

POETRY AND THE ARTS IN REBUILDING SOCIETY

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The American Bahá'í Community has been wrestling with the question of poetry and the other arts for a great many years. The problem is that poetry is not generally seen as part of religion in America. And worse, poetry is seldom considered as an active or “real” part of modern society. Yet the Bahá'í community faces the statement written on behalf of the Guardian in 1932: “Shoghi Effendi wishes...to encourage those who are talented to give expression to the wonderful spirit that animates them. We need more poets and writers for the Cause...”¹ More specifically: “In Persia, the Cause gave birth to many poets of national standing. Let us hope that the West will follow suit and produce results.”²

The status of poetry is exalted in the Bahá'í Revelation. Even before the ministry of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb remarked to a companion as they passed a fellow traveler reciting some lines from Hafez, one of Persia's greatest poets: “It is the immediate influence of the Holy Spirit that causes words such as these to stream from the tongue of poets, the significance of which they themselves are oftentimes unable to apprehend.”³ He also reaffirmed a well-known tradition of Islam: “Treasures lie hidden beneath the throne of God; the key to those treasures is the tongue of poets.”⁴ Poetry has definitely been considered, since the very beginning of the Bahá'í Era, a spiritual enterprise.

Where does that place poets in the second century of Bahá'í history? Nearly fifty years ago, single voices in the American Bahá'í Community were trying to explain the naturalness of poetry to their fellow believers. Mark Tobey, internationally acclaimed for his paintings, but as yet unknown for his poetry, exclaimed: “The potentialities of art appreciation and creation are present in some degree in almost every child, and when the right approach is made to liberate the adult...we still

find that element alive.”⁵ It is obvious to him that the capacity for creativity is inherent in one’s humanity.

Even earlier, in 1935, Henry P. Eames wrote: “In my study and research of sources of art-impulses, aims and manifestations, I have found...the emotional depths they sound and the elemental problems and purposes they present are universal, common to the life of humanity.”⁶ Worldwide, human beings are a creative species. No matter where on the planet we are born and live, or under what conditions, we are in some way creative. Creativity is a basic component of our human nature, fundamental to our essence.

Yet, where are the poets and other creative artists in the Bahá’í community? Most Bahá’ís cannot name any Bahá’í poets. Roger White and Robert Hayden, perhaps. How many know that Hand of the Cause of God, Adelbert Mülschlegel, wrote poetry? Regretfully, it remains in German untranslated. Who remembers that his fellow Hand, George Townshend, also wrote poetry (as well as prayers, essays, and books)? Who else is there in the Bahá’í community with similar unknown treasures?

There exists a heritage of poetry in the American Bahá’í community, but it is hard to find. Regretfully, the same can be said of our contemporary poetry. To find it one must search long and hard. Very few titles are currently carried by the Distribution Service; a few more are available elsewhere. One can’t help feeling: there must be more.

Some poetry is scattered in the *Bahá’í World* volumes, issues of *World Order*, and the publications of the Association for Bahá’í Studies. But individual poems are hard to locate, and it is impossible to find specific poems by topic or author. Even less accessible is the poetry of *Star of the West* and the early *World Order* (1935-1949). We have a corpus of poetry in the Bahá’í community, but it is uncollected and largely unusable. How can current poets know where they are going if they do not know where they have been? No one can safely travel any road in isolation.

If poets hold the key to the “treasures beneath the throne of God,” why are they not a visible part of the life of the Bahá’í community? Why are poets not a regular and expected part of the programs of conventions, conferences and other gatherings? Poetry can even be appropriate at Feasts and Holy Days. A letter on behalf of the Guardian specifically stated: “With regard to your question concerning the use of music in the Nineteen Day Feasts, he wishes you to assure all the friends that not only he approves of such a practice, but thinks it even advisable that the believers

should make use in their meetings of hymns composed by the Bahá'ís themselves, and also of such hymns, poems and chants as are based on the Holy Words.”⁷.

It is *advisable* to use *hymns, poems and chants* that are composed by Bahá'ís themselves. In every community the Bahá'ís can, and should, use in their programs the work they create themselves. And if such works have not yet been created, it is not too late to begin.

The Guardian appears to have defined a new and specific genre of poetry: that which is “based on the Holy Words.” In time, undoubtedly, this will grow into a sizable body of devotional literature. This distinction should separate “regular” (secular?) Bahá'í poetry from the devotional kind. But even such a distinction should not hinder any creative efforts; rather, knowledge that there will be a specific body of devotional *hymns, poems, and chants*, should spur us on to develop such a literature.

In the Lawḥ-i Maqṣúd, Bahá'u'lláh comments on some poetry written by Maqṣúd which He was pleased to have read. Could these comments of the Blessed Beauty not set a standard for poetry of any kind written by Bahá'ís? Bahá'u'lláh wrote: “*Every word of thy poetry is a mirror in which the evidences of the devotion and love thou cherishest for God and His chosen ones are reflected.*” He concluded by noting that poetry reflects the human relationship with God: “*Its perusal hath truly proved highly impressive, for it was indicative of both the light of reunion and the fire of separation.*”⁸ Might not this be a goal for which all poets and other artists strive?

But where is the poetry now? At some larger community events we have begun to witness a growing presence of some of the arts: exhibits of paintings, a dramatic musical or two, even ballet, and (sometimes) singing. But where is the poetry? And, where is the sculpture, the weaving, and the other original expressions of our human creativity within the Bahá'í community?

Even in the outline of the major goals of the Six Year Plan, the Universal House of Justice, under the goal, “Carrying the Message of Baha to the generality of mankind,” has stated that one of the devices whose use is to be encouraged in the teaching and deepening work and in Bahá'í meetings is “drama and singing,”⁹. “And poetry...” I continued the thought, but in some ways that would be redundant. For what are songs, but poetry set to music? And, what is drama but poetry acted out? In each case the House of Justice is encouraging, almost insisting, that the entire Bahá'í world community utilize the regenerative power of poetry in our efforts to revitalize humanity.

Later in the outline, under the goal “Greater involvement of the Faith in the life of human society,” we find the statement: “Encourage Bahá’í youth to move towards the front ranks of those professions, trades, arts and crafts necessary to human progress.”¹⁰ It is our lives, our professions, our daily actions which will bring about the transformation of this planet.

Our active involvement in the arts and other occupations is essential, not only to the development of this world, but to our own progress in the next. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá very clearly stated this in Paris in 1911: “Our actions will help in the world, will spread civilization, will help the progress of science, and cause arts to develop.” “Without action,” He continued, “nothing in the material world can be accomplished, neither can words unaided advance a man in the spiritual kingdom. It is not through lip service only that the elect of God have attained to holiness, but by patient lives of active service they have brought light into the world.”¹¹

The connection between physical action and spiritual development is clear. A quarter of a century after the Master’s statement in Paris, an American Bahá’í author examined contemporary society in this light. Bertha Hyde Kirkpatrick explained the correlation: “This field (art) is perhaps the most sensitive index we have of the life of the spirit in a community or nation. It quickly responds to new spiritual energies by giving new creations. In its every phase it is closely connected with the life of a people.”¹² Art is the barometer of the spiritual condition of a society. Each society, conversely, supports the arts that most clearly reflect or sustain its spiritual condition. And yet the creativity of the artist infuses new elements into the society. This infusion of creativity perpetuates the further development of the whole. For this reason, the involvement of Bahá’ís in the arts is crucial to the rebuilding and rebirth of human society all over the planet.

Perhaps we need a common definition of poetry and poets. Many otherwise reasonable people (even some Bahá’ís) are frightened by their image of “The Poet” and their idea of poetry as inapplicable to daily life. But wait! Bahá’u’lláh was a poet. “He is the archetypal Poet.”¹³ His Writings are poetry of the most lofty kind. Mark Tobey described it thus:

- What expansion! What rivers of inspiration pour from the greatness of Bahá’u’lláh’s Being as He attempts to acquaint us with this vision of Oneness, this sublimity of the One Great Power!
- It is, as though from every leaf and doorway, from every cloud and flower, from the mystery of sun and shadow, rain and heat – multiple mystic voices poured into His Heart the Glories of God. It is as though His eye beheld and knew the mystery hidden by the ardor of Its own manifestation!

- How he laments! How the sacred pen weeps that our capacity is not able to receive more! What a grief must be His, as He feels all things turned back upon Himself as though the confines of His very being would break when there is no ear to hearken, no heart to receive these poems of the spirit!”¹⁴.

Likewise, God is a Poet: the True Original Poet/Creator of Beauty and of The Word. “Art is the projection of the divine will into our human world,” wrote H. Rozenhofer in 1937. “A manifestation of divine happenings, the creator being the very first artist who formed through the medium of the ‘logos’ his master-piece, the world.”¹⁵.

Doris McKay earlier explained, “To clothe with the familiar the new-old Truth the prophets took symbols. They too spelled a word – they called it the Word of God. So, we may say that the prophets were the first symbolic poets...” She commented further on the use of symbols “through the language of the symbol the prophets and poets of all ages have sought to make Truth articulate...”¹⁶.

Robert Hayden (in an interview videotaped at the House of Worship) concurred saying, “Poetry is very close to religion.” And he added, “I might say tangentially, that when we speak of the Prophet, and Bahá’u’lláh in particular, as being a poet, in a sense this is very true, because the Prophet uses symbols, speaks in parables, uses metaphors, and all the devices we associate with poetry.”¹⁷.

And so it would not be out of place to entertain the idea of the Word of God as poetry, and conversely that poetry can be like the Word of God, since “The speech of poets and prophets is a continuous flash of metaphor, often self-explanatory.”¹⁸ This was recently affirmed by Geoffrey Nash in his essay. “Can there be a Bahá’í Poetry?”:

- By keeping poetry alive he (the poet) bears witness to the divine impulse within and may enrich society by increasing perceptions. For he knows poetry is akin to the revealed Word itself (albeit of infinitely lower rank); that the poet also in his limited way testifies that in the beginning was the Word, that man’s speech is also a mark of his divine descent, and poetry the utterance of his deepest nature.”¹⁹.

Although that which a human may compose can never rank with the Scriptures revealed by a Messenger of God, human poetry nevertheless can be uplifting and inspiring. This understanding could have been incorporated into the life of the Bahá’í community years ago. Over half a century

ago the Guardian asserted to Mark Tobey while on pilgrimage, “Art must inspire. Personal satisfaction [of the artist] is not enough.”²⁰ This was echoed in “The Divine Origin of the Arts,” written less than ten years later: “How manifold is the meaning of creative art. Its ultimate end is to lead to the Lord and to serve Him.”²¹ The creative impulse has a purpose and should be used for that purpose. To deny that purpose is to deny the gifts of God.

Commenting on the current disintegration of society, the House of Justice has 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 tranquility for troubled souls, have strayed from the straight path and are now the mirrors of the soiled hearts of this confused, unprincipled and disordered age.”²² The arts can be perverted, like anything else at our disposal, and we have to guard against that in our efforts. We have been created for glory, not humiliation: “*Noble I have made thee, wherewith dost thou abase thyself?*”²³

Music, art and literature are “to represent and inspire the noblest sentiments and highest aspirations.” How much more clearly can we state the role of the arts in a divinely guided society? Our creative expressions will be a cause for the healing of humanity when the arts are eventually used as “a source of comfort and tranquility for troubled souls.” If the Bahá’í community is to help heal mankind, we must begin to encourage expression of the talent latent within every individual Bahá’í and make it a part of our community life. And this, in turn, will teach society.

With this in mind it is logical to consider that the poetic response is one sign – perhaps, because of its relationship with the Word of God, the highest – of our likeness with our Creator, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself said,

- Ye must therefore put forth a mighty effort, striving by night and day and resting not for a moment, to acquire an abundant share of all sciences and arts, that Divine Image, which shineth out from the Sun of Truth may illuminate the mirror of the hearts of men.”²⁴

We are able to create because God first created, and our creations are likewise, a sign of our likeness to God: “...I created thee, have engraved upon thee Mine image...”²⁵ That image gives us our humanity. This link, our creativity (that element of divinity within us) is one of the distinguishing characteristics of humanity. No other creatures can similarly create. The arts are the essence of our humanness expressed in physical forms. Without art we would not be human – that is

to say, spiritual – beings. Our ability to create is the greatest indication of our essentially spiritual nature.

Creativity springs from the human being irrepressibly and unbidden. We must be taught other behaviors, attitudes, and virtues: kindness, love, selflessness, prayer, respect, fear, hatred, etc. These must be taught or brought from the potentiality to the actual, but creativity is like breathing: we just do it. The results may not always be appreciated. Parents, no matter how hard they try, cannot prevent their babies from trying to alter their environment, to create a new arrangement of their surroundings. It is as inherent as the need to explore, which we share with animals. Only severe restrictions limit the expression of our creativity – as extreme physical handicap or profound mental oppression or abuse. Even then, the limits sometimes have been overcome.

To create is to allow the divine impulses to flow through our being. The Master explained this in a letter to George Townshend, “These heavenly susceptibilities of thine form a magnet which attracts the confirmations of the Kingdom of God; so the doors of realities and meanings will be open unto thee...”²⁶ To deny this is to deny our true selves, that channel to our Creator. In essence, it is to deny God. Any society which denies the human capacity for creativity is gravely ill. This link with the creative power and the uplifting nature of the arts can serve as an indicator of the role poetry can play in the rebuilding of society.

Robert Bly, one of America’s better-known contemporary poets, emphatically asserts, “My feeling is that poetry is also a healing process, and that when a person tries to write poetry with depth or beauty, he will find himself guided along paths which will heal him, and this is more important, actually, than any of the poetry he writes.”²⁷ For this reason alone, poetry writing should be part of our school curriculum.

This healing process applies not only to individuals, as Henry Eames pointed out to the Bahá’í community decades ago. “The perception and realization of beauty in space or beauty in time are not monopolized by any one people or period,” he observed in an article in *World Order* magazine. “Nor are the forms and content of the arts – material or immaterial – the exclusive possession of any race or nation. The message of beauty is the message of truth, and as such is for the healing of nations as well as individuals.”²⁸ Too few of us have paid attention.

This healing is necessary within the Bahá’í community as well as outside it. In fact, we need it *first* in order to offer a healthy and spiritual alternative to the world. Now that we have emerged

from the protective cloak of obscurity, we need healing and spiritual renewal in our communities more than ever.

Poets are in a unique position to participate in the rebuilding of society, not only as creators of poetry, but as visionaries for society. A scholar of poetry outside the Bahá'í community, M.L. Rosenthal, voiced a statement similar to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's about the faculty of human receptivity when he wrote: "Poets are the verbal antenna of a people. The awareness they distill and convert into the dynamics of language is somehow present in the populace at large." He concluded with the warning: "We neglect it at our peril."²⁹

The role of poetry can be stated in even more timely fashion as we begin to move into the realm of social and economic development. "The poet will lead mankind into the future," Glyn Eyford declared a number of years ago, "by giving expression to hopes and visions that are often poorly articulated and little understood by most men. Poets serve as interpreters and prophets by giving definite shape to feelings, to thoughts only dimly perceived by others."³⁰

This was also Bahíyyih Nakhjavání's conclusion in her paper, "Artist, Seeker and Seer." She offers that the poet's "aim should be to speak with the tongue that whispers in the bones and arteries of his audience, in such a way that the isolated and speechless elements in the community find their voices in his harmony."³¹ In both cases their affirmation of the role of poets was clear: "They provide the images by which man moves into the future."³²

In this position of articulating the dreams of humanity, the poet has a moral role or responsibility. Geoffrey Nash explained it this way: "The poet is individual and subjective, but he is mankind's conscience. Mystically initiated to the divine order of things, he registers man's departure from his nobler nature and his higher ideals."³³ Of course, not every poet fulfills this ideal to the greatest degree possible, but those whose work has endured certainly have been in touch with the spiritual balance necessary for the promotion of the of the race.

This could be one reason why poets have been so overwhelmingly shut out from the life of the current mass culture, a situation that reflects the sickness of the age. "Society as a whole has shut the door to the artist and creative person," reflected Mark Tobey. "Because they [people in general] have shut the door to their own feelings."³⁴ This is true even in the Bahá'í community. After all, we have emerged from, yet we still live and work in, that larger society. How could we

have known differently? But now, as rebuilders of society, we have the responsibility to open that door, unite the inner and outer hearts of humanity, and heal the nations.

We have a long way to go. “In practically every aspect of society,” wrote Dennis Schimeld a few years past, as he addressed the Bahá’í community, “one sees the arts being ignored or misused. Individuals and institutions of society pay little attention to the perceptions expressed by the artist. Perhaps even the Bahá’ís themselves, struggling to organize a way of life in numerous small groups throughout the world, are still but dimly aware of the significance of the arts and their use in the education and awakening of society.”³⁵

Why else would Robert Hayden have been so ignored by the Bahá’í community in general. Why else would he have had to endure such thoughtless comments as, “[I] used to write poetry [too] but gave it up to do ‘Bahá’í work.’”³⁶

Surely it is Bahá’ís, though, who can most directly express the orientation necessary for arriving at a peaceful society. We are the only ones who have accepted the guidance of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation, whose goal is a harmonious world where all persons can develop their full potential as spiritual beings in a physical realm.

“Poetry appeals to the spiritual nature of man,” wrote Glyn Eyford. It “goes to the very roots of his being, and therefore can exert a profound effect upon his perception of reality. It results in nothing less than the moral improvement of the race.”³⁷ And it is this moral improvement of the human race, as well as its development in all other aspects, that we are trying to stimulate, assist, and accomplish.

The Bahá’í community is beginning to awaken to the need for a fuller expression of the arts in its community life. We have begun to explore ways in which we can assist in the rebuilding of society. We have been told, in the Sacred Texts, the changes that must come about for all humanity to realize their spiritual potential. In 1972, the question was raised: “Is it not possible, then, that the arts can serve at this time a twofold purpose: to help bring about a change in mankind and to help tell mankind that a change is happening?”³⁸

Not that art is to be perverted into propaganda. But art, in its highest form, will call humanity to God. As Robert Hayden himself stated, “Poetry, all art, it seems to me, is ultimately religious... It grows out of, reflects, illuminates our inmost selves.”³⁹ And so it should, for the arts proceed from God.

Bahá'u'lláh unequivocally exclaimed:

- Every word that preceedeth out of the mouth of God is endowed with such potency as can instill new life into every human frame, if ye be of them that comprehend this truth. All the wondrous works ye behold in this world have been manifested through the operation of His supreme and most exalted Will. His wondrous and inflexible Purpose. Through the mere revelation of the word "Fashioner," issuing forth from His lips and proclaiming His attributes to mankind, such power is released as can generate, through successive ages, all the manifold arts which the hands of man can produce."⁴⁰.

This power flows through God's intermediaries to receptive human souls. *"The light which these souls [the Prophets and Messengers of God] radiate is responsible for the progress of the world and the advancement of its peoples."* The Blessed Beauty continued, *"They are like unto leaven which leaveneth the world of being, and constitute the animating force through which all the arts and wonders of the world are made manifest."*⁴¹. These exalted souls are the channels of God's grace to humanity.

But to receive these creative impulses one must be receptive to their influence. Our minds cannot be passive and expect wondrous results. *"The source of crafts, sciences and arts is the power of reflection,"* asserted Bahá'u'lláh. *"Make ye every effort that out of this ideal mine there may gleam forth such pearls of wisdom and utterance as will promote the well-being and harmony of all the kindreds of the earth."*⁴².

Here we find the role of the poet, writer, and speaker linked directly by the Manifestation of God for this age to the rebuilding of human society: *"...such pearls of wisdom and utterance as will promote the well-being and harmony of all the kindreds of the earth."* How much more clearly can we be told? Is there any room for doubt or question, that those who create with words will be in the forefront of the efforts to turn humanity towards our Creator?

How is it that artists, and writers in particular, can accomplish this when, possibly, engineers and technicians cannot? The artist is most clearly a channel for the Spirit. He brings concepts and ideals into focus from the unseen realm through the power of reflection. He deals with emotions and their impressions, the essentially spiritual nature of humanity. He can transmit the lofty ideals in various ways into a variety of physical representations which can, in turn, affect the ideals, emotions, and expressions of the one receiving, viewing, or partaking of the art. "The artist,"

Dennid Schimeld commented, “affect[s] changes in the consciousness of society.”⁴³ These expressions of creativity change the way people perceive their world. And thus, progress results.

The artist probes into the human spirit, and emotions, with the divine spark. When the human condition is not in tune, the experience can be painful, but conducive to healing. The artist highlights the discrepancies between behavior and our morals. “Hence the artist, like the surgeon at times probes deeply and cleansingly into the disease,” Schimeld continued, “attempting to ‘tone up’ the mind of man so he will be capable of the insight necessary to effect changes of attitude in society.” The question remains: “But is the artist heeded?”⁴⁴

It is the change of perception that the artist can best facilitate. “By its very nature, art, Mr. Hayden taught, is revolutionary, because it seeks to change the consciousness, perceptions, and very beings of those who open themselves to it,” remembered Julius Lister.⁴⁵

Anaïs Nin, one of the more perceptive observers of our society, reached to the heart of the transforming role of the poet when she wrote in her diary in 1955, “a poet transfigures all he touches and he discards the appearance to penetrate beyond, to the essence.”⁴⁶ It is the poet who sees past what appears to be, to what is, and beyond that to what is possible. The poet is the seer for human society. We need Bahá’ís who are poets.

Poetry and the other arts are much more subjective areas than other disciplines. The poet and other creators have to be in tune with the Spirit, otherwise there is no creation. “The best of poets have always dealt with intangibles, with spiritual values,” agreed Geoffrey Nash. “The modern age is grossly materialistic and utilitarian, and above all atheistic; poets, if the evidence of the last century’s poetry is to be trusted, cannot do without God.”⁴⁸ It is the poet’s link with our Creator which makes all the difference.

So, we have a channel in the arts, and poetry in particular, for the healing and rebuilding of society. For the poets and other artists to be effective and productive, they need to know their importance, but the rest of the community needs to know it more so. There needs to be a recognized, permanent and honored place in our community life for our poets and other artists. Why not let the walls of our Bahá’í Centers double as galleries? (Bare walls are ugly anyway.) Let us have classes in our schools where *everyone* is encouraged to exercise creativity, and thereby appreciate what true humanness is. And give time on our programs to poets, dramatists and others. They need our patronage and encouragement. Above all, why not support those who are actively

trying to create by providing space (in time and responsibilities) to do so. The healing of the planet is at stake. We will all benefit.

The purpose of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is to change the life of mankind from what it was to what it can be. This change is the purpose of our lives as well. We are to bring humanity back into an awareness of its relationship to its Creator. Bahá'u'lláh taught that our true human nature and purpose are so noble and exalted that every effort should be made to strive to attain our fullest potential. Poets can create this awareness among humanity more directly and effectively than any other people. But we must allow them and encourage them to do so. Are we up to the challenge?

Notes

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6. Henry Purmort Eames, "The International Aspect of the Arts," *World Order* (July 1935) p.127.
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13. Bahiyyih Nakhjavání, "Artist, Seeker and Seer," *Bahá'í Studies*, 10 (Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1982) p.4.
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21. H. Rosenhofer, "Creative Art," p.115.
22. *Bahá'í National Review*, no.117 (January 1982) p.1 (letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Iranian Bahá'ís living in other countries around the world).
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28. Henry Eames, "Arts," pp.126-27.
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36. John Hatcher, "Darkness," p.72.
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