

The Passionate Artist

Ron Price

In some ways I see this paper as a continuation of the paper I delivered in 1990 at the ABS Conference that year in Perth on “The Inner Life and the Environment”. It is a continuation of that paper in the sense that what I want to stress here is the same thing: the inner life and private character. For it is here that ‘the creative inspiration’ finds its origins. I can not begin in a better place than quoting a passage of Shoghi Effendi, a passage that has gained in strength and meaning as the decades have passed since his passing in 1957:

Not by the force of numbers, not by the mere exposition of a set of new and noble principles, not by an organized campaign of teaching - no matter how worldwide and elaborate in its character - not even by the staunchness of our faith or the exaltation of our enthusiasm, can we ultimately hope to vindicate in the eyes of a critical and sceptical age the supreme claim of the Abhá Revelation. One thing and only one thing will unfailingly and alone secure the undoubted triumph of this sacred Cause, namely, the extent to which our own inner life and private character mirror forth in their manifold aspects the splendour of those eternal principles proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh.¹

The creative inspiration is clearly associated in manifold ways with this “inner life and private character.” Before we begin to examine the inner life and creative inspiration, though, I would like to say a few things about ‘where I am coming from.’ What are the origins of my own creative inspiration? What are some of the perspectives and themes that inform it in relation to poetry which is but one of the many outward forms, manifestations of this creative imagination, inspiration and the inner spiritual powers? There are several sources and perspectives which illustrate something of what I want to say about my own creative inspiration. It would require a book to properly outline them. I will focus on a few here.

Firstly, there are the influences of socialization. Both my mother in the 1950s and my grandfather in the 1920s, began to write extensively in their late forties and fifties. My father had an immense energy and drive. The two sides of my

life, as represented by my parents and grandparents, I think, have played a role, partly undefinable, in whatever inspiration has come into my life in poetry.

Secondly, there is the influence of my religion which I have been a member of now for forty years (and attending its various functions for forty-six years). A poetic literature, a long line of artistic and intellectually endowed associations, listening to people talk and talking with people from an infinitely wide range of paths in life, an exposure to books, to reading, to hearing people read, visible commitments, etc. These and other aspects of my connection with the Bahá'í Faith have all contributed to definable and undefinable influences on my creative inspirations. In this connection I would like to mention the invocation Alláh-u-Abhá or Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá which has special significance to Bahá'ís around the world. I have been using these invocations for over forty years. They are part of the core of ‘spiritual enrichment’ for Bahá'ís. There is a spiritual growth that is generated by the use of these simple words in worshipful devotion. Prayer in general has been an important part of my Bahá'í experience as far back as the 1950s. When one has many prayers memorized one can pray in an unfettered sense walking in the bush, along the beach, indeed, wherever one has privacy. I am confident this contributes to the devotional attitude and has effects on your life in mysterious ways. In purely quantitative terms I am sure I have spent more time in my life ‘talking to God’ through the revealed prayers than I have talking to any human being I have known, except perhaps my wife. It is, of course, difficult to measure the results of this process over many decades: an increase in the sense of intimacy with the Source of one’s light and life and a feeling that words, phrases, specific prayers, passages, indeed, many pages of the Writings have become old friends. If I recite them more quickly they feel like a mantra; if I slow down they feel like a deep meditation.

Thirdly, ill-health and personal difficulties: manic-depression in the 1960s and 1970s, divorce and employment difficulties which turned me toward seeking special inspiration. By 1980 I frequently read the following passage from *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* and sought the intercession of the departed Hands of the Cause on my behalf:

The soul that hath remained faithful to the Cause of God and stood unwaveringly firm in His Path shall, after his ascension, be possessed of such power that all the worlds which the Almighty hath created can benefit through him. Such a soul provideth, at the bidding of the Ideal King and Divine Educator, the pure leaven that leaveneth the world of being, and furnisheth the power through which the arts and wonders of the world are made manifest.²

I began writing poetry about 1981, a year or so after I began reading this

1. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration – Selected Messages 1922-1932*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995, p. 66.

2. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976, p.161.

passage on a regular basis. Although I saw no association between this passage and my first poems, by the 1990s I began to wonder at the possible connection with my poetic output and these leavening influences. By the year 2000 I had written over two million words of poetry and five thousand poems and wondered where it all came from.

Fourth, the influence of other poets: Roger White in the 1980s and the western intellectual tradition since Wordsworth, more generally. For a dozen years, 1981 to 1992, I had 'company defined by letters', company with the most delightful letter writer I have ever known and a poet whose influences has had primacy.³ In the years 1993 to 1999 my poetic friends were in books. I read dozens of books about poetry since Wordsworth started writing in the 1780s. I read publicly in cafes, restaurants, in colleges and at Bahá'í functions but did not find it inspirational, although people enjoyed my reading due to my ability to entertain. But I had grown tired of the public domain after nearly thirty years of teaching and what seemed like an endless variety of meetings. I had dried up. Poetry functioned like a new lease on life, a new leaven that leavened my world of being.

Fifth, the possible influence of the Holy Year, 1992-1993. My Bahá'í life had occupied the span between the two Holy Years, the other being 1952-1953. I think this influence is most mysterious. My life as a Bahá'í had spanned these two special years and a flood of poetry was unleashed after this forty-year hiatus. Was this something of those 'mysterious dispensations of Providence?'

Sixth, the particular view of time, space and history in the Bahá'í teachings. Time: 13.6 billion years; space: infinite, a general scientific view; and history: a ten stage process (Shoghi Effendi, 1953, Chicago) with plans, eras, cycles, epochs, stages and phases. All of this helped to give my life, my age and all of history a new, a quite specific, time focus and this plays a role in my poetry. Time frames seem to have taken on an especial meaning in poem after poem.

You will see from the above influences something of that inner life which I speak of and something of the creative inspiration which is at the centre of this article. My poetry tells a great deal about my inner life; indeed, I often feel quite naked in giving my poems to people. I don't really mind not having them published. Writing them is the real buzz.

Poetry as a Source of Social Good

If these booklets of poetry, some twenty-seven now,⁴ help to establish nothing else it will be my search for a context in which relevant fundamental questions about the undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, the societal need for legitimate and just authority and our need as individuals for

solid thinking about the organic change in the very structure of society that the world has been preparing for but has not yet experienced—can be examined. In thirty-two hundred poems, a massive corpus, this search for a context for the examination of fundamental questions may not be so obvious. I try to do a great deal in this poetry.

The fluid and elastic qualities that underpin the expression of freedom assume a different latitude from one mind to another. Indeed in this Faith there are "unique methods and channels"⁵ for the exercise and maintenance of freedom. The very meaning of freedom has been deepened, its scope extended. The very fact that my writing poetry, an expression of art, is elevated to an act of worship augers well for the "enormous prospects for a new birth of expression in the civilization anticipated by His World Order."⁶

Much, if not virtually all, of my poetry is about personal experience, a personal view of some sociological or historical process or fact. I see this poetry as essentially lyrical, as capable of expressing a sense of commonality and, for me, unparalleled intimacy. Some of what I write could be termed confessional. The first person "I" is vulnerable, dealing as it does with varying degrees of self-revelation. But even in the second and third persons there is the poet's view, less direct, self-revelation less obvious. The poetry is self-serving; the reader is invited to share in my experience, in my thoughts. The poetry also serves the community, however self-focussed my poems are. They deal with the universal and with the growth and development of that universal Force, the Cause. They deal with community. And the quest for community, it would seem, has always involved some conflict, some anxiety.

I strive, of course, for moderation, refinement, tact and wisdom in any of my poetic expressions of human utterance. For everything there is a season. Thus far, the season of my poetic writing in public has been minimal. I have been quite happy that the public utterance of my poetry, at poetry readings, has been minimal. I have written about this before in the five interviews recorded in previous booklets of poetry. Bahá'u'lláh, Himself, reinforces this idea in the maxim that: "Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed ...nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it."⁷ As the Universal House of Justice says in its expatiation on the theme of speech and freedom "an acute exercise of judgement" is called for.⁸ Perhaps when, and if, I become "public property" I will have acquired more of that quality of acute judgement.

The freedom of the poet, the writer, to declare his conscience and set forth his views is at the root of the foundation of this Order, but poetry of a negative

5. Universal House of Justice, letter to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States of America, 29 December 1988 in *Rights and Responsibilities*, Ontario: Bahá'í Canada Publications, 1997, p. 12.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

7. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976, p. 176.

8. Universal House of Justice, letter to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States of America, 29 December 1988 in *Rights and Responsibilities*, op. cit., p. 13

3. Robert Creeley, *The American Poetry Review*, Sept. 1999, p.18.

4. The last booklet I sent to the Bahá'í World Centre Library was called *The Art of Glorification*. For the period 9 January to 4 September 1997 I sent no poetry. The developments on Mt. Carmel are like a lodestone to human hearts. I continue sending my poetry as an expression of the intense attraction of the heart.

quality should be strictly avoided to prevent confusion and discord reigning in community life and to remedy divisiveness. The process of criticism is baneful in its effect and, therefore, the nature of my poetry is intended to counteract dissidence which I see as “a moral and intellectual contradiction of the main objective animating”⁹ my words. But often what I write is simply ordinary speech, sometimes emotionally loaded, raised to a high level, the highest level I can, of expressiveness. I strive for what the Greeks called *kairos*: tact, discretion, prudent restraint, maturity, for the quality the poet Pindar expressed.¹⁰ For humanity today needs that *communitas communitatum* and this Faith, the Bahá'í Faith, has an important role to play in this unifying process. This poetry is part of that wider process, that wider phenomenon.

I seek a judicious exercise in my writing. I try to be sensitive to content, style, sound, tact, wisdom, timeliness in order to “give birth to an etiquette of expression”¹¹ worthy of that term ‘maturity’, which Pindar possessed, and which this age must strive to attain. There must be a discipline in this poetry if it is to attain the status of being a “dynamic power in the arteries of life.”¹² If my words are to attain “the influence of spring” and cause “hearts to become fresh and verdant”, they shall have to be seen as “acceptable to fair-minded souls.”¹³ I can not make such a claim of my poetry, yet. In this complex age with so much competition from the intense sounds of media and other art forms, I may never attain to such an influence.

I am sensitive to my poetry's tenderness, as I am to the tenderness of the Cause which motivates so much that underpins my poetry. The rigorous discipline that must be exerted when putting print before the public eye, I have not exerted, not entirely. For I have assumed that, for the most part, the public will not see most of my poetry, at least for some time to come. But I strive to speak the words of both myself and my fellow human beings as part of a whole; this autobiographical poetic serves the whole. It resonates in the immediate and the concrete, in the inner and the outer values of my life, or in the socio-historical frameworks in which it is couched.

However idiosyncratic and autobiographical a particular poem may appear it is related to the totality, the cosmic, the grand-scale, the great system of time and place provided by the teachings and a generally scientific view of humankind. For mine is the poetry of a meta-narrative. Hopefully different readers will be cheered or saddened in different ways as my poems drift through the diverse human situations they describe.

9. Universal House of Justice, letter to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States of America, 29 December 1988 in *Rights and Responsibilities*, op.cit., p. 17.

10. Joan Aleshire, “Staying News: A Defense of the Lyric”, *Poets Teaching Poets: Self and the World*, in Gregory Orr and Ellen B. Voigt (eds.), Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1966, pp. 28-47.

11. Universal House of Justice, letter to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States of America, 29 December 1988 in *Rights and Responsibilities*, op.cit., p. 17.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

13. *Ibid.*

Spontaneity, initiative and diversity must be encouraged, but everything in its time, the right time under heaven, so to speak. The individual in this Cause is “the focus of primary development”¹⁴ but within the context of the group; for the individual is essentially subordinated to the group. The individual should be seen as a source of social good. This is his most supreme delight. This is the essential context for poetry. When, and if, this occurs my poetry will find its right and proper place in community life. Dealing as my poetry does with the fragile, confused and ever-to-be-rediscovered and redefined self, the place of the inner life and private character, the delight to which I refer will, hopefully, be associated with understanding, with intellect and wisdom, the two most luminous lights in the world of creation.¹⁵

Ron Price

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Autobiography: Analysis Yet Again

I have provided a succinct narrative account of my life (in a 40,000 word autobiographical narrative elsewhere). It is chronological; the factual material is ordered, sequential. But, clearly, sharpness of detail, revealing anecdote, even suspense and analysis of motivation are given with insight and style much more effectively in my poetry. There is so much poetry now, some 4 000 poems spread over at least 2 000 pages, that this collected and compendious mass of material, if it is ever to provide a basis for biography in the future, must be shaped, interpreted, given perspective, dimension, a point of view.

Such a biographer must provide the creative, the fertile, the suggestive and engendering fact, an imaginative, a referential dimension. Such an analyst must enact a character, a place, a time in history. He will do this through language, through imposing a formal coherency on my material, although inevitably there will be present the incurable illogicalities of life, as Robert Louis Stevenson called the inconsistent, the unresolved paradoxes of life. He will give the reader a portrait not an inventory. This is what any biographer must do. I do this in my autobiographical poetry. But I provide many pictures, many moods, many sides. Details balloon; they repeat; they illuminate.

I discover things about my life, but I do not invent them.

As Plutarch and Boswell, two of history's most famous biographers, demonstrated: “anecdote rather than history teaches us more about the subject.”¹⁶ I see my narrative as the home of history and my poetry as a source of rich anecdote. It was for this reason I turned to poetry as a reservoir of autobiography; it seemed to teach, to convey, much more than narrative. Claude

14. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

15. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970, p.1.

16. Ira Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984, p.60.

Levi-Strauss helps us to understand why several poems about one object, or person, provide more significance or meaning than a narrative when he writes:

To understand a real object in its totality we always tend to work from its parts.

The resistance it offers us is overcome by dividing it...Being smaller, the object as

a whole seems less formidable....it seems to us qualitatively simplified.¹⁷

One can not know everything about anyone, even oneself. The mountain of detail would sink a ship and would not enlighten anyone. The task of achieving comprehensiveness not only is impossible, it is irrelevant. But there are intelligible dimensions of one's life and it is these dimensions that my poetry deals with best. Imagination is critical in writing biography. Some writers see invention more important than knowledge. Inevitably, there is an element of invention, of moving beyond the factual, but my own preference is to use imagination in a framework of factual experience, as far as possible. To read my poetry should be to immerse oneself in the first several decades of Bahá'í experience in what the Bahá'ís see as 'the tenth stage of history' and, especially, that time when the spiritual and administrative centre on Mount Carmel received its richest, its definitive, elaboration and definition, in the half century 1951 to 2001 and especially the recent decade or so. There are several unifying nodes of experience for my poetry, in addition to the above. I have drawn them to the reader's attention from time to time in the introductions to some of my poems.

From a Bahá'í perspective my poetry will undoubtedly possess a moral appeal associated with overcoming hardship, a quality that characterized most nineteenth-century biography and some of its poetry. But the moral framework, while retaining a certain simplicity, is expressed in a portrait of complexity, refinement, mystery, a slumbering world, my own idle fancies and vain imaginings and the streaming utterance of a new Revelation.

Freud commented that biographers choose their subjects 'for personal reasons of their own emotional life.'¹⁸ I am sure this is equally, if not more, true of autobiographers. After criss-crossing Australia as an international pioneer and teaching in the northernmost and southernmost places in Canada - all of this over thirty-six years, I have watched this emerging world religion grow perhaps thirty times (two hundred thousand in 1953, to six million in 2000). I have taught in schools for nearly thirty years and feel, now, a certain fatigue. I must write this poetry for the same reason a foetus must gestate for nine

months. I feel, with Rilke, a great inner solitude and that life and history is itself a beginning: for me, for my religion and for the world. I want to suck the sweetness out of everything and tell the story.

I sigh a deep-dark melancholy, but keep it in as far as I am able. I am lonely and attentive in this sadness. My poetry gives expression to this process and to my destiny which comes from within. My poetry is the story of what happens to me. For the most part "life happens" and one must respond to the seeming inevitability of it all, although the question of freedom and determinism is really quite a complex one. Reality, I record in my poetry, comes to me slowly, infinitely slowly. My poetry records this process. My poetry is an expression of a fruit that has been ripening within me: obscure, deep, mysterious. After years it now comes out in a continuous preoccupation as if I have, at last, found some hidden springs. It is as if I have been playing around the edges, with trivia, with the surface. Finally something real, true, is around me. I stick to my work. I have a quiet confidence, a patience, a distance from a work that always occupies me. And so I can record a deep record of my time. I am preparing something both visible and invisible, something fundamental. And there is joy.

Ron Price

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17. Ibid.

18. *ibid*, p.122.