and which still lingers in many political ideologies whether of the Right or of the Left.

At the center of this spiritual revolution, which took place in America, the heart of the industrialized and materialistic West, was a Lebanese immigrant by the name of Kahlil Gibran. Gibran had arrived in the New World in 1895 aged twelve, possessing no English and with only the bare minimum of elementary education. By 1923 he

published his immortal *Prophet* in English, and it immediately became a bestseller. The existing critical apparatus of the Western literary establishment, however, lacked the appropriate criteria by which to judge Gibran, and although opinions of his work swung violently from the eulogistic to the condemnatory, he was never properly accepted by Western critics and academicians.

Nevertheless, what is irrefutable today is that *The Prophet* was, and remains, one of the most widely read books of the century, despite its first having appeared in an age when it was impossible to generate through intensive publicity the kind of sales which modern bestsellers enjoy. There is no doubt that *The Prophet* does indeed hold an ambiguous position in the field of English literature, or literature in English—a position which has so far debarred it from serious critical attention in the West. Gibran's particular mystical vision cannot be adequately represented as most Western critics demand in the language of philosophy, or in the framework of materialistic logic. The recognition he has received so far has come from respectable and accomplished poets such as the Irish AE (George Russell) and the American Robert Hillyer, both of whom have paid tribute to Gibran's unique genius, and have proposed for the purpose of correctly evaluating this type of literature, the adoption of a new critical methodology deriving from two separate cultural traditions, and bound by the prejudices and restrictions of neither.

Perhaps the most recent recognition of the true stature of Gibran has come from Kathleen Raine, amongst the most respected contemporary poets, and the astutest of literary critics. She wrote:

Gibran was dismissed . . . because of his immense following of ordinary men and women, for he answered to a deep need within the Western world, starved as it was of its spiritual food. Communism and Capitalism alike have believed that mankind could be fed on "bread alone" but once again the prophets of the ever-living spirit have shown that the "Word of God" is the necessary food of the soul. It is as if one mind had spoken through their several voices, none more eloquent or beautiful than the lonely voice of the Christian Lebanese Arab, Kahlil Gibran. (Foreword vii)

Ultimately, it matters little whether *The Prophet* will ever receive the accolades of university professors. The book's greatest strength is precisely its avoidance of opaque philosophical terminology in favor of a simple, direct, and consolatory tone which has already succeeded in inspiring many, touching their lives in countless ways, and imparting to them comfort, hope, and joy. In fact, in writing *The Prophet* Gibran has provided us with one of the first manuals of conflict resolution, and his message of gentleness, sensibility, love, and forgiveness has become a universal message of spiritual healing for a world which stands in crying need for balance and reconciliation between heart and mind, between faith and reason, between spiritual values and the dictates and demands of modern technology and progress.

Of all his contemporaries, it is perhaps William Butler Yeats who provides the closest parallel to Gibran. Both were profoundly preoccupied with the question of unity and its achievement in a fragmented world. In Ireland, as in Lebanon, partition of many kinds threatened this vision, as it still does: religious, cultural, social, and geographical. Just as Gibran, who attained equal fluency in his Arabic and English writings, drew on Christian, Sufi, and Bahá'í traditions and imagery, Yeats too attempted to blend the Anglo-Irish literary tradition, the riches of Gaelic myth and poetry, and the purely English tradition, into a new, overarching combination of the best in all three. Philosophically, Yeats and Gibran shared a passion for unity at every level: not the bland, faceless "globalization" of the late twentieth century, a mere reduction of diverse cultures into a featureless, indiscriminate blend, but a true reconciliation of individual traditions and recognition of the validity of each, enabling them to live in dynamic harmony together to the mutual benefit of all. At a personal level, Yeats' experiments with the Japanese Noh theatre, and Gibran's immersion in the English language, brought both of them a new creative vigor and rejuvenation. Both, in their awareness of the violence and destruction threatening a world running headlong into chaos, assumed the role of prophets, warning mankind of the terrible consequences of pursuing a path of disunity and anarchy.

Indeed, Gibran seems to demonstrate in his own person, more than any other poet or novelist of the twentieth century, the process, delicate and costly as it is, of forging unity between widely disparate cultures and traditions, languages, and literatures. At first sight it might appear irrational and implausible that one man should combine and reconcile in his work influences as diverse as those of Nietzsche, Christianity, and Islam; the Romantic poets such as Blake and Wordsworth and their contemporaries; and the artistic environments of Paris and New York. Yet he triumphantly achieved this, and in so doing stands as a symbol of the unifying vision, a vision capable of embracing the world in both its hemispheres; a vision capable of securing and respecting the rights of all in every walk of life; a vision capable of releasing the peoples of the world to lead a new life free from acrimony and conflict.

From the Arabic works of Ibn al-Arabi, Ibn al-Farid, and al-Ghazzali, Gibran derived the concept of the Unity of Being and evolved a deeper vision of the nature of the universe. The key passage, or basic credo, that may serve to symbolize the vision of Gibran is that passage from *I ram: The City of Lofty Pillars*, where he emphasizes the interdependence of the whole of creation :

All things [that] exist in this creation exist within you,  
and all things in you exist in creation;  
there is no border between you and the closest  
things, and there is no distance between you  
and the farthest things, and all things, from  
the lowest to the loftiest, from the smallest  
to the greatest, are within you as equal things.  
In one atom are found all the elements of the  
earth; in one motion of the mind are found the  
motions of all the laws of existence; in one  
drop of water are found the secrets of all the  
endless oceans. . . .

(*Treasury* 140)

Such a vision requires a radical rethinking of the present orientation of humanity that is nothing short of revolutionary.

#### GIBRAN AND THE FORCES OF UNITY

Gibran's entire output represented an attempt to make peace between conflicting interests, factions, and belief systems, and consequently the light of unity seems to illumine every corner of his thought. It is worth considering the source of his inspiration, particularly given how distant the prospect of peace must have seemed to Gibran and his contemporaries.

Indeed, as we enter the twenty-first century, it is sadly obvious that the work of peacemaking is still far from complete. Yet like all great poets, Gibran has striven to show how opposites can be reconciled: ease and hardship, as are joy and sorrow, success and failure, body and soul, life and death. In the poet himself East and West, pagan and Christian, ancient and modern meet in harmony to affirm the same faith in the "Unity of Being" as that expressed in his masterpiece *The Prophet*: here, in striking at the root of the "old corrupt tree of civilization," he penetrates to the heart of the psychological malady resulting in the gross violations of human rights in both the East and the West, and makes accessible a mess age of hope and inspiration, neither glib nor facile, but imbued with a deep sense of the unity of creation and the presence of an all-embracing love. With the growing recognition he has earned from China to New Zealand, from the Philippines to Russia, his acceptance, as "Gibran of America " as well as "Gibran of Lebanon , " as a proponent of global consciousness whose voice sounds with ever-growing resonance, he would surely rejoice at his ever-increasing fame, though not in any spirit of vaingloriousness but rather in delight at the opportunity thus afforded for the bonds of mutual interest, compassion, and understanding between nations to be strengthened so that—to use his symbolism of the trees—one branch may stoop a little lower and another stretch a little higher in order that they may communicate with each other in the spirit of truth and peace.

The "Century of Light" was at hand, and during the ensuing decades the piecemeal consciousness of the Western mind has correspondingly begun to wither. A vision of the universe as a dynamically interconnected web is emerging, in which each section is seen as part of the whole and the whole as in each part. Physicists now perceive that the "quintessential experience, the experience of multiple oneness and 'supreme identity,' might very well be a genuine and legitimate experience of this implicate and universal ground" (Wilber 2).

Of all the formative encounters in Gibran's development, none exercised so profound an influence on him as his meeting with 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1912. For Gibran, the inspiration and template for his unique portrait of Jesus was provided by the indelible impression left upon him by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which moved Gibran to exclaim: "For the first time I saw form noble enough to be a receptacle for the Holy Spirit" (qtd. in Gail 288). But Bahá'í teachings in general influenced his thought and it is easy to detect in his writings echoes of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's and Bahá'u'lláh's sacred words.

Bahá'u'lláh promises humanity that in generations to come the regenerating spirit that has been infused into the world will bring forth a new "generation of men . " In looking forward into the future, Gibran strikingly

replicates this vision of a new citizen of the world, and in one of his Arabic works which was translated into English in the late 1950s, Gibran writes:

But the children of tomorrow are the ones called by life, and they follow it with steady steps and heads high, they are the dawn of new frontiers, no smoke will veil their eyes and no jingle of chains will drown out their voices. They are few in number, but the difference is as between a grain of wheat and a stack of hay. No one knows them but they know each other. They are like the summits, which can see and hear each other—not like caves, which cannot hear or see. They are the seed dropped by the hand of God in the field, breaking through its pod and waving its sapling leaves before the face of the sun. It shall grow into a mighty tree, its root in the heart of the earth and its branches high in the sky. (*Treasured Writings* 778)

He perhaps more than anyone else understood what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá meant by “the Century of Light”: it was a light that illumined the heart with the light of self-transformation, of a new birth and of a new beginning. Gibran wrote in *Spirits Rebellious*: “The true light is that which emanates from within man, and reveals the secrets of the heart to the soul, making it happy and contented with life” (*Treasured Writings* 856).

Since the death of T. S. Eliot in 1965, no poet of universally recognized stature has emerged on the literary scene. The structure of “The Waste Land” was as much a symbol of creativity’s decay as its content. By the latter years of the century the standards had completely changed, and under the guise of “postmodernity” everything was reduced to political, racial, and religious factionalism. The “prevailing creed” was aptly described by Norman Podhoretz in the *Washington Post* of 10 January 1986:

A professor of English at a major university argued against teaching the poetry of John Milton on precisely this ground of irrelevance. Yet far from being discredited in the eyes of his colleagues, he was promptly elected to the presidency of the main academic literary association.

What now certified a book as relevant was not its literary value but its usefulness to a particular political purpose: black nationalism or feminism or the revolution against Western civilization in general. As for literary merit, “good writing,” declared a radical feminist, echoing a remark Lenin had made about music, was “counterrevolutionary.” (A22)

Might we not ask then with Friedrich Hölderlin, “what is the use of poets in a destitute time?” (111).

#### THE ROLE OF POETRY IN THE AGE OF ANXIETY

As we enter the twenty-first century, and the proliferation of new technology ensures that the world around us continues to contract, the paradox which Auden articulates has become even more poignant: increasingly sophisticated means of communication are of little worth if they convey only the banalities of faceless, and often nameless, strangers in Internet chat rooms, using anonymity as a cloak for their desperate vulnerability and sense of unease. We live in a world where the media also undermine language by ceaselessly assaulting us with images; while these images are assumed to be universally comprehensible by transcending language barriers, they actually diminish the possibility of true communication by confining it to a nonverbal exchange.

In May 1987 I was privileged to meet Samuel Beckett, arguably the greatest dramatist of the twentieth century, certainly one who exercised the profoundest influence over its development and orientation. I believe I was the last person to interview him before his passing: he shared with me then his great concern about the waning power of language. As he remarked, “The word is energy; it keeps me going. When it stops, everything stops. Today’s world is all images, no words.”

The pervasive use of pictures in place of words is the more regrettable because we are in danger of losing the informing power of language. The role of language, and especially poetry, can hardly be overrated as a unifying force. The evolution of a nation’s language, and with it its legacy of poetry, prose, and drama, is a vital element in the growth of its identity and the forging of a sense of unity among its speakers; one thinks of the setting down of the *Kalevala* by Elias Lönnröt in nineteenth-century Finland; or the contemporaneous creation of a Czech literary language in the national revival of that country; or the enthusiastic rediscovery of Celtic myth by Yeats and his colleagues in the Irish Literary Renaissance. By the same token, the word can also exercise a unifying force on the world scene, and through translations and cultural contacts the spirit of artists can transcend national boundaries and with them the sense of isolation that Auden deploras.

But what is to be done when language, this potential source of healing and unity, has been perverted? Auden’s contemporary, George Orwell, who years ago identified the phenomenon of “double-think,” warns, in his

essay "Politics and the English Language," of the moral danger which ensues when a language has been hijacked for suspect political purposes. Orwell provides several flagrant examples ("the Fascist octopus has sung its swan song, the jackboot is thrown into the melting pot" [134]) of the ludicrous results of slipshod thinking. Writing in 1946, he states, "When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer. I should expect to find . . . that the German, Russian and Italian languages have all deteriorated in the last ten or fifteen years, as a result of dictatorship" (137).

Orwell was right about the process by which language is debased; he was right about German, Russian, and Italian, as he would have been about other languages, including Arabic. The decline of the Arabic language in the last half-century resulted largely from its being made subservient to particular ends and ideologies.

Orwell's misgivings were indeed shared by writers in the three languages he mentions. In 1979 Günter Grass published *Das Treffen in Telgte* (The Meeting in Telgte), the story of an imaginary meeting of poets in a fragmented and exhausted Germany towards the end of the Thirty Years War (1618–1648), striving to bring a reconciling voice to the language and literature which are all that remains to unite their ravaged and splintered country. Grass dedicated this novel to Hans Werner Richter, founder of Gruppe 47, a free association of writers, publishers, and critics who met annually for twenty years until 1967 to discuss and read new writing. Gruppe 47 members maintained a critical attitude both to Western capitalism and to Eastern socialism and attempted to purify the German language of the jargon of both. Grass drew subtle parallels between the state of Germany and the German language in 1647 and 1947, and between the responsibilities of writers in both eras.

The 1647/1947 parallel confirms that the problems and conflicts of Auden's "age of anxiety" were not confined to his time alone. As his choice of examples (Freud, Marx, and Kierkegaard) suggests, they had exercised the minds of poets and thinkers long before he coined the phrase. Naming and locating such problems, however, poses another question: how should a poet react to them?

#### HISTORICAL SOURCES FOR CONTEMPORARY ALIENATION

Perhaps it should be pointed out that the twentieth century represents an apocalyptic consummation of forces and trends that in previous centuries had only been incubating. We have already glanced back to the seventeenth century, that calamitous time when the whole of Europe was convulsed for thirty years by a war which, in the name of religion, left it devastated and scarred for decades. Although England was not directly involved in that conflict, the same century saw the upheavals of the English Civil War, of Cromwell's Commonwealth, of the trial and execution of Charles I, and of threats to apparently unshakeable values and authority. It was in the early years of that century (1611, to be exact) that John Donne pithily expressed the disquieting spirit of change which he sensed in the air:

And new Philosophy calcs all in doubt,  
The Element of fire is quite put out;  
The Sunne is lost, and th' earth, and no mans wit  
Can well direct him, where to look for it.  
.....  
'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone; . . .  
(205–13)

John Dryden, writing at the end of that same century, was no less pessimistic about the course of its events:

All, all, of a piece throughout;  
Thy Chase had a Beast in View;  
Thy Wars brought nothing about;  
Thy Lovers were all untrue.  
'Tis well an Old Age is out,  
And time to begin a New.  
(485)

Yet subsequent ages, far from instituting the improvements which Dryden desired, found themselves in yet a worse predicament. Conflicting creeds, under the guise of religion, had been the pretext for the wars of the seventeenth century between Catholic and Protestant, Lutheran and Calvinist. The nineteenth century now saw a broadening crisis which threatened the very nature of religious belief, and of faith itself. It was this perplexity and sense of desolation which Matthew Arnold, writing in 1851, evoked in his poem "Dover Beach":



Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

(In Allott and Super 136)

In that final image Arnold might have been describing the fog-bound battle of Lützen where Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden lost his life in 1632, or one of those sanguinary engagements in the Crimea where, just three years after the publication of this poem, so many British soldiers were to lose their lives in another war fought ostensibly about a religious question. Little had changed, except that the weapons had become more sophisticated and the religious pretext an empty pretext, with a dwindling stock of genuine faith to validate it.

Yet the Crimean War (1854–1856), for all the fraudulent use of concern about the guardianship of the Holy Places of Jerusalem which was the alleged reason for the conflict, already betrayed a symptom of another disease which was to rage in the following century. Russia's ambitions to expand into the territory of the declining Ottoman Empire, viewed with such alarm by western European powers, brought her into increasing conflict with members of other faiths, not only in areas ruled by the Ottoman Turks but in places farther east whose names have a sadly topical ring about them nowadays: Azerbaijan, Chechnya, and Uzbekistan. If, in the world of Western Christendom, the irrational now threatens to destroy faith, then, in the Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim worlds, true faith has been ousted by the extremism of religious nationalism—religion employed for political or nationalistic goals. Where no real enemies exist, fanatics will invent them, proclaiming the danger of Western “cultural invasion.” We must remember, however, that religious nationalism is not a new phenomenon. In his 1938 book, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, Shoghi Effendi cites the following passage from an official report prepared by a Christian missionary organization:

Such a conscious, avowed, organized attack against religion in general and Christianity in particular is something new in history. Equally deliberate in some lands in its determined hostility to Christianity is another form of social and political faith—nationalism. But the nationalistic attack on Christianity, unlike Communism, is often bound up with some form of national religion—with Islam in Persia and Egypt, with Buddhism in Ceylon, while the struggle for communal rights in India is allied with a revival both of Hinduism and Islam. (182)

It is in such a climate of fragmentation and distrust that poets must carry out their task of revealing and affirming truths which transcend the contrived philosophies of both Western intellectuals and Eastern religious nationalists. Secular ideologues in the former Communist countries, for example, attempted to stem the search for spiritual renewal. At the forefront of this search were poets, many of whom openly professed religious beliefs but were regarded as dangerous subversives to be silenced at all costs because they dared to question the established order. To illustrate how one such poet, Antonín Bartuševk, saw the mission of poets in troubled times, I should like to cite his poem “The Return of the Poets”:

Like silkworms  
we meet our poets  
for years cocooned  
in misfortune.  
For years shone the sun of darkness  
blood fell instead of rain,  
the mire of mud came  
up to our mouths.  
Then  
in the green mulberries of hope  
the quick eye could have discerned  
ever so slight a movement in the branches.

In the leafy mulberry groves  
in the cocoons of love  
they spun their words into silken threads  
of silent speech.  
So we should not be naked  
when once more we emerge  
into the light  
of reality.

(103)

In these words Bartušvek, a Czech poet who was silent during and after the Stalinist era, expresses the conviction that poets are, as Wentworth Dillon proclaimed in 1684, “the guardians of the state” (1) and of the language of truth, preserving it incorrupt until such time as it can be freely spoken. A Czech critic suggested that Bartušvek’s long silence came about because “the climate of the fifties or the early sixties . . . operated too much with given facts and certainties, whereas his poetic type saw meaning only in searching, in . . . exposure to uncertainties and confusion” (Behnart, qtd. in Martin 14). He is thus a poet of the “age of anxiety,” his first works having been published in the 1940s when Auden was writing the poem of that name.

The role of the artist as the conscience of the nation was dramatically demonstrated during the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. In the emerging democracies, political leadership was often provided by artists who had remained untainted during the long, brutal reign of Communism. In 1989, the playwright Václav Havel, for example, became the first post-Communist president of Czechoslovakia; similarly, in 1990, the professor of musicology and violinist Vytautas Landsbergis became the democratically elected leader of Lithuania, a country then on the threshold of achieving independence from the Soviet Union.

#### THE POET AS WITNESS

If a poet is to accomplish his mission of maintaining the integrity of language and of expressing truths that may serve as the basis of a culture of peace and unity, he cannot do so by means of half-truths, compromises, or subservience, no matter what the threats to his liberty or even his life. The twentieth century has not been lacking in such threats, and no poet has described them more forcefully than Yeats in “The Second Coming”:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

(*Collected Works* 189)

It is against this background that poets must form within themselves a clear conception of their beliefs and convictions, and in their work give voice to them, in order to bring a new moral order and civilization into being and protect its values throughout the time of acute turbulence which heralds the coming of a new age. Inevitably, sacrifices are demanded; one thinks of poets such as Hölderlin, whose sanity snapped at the age of thirty-six under the strain of carrying forward the highest ideals of ancient Greek civilization through the turmoil of Napoleon’s Europe; of Lorca, murdered during the Spanish Civil War; of Osip Mandelstam and Vladimir Mayakovsky, who refused to promote the Soviet doctrine of historical necessity, and paid for their convictions with imprisonment and death; of Sergei Esenin and Marina Tsvetaeva, who ended their lives after “the high Roman fashion” rather than submit to the humiliation of compromise. Yet these sacrifices were not without effect; the word *martyr*, after all, is nothing other than the Greek for “witness”; likewise the Arabic word *shahid* conveys exactly the same dual sense, clearly indicating that the highest form of “bearing witness” to a truth is to lay down one’s life for it. Such a witness will indeed resound down the centuries. It is a witness devoid of any taint of insincerity or hypocrisy. Here again, Antonín Bartušvek speaks for their company:

It’s no use, said a little girl without even knowing

what it was all about, and yet she was almost right,  
until she met the tree which, petal by petal,  
was losing its blossom  
to prepare for the obligatory delivery of fruit.  
Perhaps one day we shall not regret  
having bloomed a little too briefly  
in order to deliver our fruit,  
in order to bear witness. . . .

(“Witness” 69)

The poet must also perform his or her duty of bearing witness, whatever form this may take, with courage and spirit, not diffidence and reluctance. Poets must, if possible, not only create characters and vehicles capable of expressing their values, but themselves live out those values with dignity and grace:

Yet they, should the last scene be there,  
The great stage curtain about to drop,  
If worthy their prominent part in the play,  
Do not break up their lines to weep.  
They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;  
Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.

(Yeats, *Selected Poems* 183)

Such was the response to the threat of “aeroplane and Zeppelin” that Yeats urged in “Lapis Lazuli,” and again in *The King’s Threshold*, a play that vigorously defends the poet’s role:

And I would have all know that when all falls  
In ruin, poetry calls out in joy,  
Being the scattering hand, the bursting pod,  
The victim’s joy among the holy flame,  
God’s laughter at the shattering of the world.

(*Plays* 77)

Resistance to the forces of brutishness and ugliness comes in many forms. Thus Yeats insisted that the palette, the fiddle-bow, and the poet’s pen offered the means, through the imagination, of bridging the gap between two worlds, the worlds of insensate matter and of the quickened spirit. Auden’s contemporary, Stephen Spender, in “An Elementary School Classroom,” suggests how, for stunted and repressed slum children in the urban wilderness, the pictures on their classroom walls of scenes from Shakespeare offered a means of escape, of transcending the narrowness and squalor of their present reality: “O that beauty has words and works which break / Through coloured walls and towers” (258–59). The poet’s supreme task is to bring forth these words and works to lift and liberate the human spirit, to lend it wings with which to escape the brutishness of the present, and soar into liberating worlds of wonder and delight, of exquisite sensibility and spiritual refinement.

In his quest to uplift the human spirit, the poet cannot, however, afford to isolate himself from humanity and its concerns, alien and abhorrent as they may sometimes appear. Here Hölderlin writes in “Der Einzige” (The Unique One): “Die Dichter müssen auch / Die geistigen weltlich sein” (Poets, even the spiritual, must also be of this world) (188)—an assertion which encapsulates the sacred responsibility as a bridge between two worlds. In it he answers the question which he asks in “Brot und Wein,” his elegy on an age of spiritual barrenness contrasted with the intellectual and cultural richness of the Hellenic world: “[W]ozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?” ([W]hat is the use of poets in a destitute time?) (111) and finds the confidence to assert, in “Andenken” (Remembrance): “Was bleibet aber, stiften die Dichter” (But what endures, the poets provide) (211). Hölderlin’s words echo those of the ninth-century Arab poet Abu Tammam: “But for the noble traits, by poets hailed / The path of glory would to man be veiled.” It is no accident that Hölderlin, neglected and dismissed as a madman in his own time, finally found the acclaim he deserved in the twentieth century, the century in which the collapse of the old order became consistently apparent, and in which he and other previously unrecognized and preternatural talents, like that of William Blake, became more fully recognized.

## THE ROLE OF THE POET IN THE CENTURY OF LIGHT

In his adoption of ancient Greek meters, and his attempts to reconcile them with the very different rhythms of the German language, Hölderlin illustrates the paradox of the poet's situation: limited only by the confines of his own imagination, he nevertheless needs the discipline of poetic structure to convey his vision effectively. Yeats, in his speech at the opening of the Tailteann Games in 1924, expressed something of the same perception, though in a wider application: "The world can never be the same. The stream has turned backwards, and generations to come will have for their task, not the widening of liberty, but recovery from its errors—the building up of authority, the restoration of discipline, the discovery of a life sufficiently heroic to live without the opium dream" (qtd. in Freyer 95).

It is only when poets, and those whom they inspire, attain the courage to live such a life without comforting illusion, to perceive reality as it is, to become, in Hölderlin's words, both *weltlich* and *geistlich*, that reconciliation can follow, not only between the conflicting elements of the human personality (one thinks again of Auden's drama), but between the confused currents of mankind's life on earth. But, just as "politics is too important to be left to politicians," the life of the imagination is too important to be left as the exclusive province of artists, especially since it is so-called artists nowadays who are at the forefront of the degradation and despiritualization of the surrounding cultural climate. As Kathleen Raine has demonstrated in "Poetry and Peace," unlike the finite resources of the material world, those of the realm of the imagination are boundless; hence there is no need to quarrel over them. Nor is the imagination limited by the past: "every time and place must be incorporated into that world" as new forms emerge and the power of the imaginative faculty enables those who live by it to achieve a peace between nations unattainable by political maneuvers.

Kathleen Raine movingly evokes the unity experienced by an audience listening to a Schubert symphony, or watching a play by Shakespeare, whereby their unique and individual perceptions merge into a greater whole capable potentially of including the whole world. In her vision of a unity based on rejection of materialism and a sharing of the treasures of the imagination, she comes close to another vision of world peace and unity, that of Bahá'u'lláh, which "transcending material frontiers, reached out to humanity as a whole, without petty differences of nationality, race, limits or beliefs."<sup>2</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh identified mankind's central spiritual imperative as that of laying the foundations of a global society capable of reflecting, embodying and promoting the oneness of the human spirit. "So powerful is the light of unity," He insists, "that it can illuminate the whole earth" (*Epistle* 14).

His foreshadowings of change were remarkably fulfilled during the course of the twentieth century, as assumptions about the environment, women's rights, and race relations all changed radically, along with perceptions of the universe and of humanity's place within it, and as the establishment of bodies such as the United Nations and the World Bank marked undoubted progress, however tentative, in the direction of world unity. "A new life," He affirmed, "is, in this age, stirring within all the peoples of the earth; and yet none hath discovered its cause or perceived its motive" (*Gleanings* 196).

As the darkness of error and suffering recedes, a new day is to dawn. "Peerless is this Day, for it is as the eye to past ages and centuries, and as a light unto the darkness of the times" (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 79). Yet His is no naive vision, but the outcome of a worldview which causes Bahá'u'lláh to appeal to His hearers, "Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements" (*Gleanings* 213). Only thus, with the grasping of the potential of the new era in full awareness of the needs to be met and dangers to be avoided, can progress towards justice and unity be made.

What, then, is the role of the poet in this Century of Light? "Soon, Bahá'u'lláh promises, "will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead" (*Gleanings* 7). How can poets help this process forward? Can poetry, indeed, influence the course of world affairs?

Seamus Heaney has demonstrated that it can, pointing to the immense power of poetry to "make something positive happen" (10), from Sylvia Plath's influence on the course of the women's rights movement and Hugh MacDiarmid's on the evolution of Scottish national consciousness, to the challenge to totalitarianism represented by Osip Mandelstam or the Eastern European poets who, by refusing to truckle to Communism, contributed to its downfall in 1989. This positive force effectively counters Theodor Adorno's claim that to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric. To bear witness through poetry to the victims of barbarism, and thus enable the human spirit to survive and soar, is the surest form of opposition to inhumanity.

## CONCLUSION

I should like to close, as I began, with Auden. Yeats, whom he so greatly admired, had already seen the "blood-dimmed tide" loosed in one world war, but was spared the experience of a second by his death in the fateful year of

1939. Auden's response to his passing was to write an elegy whose final section, as Heaney says, throws down the gauntlet to the twentieth century. In a conscious echo of Yeats' appeal to his fellow Irish poets in "Under Ben Bulbin," Auden describes the state of contemporary Europe, and the poet's role in clearing its chaos and healing its rifts and bringing about the end to the Century of Light:

In the nightmare of the dark  
All the dogs of Europe bark,  
And the living nations wait,  
Each sequestered in its hate;  
Intellectual disgrace  
Stares from every human face,  
And the seas of pity lie  
Locked and frozen in each eye.  
Follow, poet, follow right,  
To the bottom of the night,  
With your unconstraining voice  
Still persuade us to rejoice;  
With the farming of a verse  
Make a vineyard of the curse,  
Sing of human unsuccess  
In a rapture of distress;  
In the deserts of the heart  
Let the healing fountain start,  
In the prison of his days  
Teach the free man how to praise.

("In Memory" 239)

The poet, then, can never dissemble, or use his art to deceive his hearers with pleasing artifice; he cannot pretend that barbarism did not happen, or play down its consequences. Yet in a shared acknowledgment, not only of these horrors but of their ultimate impotence to destroy the human spirit and the power of imagination, poets may find the basis for their journey towards peace and unity for the world, and the inspiration to lead those who wish to join them.

Turning eastwards again, I would like to recall the words of Yehuda Amichai, an Israeli poet who saw active service in two wars, witnessed the destruction of six million of his fellow Jews, and could still write "An Appendix to the Vision of Peace":

Don't stop after beating the swords  
into ploughshares, don't stop! Go on beating  
and make musical instruments out of them.

Whoever wants to make war again  
will have to turn them into ploughshares first.  
(84)

The twentieth century was a century of light and great promise but it was also a century of great suffering and pain. At the heart of it all was the fact that humanity was experiencing the most severe spiritual crisis in its history, the crisis of its incipient, emergent globalization, the unprecedented tumult of its collective coming of age. "Let your vision be world embracing," is Bahá'u'lláh's dictum, and events have so unfolded as to reveal this as the paramount imperative of the age, artistic no less than poetical. Robert Bridges, who belongs both to the Victorian age and to the early decades of the twentieth century, grasped perhaps more deeply than any one else the reality of this crisis, and realized its implications. Fired by his vision, he compiled in 1915, during the horrors of the First World War, an anthology of philosophic writing entitled *The Spirit of Man*. In the preface to the book, Bridges wrote: "Spirituality is the basis and foundation of human life . . . rather than the apex or the final attainment of it. It must underlie everything . . . man is a spiritual being, and the proper work of his mind is to interpret the world according to his higher nature, and to conquer the material aspects of the world so as to bring them into subjection to the spirit" (i-ii).

## NOTES

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1. For circumstances of composition, reviews, etc., see Carpenter.

2. Remarks by Deputy Luis Gushiken and Deputy Rita Camata. "Sessão Solene da Câmara Federalem Homenagemao Centário da Ascensão de Bahá'u'lláh," Brasília, 28 May 1992.

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