The Emergence of a Baha'i Consciousness in World Literature:

the poetry of

# Roger White

"released from wanting and having, I shall only be."

written by

## Ron Price

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Dedicated to my wife Chris, who has given peace to my heart and exercise for my mind, and my son Daniel, who has made me laugh, often until I ache.

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In April 1993, just before the end of the Holy Year commemorating the historic occasion of the centenary of the ascension of Baha'u'llah, Roger White passed away. By that historic juncture in the history of the Baha'i Faith, this emerging world religion was continuing its rise from an obscurity in which it had existed for nearly a century and a half. In addition, the literary work of several Baha'is during that century had signalled the emergence of a Baha'i consciousness in world literature. The poetry of Roger White was part of that emergence. His story and his poetry are briefly examined here.

especially its disturbing mixture of poetic innovation and reactionary politics, its vast international influence and intense Eurocentrism, amounted to a kind of collective anxiety attack and this anxiety was reflected in post-World War 2 poetry right up to the seventies. By the 1990s, by the time White died, though, it had become clear that these sometimes embarrassing ancestors, who appeared about the time 'Abdu'l-Baha went on His tour of Western countries, had laid the foundation for a post-traditional poetry. By the time of White's first major publication in 1979, that new poetry had been growing for at least six decades. Brian Conniff describes its last phase in the 1980s in the African American Review. This poetry, he writes, is "more explicitly heterogenous and more international, both in its sources and its influence, in such works as Adrienne Rich's Your Native Land, Your Life (1986), Seamus Heaney's Station Island (1983), and Derek Walcott's Omeros (1990)."

Conniff continues: "Considered more broadly, a distinctly post-traditional stance has become increasingly apparent in the linguistic heterogeneity of contemporary Irish poets like Nualani Dhomhnaill and Medbh McGuckian, in the communal heritage evident in the prison poetry and autobiographical writing of Jimmy Santiago Baca, and in the remarkable emergence of contemporary poetry by American Indians. For these later poets, any approximation of a tradition - any communal or even personal heritage - is conceived pragmatically, as one instrument among many others with which they can engage a world that is at once overwhelmingly various and desperately in need." And I would add the poetry of Roger White here, in his three books of poetry written from 1979 to 1984. Much of White's poetry has a very traditional style and tenor, although its content is for the international stage. White gives his readers what Arthur Koestler said was crucial for modern men and women: truths which were perennial without being archaic. He also gives his readers the global Baha'i community, its history and its teachings. His is both a very traditional and an international poetic mix.

## Chapter 1

## THE EMERGENCE OF A BAHA'I CONSCIOUSNESS IN WORLD LITERATURE: THE POETRY OF ROGER WHITE

Geoffrey Nash, in a review of Roger White's poetry in 1982, wrote that White heralded "the development of a Baha'i consciousness in world literature". Literature, poetry and prose, letters and other genres, have been arriving on the world's literary stage from the pens of Baha'is for more than a century and a half. White certainly has been, in Nash's words, a herald. White's work emerged from obscurity at the same time as the Baha'i Faith was rising from an obscurity in which it had existed for nearly a century and a half. The revolution in Iran in 1979 marked a significant point along the road of that emergence. It is more than coincidental that White's first major book of poetry Another Song, Another Season was published that same year. There is now a burgeoning literature on the Baha'i Faith provided by individual Baha'is the world over in the two decades since Nash wrote what have become prophetic words. White has, indeed, become a herald, though I am sure he did not set out to become the brilliant initiator that he has been.

There are others I could focus on to describe this "development of a Baha'i consciousness in world literature": Robert Hayden, Bahiyyih Nakhjavani, H.M. Balyuzi, M. Momen, Adib Taherzedeh, John and William Hatcher among others whose books, each in their own way, played their unique parts in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in laying this foundation of consciousness. To pick one example: in April 1966 Robert Hayden was awarded the "Grand Prix" at the Third World Festival of Negro Arts for "the best" recent volume of Anglophone poetry. This was without doubt a milestone in the emergence of a Baha'i consciousness in world literature. I could cite other events along the road of this emergence but my purpose here is to focus on the poetry of Roger White.

The efforts of poets and critics to come to terms with the legacy of a post-traditional poetry that had begun as early as the second decade of the twentieth century with Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot,

As a fellow poet, I am only too conscious of the remarks of Charles Martindale in his introduction to the Roman poet Ovid, that "artists, for all their intuitive insights, are often both idiosyncratic and egocentric when responding to the work of others." Martindale notes "the comparative poverty" of the critical tradition of Ovid. The afterlife of a great poet, the artistic responses of the generations that follow a writer, shows how even the finest writers can fail to be understood and appreciated. This first generation following the death of Roger White and the industry of critical reflection that it creates has yet to establish any pattern. I trust this book will initiate a pattern of enthusiastic appreciation.

I think the period 1979 to 1984 was especially significant in bringing about a transformation in the literature available to Baha'is on their Faith. White published three books of poetry and a novella which I deal with later in this book. Nakhjavani published two books: Response and Four On An Island, in a refreshing and highly stimulating idiom that was as much poetry as prose and, like White, left many readers puzzled. Others found her writing possessed of a vitality and originality that, as Henry Moore once put it, were uniquely her own. It was also a style of writing that was inspired by that same universal vision that inhabited White's poetry and that, I am confident, will take on additional significance as time goes on. And there were other books. But this series of essays deals with the poetry of Roger White. I leave it to other writers and critics to deal more comprehensively with the other authors who have been part of this emergence beginning, say, with its first major teaching plan (1937-1944) when, arguably, this Baha'i consciousness made its earliest appearances in world literature and the Faith itself begin to expand over the surface of the earth to become the second most widespread religion on the planet.

The course of development of the prose, the language, the thought - and especially the poetry - of a group of people: a nation, an ethnic group, a religion, indeed any group with a specific identity, a specific set of characteristics is, as the nineteenth century literary

critic Matthew Arnold wrote, "profoundly interesting". "By regarding a poet's work as a stage," he continued,"in this course of development we may easily bring ourselves to make it of more importance as poetry than it really is." Perhaps I am guilty of this literary sin in what I admit to be, again in Arnold's words, my quite exaggerated praise, my arguable overrating of White's work. What may be the long term historical estimate of White's work and what is the intrinsic estimate of his work to a contemporary individual - and particularly this critic - are not necessarily identical.

The internationalization of literature, its global orientation, its planetization, its planetary consciousness, the perception of literature as part of the essential fabric of a global civilization or culture has really emerged only in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Goethe, at the turn of the nineteenth century, was the first great thinker to suggest that the literature of the future would be a world literature with a planetary consciousness. A. Alvarez remarks, in analysing modernism in literature in the first three decades of the twentieth century, that it was "synonymous with internationalism". The scholarship of comparative literature and the histories of comparative literature have demonstrated that a common vein of ideas and conventions runs through all Western literature. Indeed, there is unquestionably an underlying uniformity in the literary heritage of humankind, although an outdated nationalism, parochialism and insular local traditions still militate against the thrusting sense of global culture. Of course, traditionality, localism, associations of a national culture will remain, will continue to be enriched. That, too, is part of the process currently under way on this planet.

T.S. Eliot once wrote that "literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint". I am not sure that is necessarily the case. It would appear than many of the greatest painters and writers did not work from an explicit, a defined and articulate philosophical perspective, but in the case of this work, this literary evaluation of the poetry of Roger White, I do write from much the same ethical and theological standpoint as

White. Perhaps more importantly, though, the White I am analysing in this book is a very personal White. He is my White. A personal relationship grows up between poet and reader, a personal interpretation. My commentary on White is based, as Northrop Frye emphasized, in "the actual experience of art" that is in my actual experience of White's poetry. It is based, too, on a conceptual universe of analysis that I have constructed on my own with the aid of a range of ideas and concepts from the literary arts and social sciences. The poet may be part of an embryonic Baha'i consciousness in world literature but he also becomes part of the individual reader's consciousness in a very private and personal world often quite different from the worlds of other readers. Lionel Trilling made this same point in relation to Robert Frost's poetry at a talk he gave at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York in 1959 in celebration of Frost's eighty-fifth birthday.

For this reason and the personal friendship that I had with White over many years, I feel somewhat like the famous literary critic Helen Vendler who said in a panel discussion just recently in New York "I don't often do negative reviews…that does not seem to me an interesting kind of writing to do." Vendler went on to say that the negative, the critical side of reviewing detracts from the effect, the vitality, of the content on the page. Critics want to write about the kind of poetry they would like to write themselves or they would like to sponsor. No critic wants to write about some poet they do not especially like, Vendler concluded, as they get older, and especially if they know the poet. Marjorie Perloff, another critic on the panel, said that to demolish or trash a poet was a devastating thing to do. Her approach was to say 'if you can't say something good about the poet, don't write the review or the book'. She said this is especially true for poets you know personally and when the review is not anonymous. Who wants to be critical of someone you know personally? It is not natural or instinctive, said Perloff. Some critics can hide behind the veil of anonymity and psychological distance and thus make more devastating comments. Others simply will not

write about living poets. As far as these essays are concerned, then, readers will find little overt and strong criticism of White. There is, I trust, much of that etiquette of expression, that judicious and disciplined exercise of the written word, that moderation which "ensures the enjoyment of true liberty" Such is my aim.

I like to think my study, my literary criticism, is similar to that of the father of literary criticism, John Dryden. "His is the criticism" in the words of Samuel Johnson, "of a poet, not a dull collection of theorems, not a rude collection of faults….but a gay and vigorous dissertation, where delight is mingled with instruction, and where the author proves his right of judgement, by his power of performance." Whatever the standpoint, though - theological and otherwise - my aim, like the aim of White's poetry, is to awaken and enlarge the mind by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand otherwise unapprehended combinations of thought. White knows that:

*Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,*
*Stains the white radiance of Eternity,*
*Until death tramples it to fragments.*

And so he gives us that "many-coloured glass", as some of his philosophy "the white radiance of Eternity" and the process of the familiar feet of death trampling life "to fragments". And I give you this review of White's poetry. I try to convey something of the new voice that White creates for us in his several books of poetry. I try to save the poetry from the artist who created it. For this is what White wanted. He was quite insistent in making this separation. This book opens with a short biography in three parts. I know that readers are as much interested in the man as the poet and his poetry. I do not think I overdo it, though. I hope Roger would find my weighting of these two distinct categories in good taste. He was always so kind in his letters that even if he disagreed with you he

would always let you down slowly, laughing as you went. And he is no longer with us, with me, to say "I think you overdid it here, Ron." He was also adventurous and frank, so you knew where you stood. He did not beat around the bush, as they say.

There is a high seriousness in White but his alembic is humour. For some readers the effect of his poetry is a lightness and pleasure that only humour can provide; for other readers White's seriousness and his language place too much of a demand and, not willing to read and re-read his poems, these readers put him down without extracting the intellectual delights; for still others, White has the effect of an invigorating exercise of the mind. For them the laughs are a bonus and the reward is more than pure delight. These readers gain an understanding of the religion they joined at some time in the last half century, an understanding perhaps deeper than any learned commentary or, indeed, the efforts of their own investigation. These readers get a sense of a Baha'i consciousness, a Baha'i sensibility, a Baha'i voice, from a poet who has made a distinctive contribution to the birth of a spiritual and universal art.

Blended with this voice are interlacing strains of White's literary ancestry. They influence his style in quite complex and mysterious ways, making whatever seems original and a fresh creative force partly and inevitably derivative. At the same time, as the sociologist Levin Schuckling emphasizes: "Somewhere, at some time, the poet follows the divine summons sent him and, true to an inner urge, responsible only to himself and answering no call from the outer world, creates his works of poetry that are dictated by the ideal that floats before him. The works brought into the light of day often show divergences from existing forms and do not fit into the contemporary scheme of taste. Over time, though, the poetry finds friends, gains recognition and effects the general poetic taste."

Matthew Arnold, writing about the "sanguine hopes" which accompanied the splendid epoch of poetry in European civilization in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, said there was a "pre-

matureness" to its expression. He said that, in spite of its energy and creative force, that epoch did not know enough. The creation of a modern poet, he went on, "implies a great critical effort behind it" or it will be a short-lived affair. Time will tell, of course, if there has been enough of that critical effort behind the poetry of Roger White to make it a long-lived affair. There is certainly a critical effort required on the part of the reader if White's work is to be appreciated. In this twenty-first century, sinking deeper as it appears to be into a slough of despond, one cannot help but wonder with Harold Bloom what will survive in the long term from the world's burgeoning literary and media productions that fill people's lives today to assume a home in the world's literature in history's long arc.

In this greatest drama in the world's spiritual history in which we are all engaged, Roger White appeared for a time on the stage and is gone. But his poetry remains: as playful as Robert Frost and as serious as Ezra Pound, with his delightful metaphor and the freshness thereof, with his sympathy, infinitude and expansive virtues which, as Shelley once wrote, await "a world of peace and justice for their due recognition". White, the voyager, is gone, ten years now. He gave himself, the only thing a writer has to offer. And where life is concerned, a writer, a poet, can only truly see, as he does, through his own eyes and his own heart. He gave us the results of his search which, as Mark Tobey once wrote, are "the only valid expression of the spirit". He gave us what Dante says are the proper subjects of poetry: venus, virtue and salus.

He liked the term 'minor poet' - at least he used that term to apply to himself in one of his first poems. I think he would have eschewed the term 'major poet' for many reasons but, if a distinction can profitably be drawn between 'major' and 'great', then White, for me anyway, deserves recognition as a great poet. Minor writers, minor poets, can be loved as purely and appreciated as much as major ones, and sometimes more easily, as another great analyst of poetry, Helen Vendler notes. The distinction between talent and genius may also be useful here. The former, said Arnold, gives the

notion of power in a poet's performance, while the latter denotes felicity and perfection in the art. For me, White has some of both.

It is, perhaps, unimportant to 'decide' whether White was a great poet. Pursuing labels of this kind and making such distinctions may not be that helpful. White was good enough to provoke the question; perhaps that is enough. He was an exquisite craftsman. He produced an ample body of powerful poetry. That was enough, in the case of Balzac, for Somerset Maugham to use the term genius, or in the case of Wordsworth for Matthew Arnold to use the same term. Arnold also felt that "poetry to be truly excellent must have a high seriousness." White certainly had that.

Arnold also wrote that: "Whether one is an eagle or an ant, in the intellectual world, seems to me not to matter much; the essential thing is to have one's place marked there, one's station assigned, and to belong decidedly to a regular and wholesome order" as one gave others a taste for the things of the mind. Baha'u'llah explored the same idea in writing about the portion of some laying in a gallon measure and others in a thimble. 'Abdu'l-Baha wrote much about the cultivation of the mind. Arnold was in good company. I got the impression these questions did not matter much to White.

Now, of course, I think it unlikely that recognition of this or any kind concerns him in the slightest. As he writes in one of his last poems:

*.....Released from*

*wanting and having, I shall only be.*

*.....*

*Occupied with boundlessness*

*I shall yet divine your unspoken question:*

*Were you drawn away by the music,*

*the laughter,*

*the promised ecstasy of reunion*?

The work of a critic can be fantastically overestimated. Readers often forsake the works critics are writing about. Instead of enjoying the poet, the reader turns to the critic as specialist, to his prodigalities of implication, his hyperboles, his nimbuses of rhetoric, his exaggerations and the various promptings that the critic places before the reader. This I do not mind. I think there is a certain inevitability here, at least for some readers. As long as all that I have written convinces you, the reader, if only for the moment, of White's talent and genius, I will have done my job. For my main responsibility is to the poet, Roger White, and the need to be truthful. If what I write appears over the top, as it is said colloquially these days, that is because of the genuine enthusiasm and pleasure I take in reading his poetry. White is a subtle, yet bewilderingly gifted poet. I would not want you to miss the experience of Whiteland. I like to think that most of White's life consisted of only those things that were not good enough to go into his poems. So, if his biographical details are a little light on, readers should not feel they are missing much. White wanted it that way.

The nineteenth century literary critic Amiel, describing perhaps that century's finest French literary critic Sainte-Beuve, wrote that "it is only at fifty that the critic is risen to the true height of his literary priesthood or, to put it less pompously, of his social function". Only then does a critic have the required critical judgement. These essays were put in their present form when I was in my late fifties. I am not so sure I qualify for any literary priesthood; I am not sure I possess the maturity of judgement Amiel refers to, but I hope that readers enjoy the essays that follow.

Samuel Johnson wrote biographies of each of his subjects before proceeding to comment and evaluate their works. Such a combination satisfies, it seems to me, a perfectly proper curiosity. Johnson's

Lives of the Poets is part of a biographical tradition going back to the early seventeenth century and earlier, a tradition that keeps separate a man's poetry and the man. Gradually, in the nineteenth century, the study of a man and the interpretation of his work began to mingle and to mingle more in the twentieth century. I do some mingling. I am a moderate mingler. This is what White wanted. I hope both White and readers of these essays will find my mingling helpful but not intrusive.

Chapter 2

## THE POEM NOT THE POET

Roger White would have liked George Bernard Shaw's views on biography. The facts of writers' lives, wrote Shaw, have no more to do with their writing ability than the shape of their nose. White used to quote Rabindranath Tagore on this biographical theme: 'the poem not the poet' - as Tagore put the theme succinctly. White felt that his life was, to use Shaw's words, biographically uninteresting. I do not think, though, that White's life, among those lives of the other minor poets to whose ranks he himself claimed to belong, could be said to be so unvarying and therefore so uninteresting. White did not want to diminish his work by restoring it to the particularities of what he felt was his mundane biographical context. And so there is little here of what that significant biographer and poet in our early modern period, Samuel Johnson, referred to as "domestic privacies" and "the minute details of daily life".

I am sure White felt about his future biography somewhat the way Mark Twain felt about Shakespeare's biography: "an Eiffel tower of artificialities rising sky-high from a very flat and thin foundation of inconsequential facts, a fifty-seven foot high brontosaur that looks convincing enough in the natural history museum but is made of six hundred barrels of plaster of paris and maybe only 'nine old bones'." He did not feel the same way about his poetry, although he does not appear to have had Walt Whitman's grandiose sense of destiny and overriding purpose about his poems. His was a more moderate sense of self-worth. But, like W.H. Auden, he was inclined to the view that an artist's private life sheds little light on his works. But like Auden, too, he would have been willing to bend the rule given the right circumstances. Of course during his life White did not have to fend off biographers standing in line to write his story. I certainly do not have enough information about White's life to provide the kind of story White's life deserves, although Anne Gordon Perry has gathered a collection of White's letters and, if the right circumstances can be arrived at serendipi-

tously and through Perry's insight into that collection, then White lovers will soon be able to read the first stab at a biography of White. The chief source material for biographers is often their subject's letters or a diary. White was a most prolific letter writer and, for me anyway, his poetry serves as a type of diary. If any biographical skyscraper is to be built on Whiteland, his letters will provide the architecture, not his poetry.

Literary critic, J.V. Cunningham, once said of the poet E.A. Robinson that he was "a man almost without biography". I do not think White would have put it that strongly vis-à-vis his own life but that was the sort of emphasis White wanted to give to his day-to-day life and, more importantly, that was the sort of emphasis he wanted his readers to give to it. I address myself to some extent to what White saw as his quiet and uneventful life, to the events behind his character and personality and to the tough fibre that was his life as a writer. I hope that readers will like and respect White more, find him in greater clarity as a human being, as a result of the glimpse I have provided into his life story and his poetry. I hope, in the process, to deepen our understanding of White's art, for it is in his art that the greatness lies. But my purpose is not, in the main, to correct or refine taste, as T.S. Eliot said was the purpose of the literary theorist. Nor is my purpose to provide evidence for a thesis. What I write issues out of the pleasure I take in reading White's poetry and the belief that, as Robert Hayden once put it, "Poetry does make something happen, for it changes sensibility." Such change, incontrovertibly spiritual in nature, is the prerequisite for any transformation in the objective, quotidian world. I hope I bring to this exercise what the true father of English practical criticism, John Dryden (1631-1700), said was the "primary qualification of the good practical critic - the ability to read the work under consideration with full and sympathetic understanding". I hope that I also bring a secondary qualification to my critic's role, a qualification which Dryden thought was important for any critic to possess; namely, the ability to communicate my relish and enjoyment of

White's work and thereby help the reader enjoy his poetry in a similar vein. It is difficult, though, to rationally explain the effect of a poem on one's mind and emotions; I always find my comments on White's poems never quite explain my experience of them.

Good literary criticism of poetry, wrote George Saintsbury back at the turn of the twentieth century, is "as delightful as (one) can find in any department of belles lettres". I hope readers will find these essays a delight. It is rare to find two critics liking the same things for the same reasons. Diversity of selection and interpretation is the norm. But in so far as White's inner world is concerned, a world largely inaccessible to biographers except through speculation, it is my view that White's poetry comes closest to revealing its true nature. Of course letters can be very useful in revealing the nature of a person's inner life and I leave that to Perry, as I indicated before. Mark Twain expressed some of my scepticism regarding the extent to which a person's outer life, their actions and their conversation are a revelation of their true nature. Twain says they are just "the clothes and buttons of the man". Twain continued:

"What a wee little part of a person's life are his acts and words! His real life is led in his head and is known to none but himself. All day long, and every day, the mill of his brain is grinding, and his thoughts, not those other things, are his history. His acts and his words are merely the visible, thin crust of his world - and they are so trifling a part of his bulk… The mass of him is hidden."

Twain expatiates at great length on this theme and it reminds me in some ways of what has become an oft-quoted passage of Shoghi Effendi:

"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 Baha'u'llah."

Perhaps the real person is quintessentially a mystery. If so, my intention is to explore that mystery through White's poetry. My focus is not on some complex of internal and self-referential relations, some theory of psychoanalysis. I am not trying to focus my gaze on the inaccessible inner reaches of the authorial psyche. I am not trying to get inside White's head. I try to understand White the man in a way he wanted to be understood: through his poetry. For the most part, I leave to biographers the question of the poet's character formation and the peculiarities of his personality as they take shape over a lifetime. I hope in the process to give White what Auden said "every author hopes to receive from posterity - a hope usually disappointed – justice".

White's life may have been much like Jane Austen's novels: nothing much happens but you eagerly turn the page of his literary life waiting for what happens next. For the drama of White's life was in some ways like Lord Acton's, only on a different scale. That drama was a drama of ideas. Just as Acton's life illustrates the influence that powerful minds, past and present, exerted over his development, so does White's, only in his case the powerful minds were those of two manifestations of God and Their chosen successors who passed by before and during his lifetime, and some very impressive individuals in the first century and a half of the religion he became associated with in his late teens.

The whole of creation, Baha'u'llah writes, "was revolutionized and all that are in the heavens and all that are on earth were stirred to the depths". In 1921 T.S. Eliot expressed this change as a "dissociation of sensibility". Others have called it a paradigm shift. Society has not recovered; indeed, the tempest is still with us. For this writer, White is but one of the multitude of manifestations of this quite complex and profound shift, as it was expressed in poetry, in the early epochs of the Formative Age of the Baha'i Faith and, in particular, the tenth stage of history when the charismatic Force that gave birth to the Baha'i Faith was fully institutionalized.

I see myself very much like the type of literary critic that Eliot calls 'the advocate', to help readers find merit in what they once overlooked, to find charm in what may have been first experienced as a certain tedium vitae or boredom, to remind others that there is a depth there in White's poetry that simply must be tapped and simply to express my gratitude to White, posthumously, on behalf of many of the lovers of White's poetry. There are no explicit canons of criticism. What is needed is a meeting of the author's intention and the critic's appreciation. "Worthwhile criticism," writes Herbert Read, has as its basis "pathos, sympathy and empathy". To some extent, too, this commentary is a by-product of my own creative activity. As 'Abdu'l-Baha said many times, the reality of man is his thought and it is White's thought that this book is devoted to, for the most part. Here is White's thinking talking to you. I hope that the reason readers want to know more about White's life is that they care for his poetry and are interested in his thinking. If former American poet laureate Robert Pinsky is right about what constitutes good poetry over poetry that is dross, namely, that it will admit abstract statement, then White's poems are good ones. They certainly tell you what he is thinking with a fair portion of abstract thought. They also, or so it seems to me, spread an imaginative solitude that, as Oscar Wilde once wrote, "works best in silence and in isolation".

I am more than a little aware that almost the last thing most people come to poetry for is literary criticism. Indeed, I am sure that many would agree with Wordsworth that the writers of literary criticism "while they prosecute their inglorious employment, cannot be supposed to be in a state of mind very favourable for being affected by the inner influences of a thing so pure as genuine poetry". Of course Wordsworth regarded the critical power very low, infinitely lower than the creative power that produces poetry. And he was also sensitive to the damaging effect of false and malicious criticism. This was the source, writes Arnold, of his exaggerated and negative view of criticism. My own feeling is that creative activity,

in most forms, is invaluable and one form, like criticism, is neither higher nor lower in rank, than the writing of poetry. I have difficulty going as far as Oscar Wilde who saw criticism as demanding "infinitely more cultivation than creation" and more creativity than the creative arts of poetry and literature since criticism was, to him, "the purest form of personal impression". Wilde also saw criticism as "the record of one's own soul" and as "the only civilized form of autobiography". Criticism was in its essence purely subjective. This may be why I have been attracted in recent years to a critique of White's poetry because it allows me to deepen a literary process I began, myself, some twenty years ago but which ran dry in the channels of narrative autobiography.

Wilde writes that through criticism "the picture becomes more wonderful to us than it really is, and reveals to us a secret of which, in truth, it knows nothing". Such is the paradox of criticism as Wilde sees it. The poetry critic examines the poetic form and puts into it what he wishes and sees in it what he chooses to see. There is a freshness, a vitality, a provocativeness in Wilde's view of criticism that appeals to me. And I like to think that there is some of Wilde's perspective in my own.

I was able to piece together a basic outline of White's life. I sent it to him for his approval two years before he passed away. He made two or three minor corrections of fact and returned it. It was obvious to me that White was disinclined to provide more than he already had done about his life. "If you want to know about me, read what I have written," seemed to be his position, his view, on writing about his life.

I have done so and enjoyed White's poetry with the relish of a starved palate. Now I hope I can accomplish what the twentieth century's great poetry critic Randall Jarrell said was the critic's aim: "to show to others what the critic saw in what he read". Inevitably readers will be exposed here to the defects of my own sensibility, prejudices and idiosyncrasies as well as a substantial body of

analysis and evaluation of White's poetry. For the most part I do not dwell on the intricacies with which White's mind negotiates with its surroundings to produce what I find deeply satisfying poetry. For the most part I do not occupy myself with the nature of the connection between White's personality and his poetic imagination. I leave that to the more biographically inclined student. I am content to explore the poetry, the world that is contained in White's poetry and its meanings. Even then, I only explore a small part of his oeuvre. Poetry, in some ways, is the attempt to organize through the imposition of language raw human perception, the flux and mass, or should I say mess, of experience. I examine a very small part of White's specific perceptions, specific experience, specific poems and the examination is largely tentative. It is just an initial exploration of the territory. Perhaps it will stimulate others to journey into White's land, to follow his path, to continue beyond an examination which is the first published study in the early stage of what I am confident will become 'the White industry'. In some ways it is through the very incompleteness of White's story that it acquires a certain beauty. It addresses itself not to the faculty of recognition or reason but to the aesthetic sense alone, subordinating them both to a synthetic impression of White's poetic oeuvre. White felt the same way about life so many of us feel as life takes its long mile that it seems to be like a dream and an illusion. For White what came to be living and enduring, a fulfilment of his experience, in some basic ways, was his art, his poetry. It helped to shield him from the sordid perils of actual existence.

If you had met White at any time in his adult life, say after his marriage in 1954 at the age of twenty-five, the man you would have seen is one that I have only the most vague impression of. It is an impression I have gathered from several photographs and from the several letters I received: a short, slender fellow, thin and bird-like, a serious countenance, a ready smile, a quick wit. But since I never met Roger White, since I have no observations of others at my fingertips and since White himself wanted me to focus on his poetry,

what readers have here is poetic evaluation as a type of philosophical activity. It is an activity as Lord Acton once described it: something concerned with "the latent background of conviction, discerning theory and habit, influences of thought and knowledge, of life and descent". I find it helpful to be able to connect White's poetry with his life, but I cannot go as far as the literary critic Emilio Roma III who wrote that "a critic will get at the meaning of a poem if and only if he does connect it with the poet's life…. he must use this material if he is to be a good critic". Neither can I go to the other extreme, as far as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault as far back as the 1950s and in the United States since the 1970s, where literary criticism has set itself the aim of erasing the author as an entity and "treating the text as a bloodless, authorless orphan". Readers so influenced by this approach to the study of literature in a spirit of aggressive demystification - and I think this approach has its place - will find my approach somewhat "belletristic". But to others, to the community of poets and readers of White's poetry, I hope this community finds what I write an encouragement to take criticism and evaluation of poetry back into their own hands. The study of literature, prose and poetry does not need to be only arcane and for some literary elite. It can be for everyman and he can still do his gardening, fix the car and watch movies. I like to think White's poetry can and will spread far and wide because, for many, his work is free of that "narrow and dull decorum" with its studied plainness which Robert Breslin saw as having "spread over most, though not all, poetry in America".

I take some comfort in the words of the nineteenth century English essayist William Hazlitt who thought we could know too much about a person. Hazlitt wrote that "the more evidence about a person you accumulate the more complex and difficult it is to 'know' someone. Interest and prejudice take away the power of judging, especially of those we love. The harder and longer you look, the more impossible it becomes to attain knowledge of others. Actual qualities do not conform to any factitious standard in the

mind but rest upon their own truth and nature". It is difficult, as Virginia Woolf once put it, describing the process of creating biography, to describe some seamless whole around the life of anyone, some "granite-like solidity of truth" and some "rainbow-like intangibility of personality". And so I do not try, nor does White even want us to try. I do not try to portray or to shape White's life; I do not strain to define his identity; I do not describe from the outside some wholeness nor view his life from the inside in all its bits and pieces. I do not run after the unity of White's person. I accept that unity, as Alfred North Whitehead expressed it, namely, as an "inescapable fact". I find Whitehead's view of personal unity helpful in connection with whatever remarks I may make about White:

Personal unity is a perplexed and obscure concept. We must conceive it as the receptacle, the foster-mother as I might say, of the becoming of our occasions of experience. This personal identity is the thing which receives all occasions of a man's existence. It is there as a natural matrix for all transitions of life, and is changed and variously figured by the things that enter it; so that it differs in its character at different times. Since it receives all manner of experiences into its own unity, it must itself be bare of all forms. We shall not be far wrong if we describe it as invisible, formless, and all-receptive. It is a locus which persists". It is a locus which Oscar Wilde believed is inhabited by "the lives of the dead". The soul that dwells within us, it was his view, is "no single spiritual entity".

The literary critic Edmund Wilson and others of his school who employ psychology and sociology in their study of literature inform us of the immense complexity and subtlety of the task of relating writers' lives to their works. The latter, a writer's work, is not simply a variation on the former; each throws light on the other. Wilson prefers to work from the writer's life to his work, but more technical psychological criticism often works the other way. This is not so much of a problem if we know a great deal about a person's life. In the case of White, Wilson and his school are of little help.

It is the role of biography to describe the contours of this highly problematic receptacle and in the process portray character, render personality, place the individual in a sequence of culturally patterned relationships. That is not my role. I find that man and milieu, idea and context meet somewhat haphazardly on street corners: in Akka, in Haifa, in Toronto, in Belleville, in Tehran and around the corner from where I live. I am not concerned with where the cameras were pointed, at what the newspapers said, how White might have appeared on TV or on the radio or the contradictions that inevitably arise from the multitude of views that people have of anyone and of White in particular. I am writing about a media event, but it is in the print media. I am not trying to transform a selection of ephemeral events and scattered accidents into some fixed documentary with reportorial authority. I am not trying to recreate White, although I must confess to a certain impulse toward elegy, toward commemoration. The fertile, the creative facts that suggest and engender - and that I am after - are not in White's life but in his poetry. This is no exercise in 'mere impressionism,' as David Daiches calls the simple setting forth of an autobiographical response in the place of a critical assessment of a work, a literary oeuvre. Autobiography is not literary evaluation.

The biography of a man whose adventures are played out silently under his brain cupola is a literary labour of another order. When a life is not crowded with incident and adventure, when a biographer cannot compile external excitements but must rely on inner greatness of spirit and on quite complex phenomena in a man's inner life, the challenge facing that biographer is greater. For the complexity of White and the phenomena associated with his poetry resides in factors like: who readers have gradually become by reading his verse; how his communication with readers is achieved; the exuberance of his language and its appeal to our intellect and feelings; and his non-partisan political poetry which overtly attempts to reveal connections between the feelings - the inner life - of the individual and objective social/historical facts. To keep the poet and his poetry

together, the doer and the deeds into one sober set of facts, under these conditions, and make it an interesting read for the public is beyond this writer. I do not see my role as an attempt to protect White, now that he has died, from "malice, obtrusive sentiment or vain curiosity", to use the words of one of Thackeray's memorialists; nor is it my role to show and tell all. I show and tell very little really of White the man: whatever harmonies and disharmonies there may have been; whatever warts and all he may have had; whatever achievements he may have had while serving on a multitude of committees, assemblies and groups, doing a myriad projects, assignments and activities as part of an embryonic order, as an adolescent, a husband, a single man, a friend, indeed in one of any number of roles he had in life. I am not trying to save him for future generations. I am trying to put his poetry in perspective. I am trying to paint a mosaic in which White's poetry, its intimate imagery with so many of the historical landscapes associated with the birth and development of his religion-and ours coexist as equal expressivities within a pattern. My aim is not to describe or embody in words some personal coherence of White the poet, like a Renaissance painting. If anything my style is more cubist. I come at White from a thousand directions, just brushing his side, touching his hair, taking a furtive look, as I hit his poetry with everything I have. It's the hit of a baseball out of the ball park or a golf ball on a long putt right into the hole. That is my aim. Sadly I often strike out or settle for an eagle. For I am no professional; I am simply someone who loves White's poetry. And to arrive at what I really believe about his poetry I speak through the lips of thinkers different from myself. For I believe, as Wilde did, that the culture of my times is seen through my analysis and words. And this requires me to go to the words of others for my own understanding and perfecting: to feel myself alive. If I want to acquire the qualities of the divine I must have contact with divine sources.

White approved, in the two years immediately before his passing, a collection of a dozen or so essays - essays which focused on his

poetry not his life, his words not his life story. Put slightly differently, this same focus on the art not the artist was expressed by George Painter in his biography of Proust. "Tell me anything," Painter wrote, "which I could not find more intensely, acceptably and deeply in Proust's works." Biography would only provide meagre details of Proust - and White. In White's poetry the reader can find his personal analysis, his introspective pondering, his inner self. His poetry, he felt, could and should stand on its own. It is the thread joining his life's occasions of experience. It is the way he discovers and clarifies his vision. It is a vision far removed from every tinge of partisanship and politics but "wholly devoted to the interests of all mankind".

I would like to say a little more about White's politics. The words of poet Carolyn Forche are useful here. Forche writes that "the quality of a poem is dependent on the quality of its engagement, a high degree of commitment". This is part of what she calls the poet's "ideological stance". The time to determine one's politics is the "whole of one's life. We are responsible for the quality of our vision, we have a say in the shaping of our sensibility. In the many thousand daily choices we make, we create ourselves and the voice with which we speak and work." This comes close to expressing the type of politics White was concerned with in his poetry. By the time White had become an adult he had been exposed for several years to what was clearly a Baha'i definition of the political. It was concerned with building a new Order and White worked within that Order in different capacities for nearly fifty years.

I think it is impossible to get a comprehensive, a coherent picture of White from his poetry. With some people, usually writers, there is a tendency to describe and record everything in their lives. This tendency gives a biographer a fighting chance. Virginia Woolf and Bertrand Russell were two such people. White did not put it all down. He put "the love and madness of life", as Woolf called life's travail and adventure, into his poetry. But I do not attempt to knot up the incoherences of White's life into some theoretical coherence.

This is no psychoanalytic exercise, however probing it may try to be. White knew and experienced a great deal but I approach this knowledge, this experience, through his poetry, not through what happened to him. If readers want an entertaining yarn about an interesting Baha'i who lived in the last half of the twentieth century, they must go elsewhere.

White kept no diary and so we do not have a detailed picture of his life, what Stendal called the "excessive pile of I's and Me's". Prose was not a sufficient vehicle for White, although he certainly made use of it in his letters and in his craft as editor. The miraculous gift that makes an artist or a poet remains a mystery, however near he may be brought to us by our need to understand him and his work. His poetry, though, belongs to all lovers and appreciators of literature, whoever and wherever they are, even if the best critics of poetry are the poets, as Seneca argued two thousand years ago and as T.S. Eliot stated the case in our own time. There is a basic unity to White's work, a unity that is difficult to define, except to say that White gives us life itself, the word and the world as seen from a particular point of view by a North American Baha'i during the second, third and fourth epochs of the Formative Age of the Baha'i Fasith. Poetry critic George Saintsbury refers to the "infinite manifestations" of poetry's "Grand Style" which he defines as "the treatment of a serious subject with simplicity". White certainly does this and, I would add, White's work is free of affectation which is fatal to any 'Grand Style' and any pretensions to understanding.

Readers will find here in these essays a personal, unsystematic, eclectic kind of criticism, creating as it moves a tone and an atmosphere that reflects in various ways the special qualities of Roger White and his writing as well as my own qualities, preferences and prejudices. I do not try to demonstrate with analytic precision the presence of any given quality in White's poetry; I respond to the achieved work rather than engaging in some technical demonstration. I like to think there is an atmosphere in this book of a small library-study, for that is where I have done all my writing. The

chairs are comfortable, the walls lined with books, some Bach or Beethoven is playing. I, like White, "Draw my chair beside the fire and/Gather silence to me./I wind my thoughts in knotless skein,/Unspoken, mile by mile, - /A league from immortality/Lay down my wool and smile" And, in the process, I draw closer to Emily Dickinson in White's poetic evocation The Figure in White; or perhaps I draw closer to myself.

White was more than ready to respond to an analysis of his poetry written by others, even though he himself wrote little about his own life and little about his poetry. The essays which I wrote and sent to him about his life and his poetry were returned quickly with the occasional comment and a general appreciation and enthusiasm for what I had written. A dozen years later, in 2002, I revised these essays; it is these revisions which appear in this book. The result of this playing down of the biographical was that I never felt I was living in White's skin, only in his poetry and in the wonder of consciousness that emanated from his mind. In my essays I try to emphasize my understanding of White's poetry and to avoid the danger of slipping into endless explanation. Criticism in literature is not a science, however theoretically based it may be. There are no established canons or standards of criticism today as the Greeks once developed in the fourth century BC in Aristotle's Poetics. I try not to over-emphasize enjoyment and the impressionistic, and so avoid making poetry a mere amusement and pastime. There is a balance, I think, between the overlapping categories of understanding and enjoyment, analysis and impressionistic response. I trust I have preserved the balance, one that is often defined in our culture as that between entertainment and education. It seems to me there is an essential key, though, to the deeper understanding of a man's poetry to be found in his life, in spite of what White says. I toy with that key in this book while accepting the premise of Carlyle's biographer Froude that "every person is a mystery even to those closest to him".

I have never written to anyone who responded with such haste to my letters. These were the last days before e-mail began to move communications electronically faster than a speeding bullet. His correspondence was humorous and engaging. One of the effects of his letters was to make me want to dip into his poetry more frequently. As I came to enjoy the man behind the poems, I came to enjoy the poems even more. I never actually met Roger. We exchanged letters for a dozen years: 1981 to 1993, years when his poetry reached out to the wide audience that he enjoyed for the last decade or more of his life. He died in April 1993 at the age of sixty-three. I have included a sample of our correspondence because it tells about the man in a way that his poetry does not. In the main, though, I have left White's correspondence to Anne Gordon Perry whose new book I trust will be on book shelves in the next year or so.

The sample of letters I do deal with, though, is partly my concession to the biographical. I also aim to convey some of the joy or delight that is produced by reading White. "Poetry only gives joy," though, writes Herbert Read, "in proportion to the understanding we bring to it and our understanding must be of the most universal and intuitive kind". White was more than a little conscious of what Sir Philip Sidney once called "man's erected wit and his infected will" His letters, at least the ones I received, are a tribute to his "erected wit". Indeed, given the human propensity and need for, and pleasure taken in, laughter, it will not surprise me if White is remembered more for his wit than his wisdom. For he is par excellence the entertainer.

Shelley saw the poet and the man writing the poetry as having two quite different natures. I find that sometimes they blend and sometimes they occupy two quite separate worlds. I can only partly agree with Shelley, but what I do in these essays, and what Roger White would have preferred me to do, is to focus on his poetry or, to use Shelley's idiom, I focus on the poet and the poetry not the man. White was only too aware of most people's preferred interest in the

man, the personality behind the poetry. He was prepared to admit that biographies were not only inevitable but that they were desirable. But such a concession he would have surrounded with a host of reservations and warnings. He would have been the first to admit that biographies are worthy of cultivation because they can enchain the heart by their irresistible interest and diffuse instruction by their diversity of form. But 'not about him' he would add, if you gave him the last word. At any rate White would have been pleased with any attempt to discuss intelligently his poetic opus. For he would have agreed with Daiches that "A civilization is judged by its amateurs, by the degree to which intelligent non-experts can discuss with sense and understanding the phenomena of their culture…. not too far removed from ordinary readers of literature."

I wrote the preface to White's last major book of poetry Occasions of Grace (1992). This preface focused on his poetry not his biography. And I do it again, here, in what is a more extensive and, I feel, a more deserving way, a decade after his passing. The timing seems right. The 'White industry' has had a quiet beginning, not an unusual one, though, for a poet. There is not yet a 'Collected Poems' for White. For someone starting out to read, to imagine and meditate upon White's verse, the journey will be demanding. The exercise would be something like setting out to explore the planet. For anyone who is already familiar with some of his poems the new ones and the new books of his poetry will fit well into their existing pattern. I have spent years on White's poems, at least twenty, during which I have examined them in some detail, underlining, making notes and watching two of the volumes that I came to cherish gradually fall apart as the binding deteriorated. I hope this time and effort, personal pleasure and profit, will in turn be of use to those who want to know more about White's poetry. For White crystallizes much of the amorphous nature of our existence, not by providing information but by a direct apprehension of the nature of reality and the significance of life. The process by which he achieves this is his style and a certain grace and clarity of performance. In

the process he creates his own universe. Occasionally I refer to it as Whiteland.

"The point of a biography," writes Ray Monk in a recent biography of Bertrand Russell, "is no more and no less than to understand its subject. But a biography is not a necessary precondition for understanding a body of work." Ray Monk, Shaw and White saw a distinction between life and work. And they would have placed the focus on the work. The work was always there to illumine the life; in fact the life could not really be understood without understanding the role played in the life and the imagination by the work. And I would add, in conclusion, that the exercise of sympathy on the part of the critic must meet and mingle with White's own predominant passions and concerns in his poetry, in his work, if his intellectual life is to be discerned, if the music of his soul is to be described, as Herder defined poetry.

I trust that readers will easily detect my sympathy meeting and mingling with White's work in the chapters that lie ahead.

My general aim could very well be a motto attributed to T.S. Eliot in his practical criticism and study of poetry: "Study the craft, follow the process and read constructively". In doing this in the essays which follow I try to strike a balance between making comments on individual poems and making them on the entire corpus of White's poetry. The extent to which I achieve this balance is the extent to which my own response to the poetry of Roger White is full and complete. The analytical criticism and the more intellectual and complicated poetry that developed after World War 1 was part of a major change of taste in poetry. White's poetry is not overly complicated and my criticism is far from the bewildering obscurity of much of contemporary criticism. I trust the reader will find here a moderate middle ground.

## CANADA'S THIRD WAVE

Chapter 3

*".....at every second of his life he was, as we all are, infinite, unseizable, imponderable."*

*- Philip Toynbee, Biography as an Art, p.196.*

It was a bad year. The stock market crash precipitated the beginning of several years of economic bleakness that have come to be known as the Depression. Roger White was born in that bad year, 1929, in Toronto, becoming part of what literary critic Maxwell Geismar called "the generation of '29' ". A new Conservative government had taken office the year before under R.B. Bennett. Two years later Canada ceased to be a colony of Great Britain thanks to the Statute of Westminster. This little-known fact mattered little to most Canadians at the time.

The first wave of exploration in Canadian history had been religious and economic: missionaries, voyagers and fur traders. The second wave was technological and scientific: railway builders, miners, people in many fields of science and technology. The third wave that explored phenomenal existence was cultural. The poetry of Roger White, beginning in the late 1940s, became part of this third wave. This, too, is a little known fact.

Until World War 1, 1914-1918, romantic and adventurous tendencies in Canada were associated with western and northern Canada. Intellectual adventurousness had its roots in classical civilization and the minute examination of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Until World War 1 and perhaps even World War 2 the classical tradition of Western civilization still held the centre of Canadian intellectual life. But after World War 2 a new continental, north-south consciousness began to emerge and with it a global, an international perspective.

The classical tradition began to lose its centrality on the Canadian intellectual landscape.

This new and emerging continental, north-south divide provided the matrix for the developing embryo, the first seeds of an evolving Baha'i consciousness in world literature. Within the context of this continental, this American expansiveness, a new literary cosmopolitanism invited readers to a luxurious feast, a great banquet of world literature. A host of writers, rising as they did above ideological and cultural differences to sound the unified note of an "international perspective", began to be heard more and more as decade succeeded decade in the last half of the twentieth century. The Baha'i voice in this literary cosmopolitanism was a small one, not surprisingly for a community which did not exceed twenty-five thousand members in Canada and, perhaps one hundred and fifty thousand members in the United States at the turn of the millennium. Globally, though, the Baha'i Faith was the second most widely spread religion on the planet. The emergence of a Baha'i consciousness, a Baha'i perspective, in the literature of the people's of the world was inevitable. This emergence has taken place in several forms and several places. One of these forms is the poetry of Roger White.

The Canadian consciousness, whether turned toward classical or Judaeo-Christian history, whether turned toward the west, the north, the south or, indeed, to the entire planet as it increasingly was, could not be conservative. It was impossible, wrote Canadian cultural historian George Grant, to build a conservative nation on a continent right beside the most dynamic nation on earth. It was not only impossible, it was ridiculous to even try. Canada had tried to do this until 1939. After World War 2 in a rapidly developing global cultural marketplace and ethos Canada moved increasingly in waters that covered the face of the earth. It was in these waters that White's poetry belonged. Although there is a strong Canadian flavour to his poetry as early as 1947, his poetry reached out to Baha'is around the world by the 1980s.

In 1929, though, White's home-town Toronto was a homogeneous Scotch-Irish community. It was noted for its smugness, its snobbery and its sterility. This was to be the case until the large intake of immigrants was absorbed in the late 1940s and 1950s. That conservative ethos and philosophy was rubbed off, given a shift outward, loosened up, as a post-war nation moved imperceptibly toward an era of multiculturalism by the 1970s. Perhaps this rubbing-off process was part of White's release, too, from that same Canadian smugness and sterility which he was born into in Toronto and which he was sure to be part of in the air he breathed in Belleville, also on the northern shore of Lake Ontario, in the 1940s. In 1947 White had begun to take an interest in a religion that had been in Canada, by then, for half a century. Something was sure to rub off during this association and it did for nearly fifty years.

In the late 1920s and 1930s Canadians still wondered why their former Prime Minister Sir Wilfred Laurier had said that the future belonged to Canada. It seemed to them that the era of the farmer was passing and that Canada was rapidly being urbanized. The optimism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had been tarnished by World War 1, to put it mildly, and what was left of that optimism was obliterated by the Depression. Whoever the future belonged to, it was not Canadians. A new optimism, though, was born again after World War 2 and White tasted its fruits, beginning perhaps with his first job as the war ended and with his first poetry in 1947. The religion he joined in 1947 was also one of great optimism and it filled his poetry for half a century.

On 29 October 1929, Black Thursday, the boom of the 1920s came to a crashing halt and the New York Stock Exchange collapsed. Within a year millions of North Americans were without work and without money. Canada was desperately affected, so inextricably tied to the US economy had she become. By 1933 one-third of the Canadian workforce was unemployed. The new fiery leader, R.B. Bennett, elected in 1930 had no solution to the problem, although he was clocked at speaking some 220 words per minute. John

Bernard White, Roger's father, moved to Belleville that year. A job there was better than none in Toronto.

Here in this small Canadian town, hugging the north-east shore of Lake Ontario, Roger White entered primary school. Here he stayed until grade ten when he took his first job as a court reporter and Justice of the Peace in the Family and Juvenile Court of Hastings County, Ontario. He was now fifteen. The year was 1944.

The 1920s and the 1930s came to be known as the years of Boom and Bust. When World War 2 ended these roller-coaster years were over. Although Canada had entered World War 2 with little emotional enthusiasm for the project of defending the Empire and Western civilization and although the war was an exhausting process, Canada was surprisingly recharged. Her economy was transformed by the war. Unemployment disappeared and the standard of living rose all across the country. There were jobs everywhere and when peace came in 1945 Roger White was sixteen and enjoying that first taste of employment.

Two years later, at the age of eighteen, Roger came into contact with a small group of Baha'is in Kingston, a large city near Belleville which Roger visited from time to time. Roger's first poem dates from this same year, 1947. That international climate was beginning to stir in the Canadian consciousness and it was reflected in the first significant wave of new members. The Baha'i community of Canada grew from about one hundred in 1945 to three hundred in 1952. By the mid-1960s the numbers had gone to over three thousand. The essentially international nature of this new message was beginning to attract an essentially conservative people on a highly dynamic continent that was going global, indeed, as the world was becoming a neighbourhood.

Of course this phenomenon was not confined to North America. White got in early, as the Baha'is did all around the world, for theirs was a religion made for a planetary culture and civilization. As its nationally elected body, the National Spiritual Assembly of the

Baha'is of Canada, formed for the first time in 1948 - indeed, as the North American Baha'i community passed into its second half century - Roger White was beginning to write his first poems. Few would read any of them for another thirty years.

White was born into a world, the North American world, which had just seen the final separation of the writer, the poet, from society. Some literary critics argue that this process of separation had begun in North America in the mid-nineteenth century and was completed in the 1920s, in the Jazz Age. The energy which had conquered the continent in the previous two centuries had, by the 1920s and 1930s and with the help of the worst war in history and the deepest depression of the industrial age, lost its direction. What some called the generation of '29 was psychologically homeless, placeless and free to create a new world. Little did that world know that a new world was in fact being created even as it went through the chaos of that great bottoming out. This generation existed, White existed, at the very start of a unique transformation, a turning of a cultural tide. With a new courage and a new faith won from crisis, new novelists arose at the very period when the nucleus and pattern of a future world order was being formed: Lardner, Hemingway, Passos, Faulkner, Wolfe, Steinbeck. White began his contribution in the forties, a later part of that new wave. The Beat poets: Ginsberg, Kerouac and Burroughs were forming their first relationships in the mid to late-forties. A new wave was indeed on its way after the holocaust of the second great war of the century, one of the lowest points in the history of civilization.

"The literary critic, Clement Greenberg, had remarked acutely about the modernist poets of the 1930s, the years before World War 2: " It is small-scale poetry, lacking resonance, lacking real culture….. Its makers have neither inherited nor acquired enough cultural capital to expand beyond the confines of their immediate experience and of a narrowly professional conception of poetry." By the time White began his poetic work, though, in the late 1940s the cultural capital had begun to be built anew. There had begun a new

turning to belief and the embryo of new forms of poetry was finding its first shaping. White had been one of those precious adventurers of those post World War 2 years, searching the unknown, a writer, at once unique and common, who would make his discoveries and endure them until his passing near the century's end. One of his discoveries was an emerging order associated with an emerging world religion.

Enjoying his childhood during that "little overture to the immense drama of the centuries," as Geismar called those years between the wars, an overture during which the nucleus and pattern of this emerging world order was given its initial shaping, White would come to play a part in formulating an understanding of its beliefs, its outreach, its meaning to the generations that had joined its ranks in the second half of the twentieth century. This embryonic 'order', a democratic theocracy in its political form, was going through some of its crucial early stages in its institutional evolution during his lifetime. The sociologist Max Weber had called these stages "the institutionalization of charisma".

Everything was changing for that generation of '29. Of course plus ca change, plus ca la meme chose. The inherent conservatism of the Canadian psyche was slow to move, even if it did live beside that great 'dynamo' to the south. White wrote about this change and this conservatism in his poetry. Living through nearly two-thirds of the first century of the Formative Age of the new religion and being one of its members for nearly fifty years after he had joined its forces in the forties, he was certainly part of its first wave. For history has its waves upon waves. The first wave of Baha'is, some 555 in the years 1898 to 1948, was succeeded by a second in the years 1948 to 1998, in the first century of its Canadian experience. It was here that the poet Roger White made his home, swam in the sea of its waters and discovered some wondrous gems which he once wrote were part of an "unmerited grace".

Chapter 4

## THE FIRST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS: 1929-1954

This essay would benefit from access to White's archival collection held now at the Canadian National Baha'i Centre in Thornhill and at the Baha'i World Centre in Haifa. But it has not been my intention to cover White's entire collection of poetry, letters, essays and references in general literature. Rather, I am attempting a general introduction to White's work since, as yet, no introduction has become available and it has been ten years since he passed away. The time was right, it seemed to me and to my publisher, for such an introductory work. The focus in this book is, in the main, on White's poetry, his major publications, not on his letters, essays and the several genres within which he worked as a creative artist with words. Some attention to these other genres is found here in the name of bringing White closer to his audience and introducing a new generation of readers to this delightful poet who happened along at a critical stage in the process of the emergence from obscurity of the religion he had been associated with since the late 1940s.

White's first published work, the first work in what could be called the Early stage of White's poetic development, was a chapbook in 1947. It was entitled Summer Window and was published by Cherry Press in Belleville, Ontario. One day a student of White will examine its contents as the White industry, now in its earliest days, expands, as it surely will. Even by his mid-to-late teens White needed to write. This need defined the basic premise upon which everything else depended. It was one of the two or three great categorical imperatives of his life. A second chapbook of poetry, also containing poetry from these early days, was published in 1973 by Haifa Publications. He called it Sketches of 'Abdu'l-Baha. I leave the examination of this poetry to future scholars. One chapbook that Roger sent me at some time in the 1980s, Old Songs/New Songs, contains several poems about White's early life before the age of twenty-one. It was certainly written before he was twenty-one. White called these poems his juvenilia. Two of them, sent to me

under separate cover, he said he wrote "circa 1947". He wrote at the top of the page "juvenilia". He said he found these "while sorting through his papers". I reproduce them here, the earliest poems that I have read from what became nearly half a century of writing poetry. There is no indication that his earliest work gave him 'the creeps' as the earliest work of the great American poet Wallace Stevens affected him as he looked back from the pinnacle of his literary success.

These were the early days of White's education as a poet. Through the experience of writing, White was learning what literary structures fitted his talents. They were important lessons. Often a poet does not learn until too late. Ezra Pound learned late that The Cantos were basically incoherent and a lifetime of over fifty years and 800 pages may have been useful for a biography of Pound but they served largely as an unvisited mausoleum for his poetry. White, on the other hand, slowly fashioned his craft without the harsh judgement that some poets inflict on themselves. One of White's contemporaries, Robert Lowell, for example, complained that his (Lowell's) poems "seemed like prehistoric monsters dragged down into the bog". White's poetic edge seems lighter, humorous, easier on his psyche - even his work from the late forties and fifties. By the seventies and eighties White had refined his literary structures. He profited, it would appear, from that early education. One of these early poems was titled Forecast:

*Emily Dickinson had a way*
*of passing every tidy day;*
*home, the hearthside and a cat,*
*to pen a verse, she asked just that.*

*My home is bare,*
*my hearthside's cold,*
*my cat has mange,*
*I'm growing old.*

*What shall I do should all disperse?*
*Pen a verse, son, pen a verse.*

White was only sixteen at the time he wrote this. The wonderful poet Emily Dickinson had already made a mark on White's consciousness. Few Canadian youths at sixteen would have enjoyed the perspicacity to appreciate this enigmatic poet of the nineteenth century who, with Walt Whitman and Emerson, gave a poetic voice of some profundity to American society in that long and arduous century. White helped hundreds, perhaps thousands of Baha'is in the 1980s and 1990s to articulate their own voice within the framework of the writings of their Faith. Most of them had joined what one writer called "this chrysalis global church" in the period of its first six teaching plans from 1937 to 1979. In the 1940s White was already defining his own voice. It was a voice that had little to do with the Brooklyn Dodgers, the New York Yankees or so much that was popular culture. "There is no clear window into the inner life of a person," wrote the philosopher Derrida, "for any window is always filtered through the glaze of language, signs and the process of signification." In these poems White gives us some of that glaze. He also gives us the very beginnings of that narrative identity which developed with the years into a tool of great power and strength and which is "a task of the imagination, not a fait accompli." This imagination empowered White to identify with the great range of historical personages found in his poetry. This imaginative activity is a process, an activity, I will discuss in a later chapter.

I include a second item of White's juvenilia here because it shows the kindness that was already a part of his style, his humour and his forgiving nature, and was also a part of his character, a character which endeared him to people until his death in 1993, and continues to do so through his poetry. It was titled And In Closing:

*Now that you have bruised my heart*
*and, tiring, said that we must part,*
*I'll smile your favourite smile and say,*
*"The gods be with you on your way,"*
*and brush aside remembering*
*and wish you joy and everything*
*that's good.*

*But if your angel deems it wise*
*to overcast your summer skies,*
*and other lovelings whom you hold*
*turn aside and leave you cold;*
*if some small wraith of misery*
*haunts your nights with thought of me,*
*that's good!*

There is self-disclosure here, but it is oh so gentle, so indirect, so light. This is but one of the many manifestations of kindness which 'Abdu'l-Baha says is a characteristic of Canadians. There is the humour, the surprise element, the delight. And this would be how the reader would come to know White and his poetry in the years ahead. The reader might have to draw on a dictionary now and then,

for White was quite a wordsmith. He digs deeply below life's surface and into his large vocabulary and he requires, often, some patient study on the part of his readers. Such patience would yield a pay-off, though; readers would come to know White as a friend. For many, they would learn something about the Baha'i Faith and life that could not be learned in the available commentaries on the Cause and in the burgeoning literature increasingly available. What I provide here in this brief biography will not detract, as biography often does, from the brilliant opacities that are many of White's poems.

The friendship that readers can enjoy is not to be based on personal acquaintance, reciprocity and having cups of tea in his home or theirs, but the kind of friendship that the Pythagoreans enjoyed, a friendship based on being part of a universal brotherhood - in the case of the Pythagoreans the universe of several Greek city states in the sixth century BC. These friends were assumed to be friends regardless of whether they knew each other. It would be a friendship not based on physical proximity or face-to-face meetings. It would be a friendship embedded in silence, in his poetry and the words of his letters. It would be a friendship that yielded no anecdotes, except those deriving from the printed word, from White's poetry. It would be a friendship characterized by sudden interruptions, sudden communications that commented in some unique way on the strangeness, the fascinating complexity, the surprising nature of human community and its existential dilemmas. Hearing not seeing is the condition of friendship for White, at least for most of those who are his readers. There is camaraderie; there is Voltairian irreverence and there is also a profound respect. In addition, people have a basic need to make evident their deepest feelings about life, part of everything they are and know. Readers of White, each in their different ways, felt they were partly satisfying this basic need in his poetry. For hundreds, thousands of Baha'is it was a refreshing relationship, a relationship of self-discovery with the help of an art form that never ended. It could always be re-created.

White knew he could not heal the multitude of wounds people who came near to his poetry had. But as a friend he might help with understanding. I am not so sure White was conscious of much of this at sixteen, in 1945, at the onset of his poetic experience. One poem he wrote, which first appeared in his Old Songs/New Songs, does go a long way to describe what he did know, where he was at, in his mid-to-late teens, say 1945 to 1950. It is called New Song. In it he refers to a certain cynicism that set in during those years. "A clean, cold, wind" left him feeling like "a stripped young tree in autumn with a cynical winter setting in." This spiritual state, he goes on, left him with "nothing large enough to house his impulse to believe".

White continues, though, and describes his psychological, his spiritual condition in 1947 or 1948 when he first came across the Baha'i Faith in those meetings in Kingston, Ontario, that he began to attend:

*The need lay as quiet, unhurried and insidious as a seed*
*snowlocked in a bleak and lonely landscape.*

These words could very well describe the condition of the needs of millions of young men and women in their late teens (as well as many adults): quiet, unhurried, insidious, waiting Micauber-like for something to turn up, waiting for a sense of direction to emerge in their lives, waiting for some love which would sweep them off their feet, some career to give them some centering and their lives some meaning. This is how White describes his early years of contact with this small group of Baha'is in Kingston:

*But forgiveness came, an unsuspecting flooding rain*
*and the seed was there, a promise kept.*

*Even your rejection was forgiven*

*and, in the burgeoning, lovesap slowly stirred.*

*God hadn't died, of course, abandoned us for Russia,*

*nor moved to Uganda.*

The lines are evocative and present a sensitive and humorous portrait of the first stirrings of White's beliefs, beliefs that would produce some of the finest poetry written by Baha'is about their experience in the second half of the first century of the Formative Age of their Faith. In White there is an etiquette of expression. There is that tact which is a part of fine poetry. There is, too, a passionate, sympathetic, insightful, astute, attractive personality who often made the writing of others seem more important than his own. Often only a fraction of the output of a poet is really first rate. In White's case the fraction is large.

The following poem takes us back to even earlier years in White's life. Innocent Ogress, refers to a period of "cloudless years", probably his late childhood, 1937 to 1941, or early adolescence, 1942 to 1945. He focuses in this poem on those magic days of his early life, cloudless years -

*when make-believe ran rampant*

*and each young heart*

*loved his private witch*

*who stoked delicious fears.*

In this poem White describes a spinster in Belleville who lived alone in a big grey house. He writes:

*she always wore one black gown*
*so this woman was our witch*
*.....*
*such adventures I remember we would have*
*trailing the old woman about*
*shivering with sweet delightful fear.*
*.....*
*she bound stray children into sacks*
*and kept them in her basement*
*but, of course,*
*we never really caught her in the act.*

Two other poems, in a collection of poetry published in 1981, give us some insight into White's life with his mother and father during his childhood and adolescence. In Memoriam: John Bernard White 1904-1971 does not tell us a great deal about his life with his father, although it reveals some of White's attitude to and understanding of his father, written perhaps a decade after his father's passing. Kathleen's Song, in that same 1981 collection, The Witness of Pebbles, tells us much more about a woman who coaxed him "toward exultancy". She was the "goodwife". She was "Earth's God's-penny". Perhaps the following lines, the first ones in the poem, place his life with his mother in the most accurate perspective:

*Life is her cause and love her sole crusade.*
*She extols, proclaims, upholds them, knows them dear,*
*Divine and indivisible. Many chilled with fear*
*Find her warming fire.*

White's mother was a woman who held the "key to recesses of hearts". She had an energy and joy that had an immeasurable effect on White's psychological and spiritual development. Perhaps it was in this critical relationship that White acquired his sensitivity and innocence, the same "swift joy" and the same "uncunning generosity".

I think it is useful to make one or two points about the poem White wrote about his father, In Memoriam: John Bernard White. Father and son relationships have long been characterized by far fewer words than the mother-son or mother-daughter relationship. White writes:

*Father, I am your book, you know me well*
*Yet said so little of this while you lived.*
*The mysteries that once held you time has sieved*
*And memory surrenders you to tell*
*The words that man and boy may barely say.*

This poem was written at some time in White's mid-to-late forties and shows an empathy, a wisdom, an identity with his father, a closeness only achieved, one safely assumes, with the passing of the years. Although the poem tells us little about White's early life in Canada it tells us a great deal about how White came to see those years and his father more than thirty years after he left home and nearly a decade after his father's death.

For all of us, though, our life story is always incomplete, partial, episodic. A man turns to poetry to provide experiential self-continuity. The poetry provides a sort of remobilization of memory in the service of living more effectively. It resurfaces the poet's life and gives a new depth to memory's story. White writes:

*I am your inmost essence, your hidden way.*

*Replication of your heart's deep need;*

*I voice your silent prayer, retrace your plan*

*And sorrow for this lonely thing - a man.*

The poet composes his life story over and over again, as we all do as go through the several stages of our lives. White here is interpreting the reality of his relationship with his father, a reality that became quite a different thing in the light of his experience, in the light of his poetic and contemplative reflection on his life's narrative, his story. He continues:

*My soul's map charts your bravest deed,*

*Bears imprint of your hope and conquered fears*

*And love. Shamelessly I shed your unspent tears.*

I asked Roger once what he thought his father's "bravest deed" might be that his soul was charting. He said it might be the occasion when his father put his foot through the television screen when someone was talking about Baha'is on television. White was impressed that his father could feel so strongly about the Baha'i Faith. Imagination and critical reflection live in the house of the mind where White composed the definition of his reality, in this poem the reality of his relationship with his father. The friends that his critical reflection and imagination bring home are a source of great illumination. They produce, here, a poem of considerable insight.  White continues, as if speaking directly to his father:

*Regard your book - you know to Whom addressed*

*And tell blind reader: is the ending blest?*

In the end White is faced with mystery in his relationship with his father. So, too, is it in our own lives. We get a sense here of what it means to be a father, a person. What were his father's "unspent years"? Did White feel, at this juncture, while he wrote the poem, a "homeless thing"? Who knows? In some ways it does not matter. But there is little doubt that we all feel this way from time to time. The meaning of this poem, like all poems, whatever its sound or its structure, remains empty and a non-event to readers unless it touches the receiving mind. The receiving mind must be active in a certain way if a transmutation from a mere set of words on a page into an experience of meaning is to occur. This activity is part technique and part an "inner ringing and singing" as the reader constructs a parallel world to the world constructed by the poet.

In a poem in a 1982 collection, Whitewash, White ponders his years in Belleville and whatever pleasures they offered to him as a growing boy - and it would appear they were for the most part pleasurable. He ponders these happy, cloudless years in the context of another form of pleasure and ecstasy, that of martyrdom. White seems to be reflecting in this poem, Sweetmeat, on his life and the indifference of his society to the religion he joined. He contrasts his life with the experience of a person living in a society which would kill those who took an unorthodox path of belief:

*I would welcome contempt*

*above indifference*

In that same 1982 collection, Whitewash, in a poem entitled Lines on Drowning, White refers to the lack of response to one's efforts to

spread the Faith in a brilliant piece of analysis: "how tiresome this pride which love nor hope nor irony convinces,/this will that will not will belief." Here was a man speaking from thirty-five years' experience in what, for me, is one of his cleverest turns of phrase and one of his most accurate statements about an important area of Baha'i experience, both in his first twenty-five years of living and in the second twenty-five that were to come.

I will have more to say about White's experience in school in a later chapter but for now let me say that for the most part White enjoyed school. He did not enjoy mathematics, metalwork or woodwork. The Catholic sisters were uniformly kind, gentle and pious. They all smelled faintly of disinfectant or witch hazel, a fact which perhaps contributed to their seeming interchangeableness and anonymity.

By 1947, at the age of eighteen, White was in the habit of visiting Kingston, the biggest city on the north-east shore of Lake Ontario. Kingston is at the point where Lake Ontario joins the St. Lawrence River at Thousand Islands. It was a natural attraction for a young man with a curious and adventurous spirit living in what was then the small country town of Belleville. Over the next five years, as the North American Baha'i community was completing its first temple in Chicago and its second Seven Year Plan, White got to know the small Baha'i community in Kingston. He also got to know some of the Ottawa Baha'is who travelled to Kingston on extension teaching trips: Winnifred Harvey was one such travel teacher; Doug Wilson and Cliff Huxtable were students at Queen's University in Kingston at the time.

From time to time he heard visiting speakers such as Ruth Moffatt, Allan Raynor and Margaret and Larry Rowden. Eventually, a small Baha'i community grew up in Belleville: Margeurite Carter, William Connors, Helen Owens, Margaret Mann, Jack Campbell, James McLaughlin and Robert Cretney. These names are, for the

most part, unknown now but by 1954 a local assembly was formed in Belleville. That same year Roger married Helen Owens.

In 1954 Roger also started working as a freelance court reporter and assistant editor of Hansard in Ottawa. This daily record of the debates in the Canadian House of Commons gave White invaluable experience which helped him get a job in 1958 in Vancouver with the Supreme Court of British Columbia as a reporter and which helped to continue watering those poetic seeds that would eventually mature twenty to thirty years later in an extensive body of poetry.

There is no doubt, though, that White was a skilled craftsman with words in these early years. John Ward, in his book The Hansard Chronicles, says that White was "acknowledged by his colleagues as one of the finest shorthand writers ever to serve the country. White gave up a promising career as a freelance journalist to join Hansard where he was for many years resident..."

The decade from 1947 to 1957 saw the beginning of White's poetic output. White produced a chapbook Summer Window in 1947. The poetry in this booklet may have gone back to earlier years. Further study of the White archives in Toronto and Haifa will tell future scholars more about the beginnings of White's poetic life in the 1940s. Job, marriage and the demands of early adulthood kept him busy. The total quantity of poetry that has come down to us from those years, at least that poetry now readily available for popular consumption and not requiring the resources of an archive, is slim. This, as yet unpublished, poem When the Gods Forsake Us, provides a retrospective look at White's early-to-mid adolescence, the years to the end of World War 2. Written five years before his passing, this poem gives us a window into his early youth in Toronto – at the age of fourteen years:

*Inexplicably disconsolate*

*I reach for a forbidden cigarette*

*out of a perverse loyalty to Paul Henreid*
*who sanctified the ritual of lighting up*
*back in the days when the Surgeon General*
*minded his own business.*

*Most of my significant decisions*
*were made during matinees*
*at the Alhambra, Danforth Avenue, 1943.*
*Fay Wray would have given that ape the slip*
*if she'd known how much I loved her,*
*ageless in reruns.*
*I'd never have torn her dress.*

*The casual slouch of Bogart's fedora,*
*Cary Grant's insouciant grin -*
*the mirror yawned at my worshipful impersonations.*

*No one warned me that the immortals would die.*
*Have I mentioned that I'm still in mourning*
*for Leslie Howard and Vivien Leigh?*

*It's 1987 and friends in their 70s*
*who've forgotten Sonny Tufts*
*complain that they're up*

*several times in the night*
*and hint at other dark indignities.*

*I am inconsolable.*
*Do not come to me*
*saying in the clipped tones of Bette Davis,*
*What do you mean? Whatever do you mean?*

For the years of his late adolescence and the earliest years of his adult life (1946-1952) we must also remain scantily informed. All we get from these early years is the occasional poetic revelation into some aspect of the impressionable years of a Canadian youth and young adult who became, in the last dozen years of his adult life, a poet who defined and described the experience of Baha'is in the last half of the twentieth century perhaps better than anyone else. The identity that White conferred on his readers was not so much his own, although he does give us a human and humorous taste, but theirs.

It did not concern White that he left little information about his life, any direct autobiographical detail, for to him the poet was not to be confused with the poem. If the reader wanted to know about the poet, about Roger White, White advised readers to study his poetry. Therein, he said, was his life. Although not explicitly autobiographical, poem after poem tells much about White. His autobiographical poetry is not, as Ann Goetting argues in her study of the autobiographical process, some simple repetition of the past. His poetry is the presence of a spirit in a world now gone, the creation of a particular view of reality, reconstructed truth, fact and experience. This truth, this reality, is not always self-evident or even subject to proof. It often adds an element of seasoned consciousness to

some original experience, an interpretation of life's processes. It was an expression of how White dealt with the life around him.

Combining history and biography, much of White's poetry is a type of sociological imagination, as C. Wright Mills described it back in 1959. This imagination escapes the merely personal by surrendering to the features of life's bigger picture; it escapes personality because the poet is only a medium, a vehicle, a vessel, a catalyst in the process of creation. This forces the critic to direct his attention to the poems not to the poet. T.S. Eliot called this the "impersonal theory of poetry" and Goethe said it was part of the poet standing "above art and the object" so as to utilize art and its many forms for his own purpose and deal with it in his own manner.

With Proust, White would have concurred that "in reality, every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self. The writer's work is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without the book, he would never have preconceived in himself." With Ortega y Gasset and the poet Wallace Stevens, White saw himself as the poet of himself, but he also provided a view, a philosophy of life. It remained the task of his readers to find themselves in his poetry. White was conscious, as we all are, of the incomplete, episodic nature of daily life. Poetry provided a source of experiential self-continuity; it remobilized his memory in the service of the living, of living more effectively; it provided freshness of surface and depth of meaning and retention. It does the same for White's readers who travel with him in his poetry. For what readers see depends on what they bring to White's poetry and what they read depends on what they bring to the reading. Readers, in other words, create their own poetry through their own interpretive strategies "as members of a larger community". The interpretation of a poem is not so much the art of construing but the art of constructing. Poetry can penetrate deep into people's personal lives because in giving form to their worlds, it articulates their nature, sensibility, energy, passion, their life of feeling. For many White's poetry did just that.

Before we turn to White's poetry and the specific books of poetry that he had published, though, we will examine in the essay which follows his second twenty-five years: 1954-1979. It is difficult to draw on what some literary historians see as a developmental model for my study of White. Early, Middle and Late can be comfortably applied to White but I am not sure how useful such a division into periods of writing is in White's case. Like the theories of developmental psychology: Freud, Erikson, Piaget, et al., whose application is complex and still unfolding their relevance to students in the field of psychology, this chronological development model applied to White's poetry could be a study in itself. For my purposes, though, these three stages simply provide an outline, a broad chronological framework, within which White's poetry can easily fall. How useful this model is for showing White's development as a poet is difficult to assess. This model may be more useful to us as we try to account for his growth as a poet than it is to describe his life's narrative since information here is somewhat thin on the ground. And, as I have pointed out at an earlier stage, that is the way White wanted it. I leave the analysis of this question of development to future literary critics and lovers of White's verse. And so, we now turn to this Middle period of his writing.

Chapter 5

## THE SECOND TWENTY-FIVE YEARS: 1954-1979

From 1954 to 1966 White lived in Vancouver, a centre of a great poetic upsurge that had begun as early as the 1940s in Canada and the USA. White does not mention any direct influence from this awakening poetic spirit, a spirit that continued on into the 1950s and 1960s among the Beat Generation of poets, the Black Mountain poets, the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance and the poets of the New York School. During these years of a great burgeoning of poetry in North America White worked with the Supreme Court of British Columbia as a reporter. In 1966 White moved to Nairobi in Kenya and remained there until 1969 when he returned to North America. He lived in Palm Springs, California until 1971 where he served as secretary and research assistant to writer and Hand of the Cause Bill Sears.

Bill and Marguerite Sears inform us that they suggested to Roger that he apply to serve at the Baha'i World Centre in 1971. They were planning a six-month teaching trip at the time. As Bill put it while he carried Roger's bags to the car back in 1971: "You know, of course, Roger, that this is good-bye." "What do you mean?" replied Roger. "Do you think the Universal House of Justice, once they hear about all the wonderful things you do, your multiple skills, and what a remarkable Baha'i you are, will ever let me steal you back again?" Bill also underlines that Roger was not his assistant: "we were partners together under the eye of Baha'u'llah, along with Marguerite."

These were prophetic words and that is exactly what happened. White came to Haifa in May 1971 and stayed for twenty years. Had it not been for his bad health he would still be there today. His work was especially invaluable in compiling and publishing volumes XIV and XIX of The Baha'i World. While in Israel he served for many years as the associate editor of the first English language poetry journal of Israel, Voices-Israel, founded in 1971.

One interesting story comes from the Kenya period and that was White's "infiltration" of the Nairobi Theatre Group. It was a "white only" theatrical group and White, although being offered a dancing spot, had to refuse due to "other obligations". I have not gathered many details from this period, nor from the Palm Springs chapter of White's life. My aim here has been to provide a short biographical sketch as a backdrop for the study of White's poetry.

Most of the poems in Old Songs/New Songs: 1947-1977 come from White's first six years in Haifa. They did not receive a wide circulation, perhaps only a few of White's friends to whom he sent a copy. Some dozen poems can be found in this small booklet that did not appear later in Another Song, Another Season. It was somewhat fitting when two years later, in 1979, his Another Song, Another Season was published. White was fifty and he had produced this song for all seasons. A few of the poems that White had published before 1979 were not readily available again in this bright new book of poetry which was published by George Ronald in 1979. It is not my intention to examine in any detail White's poetry before 1979. Most Baha'is have never seen it and this study of White's earliest poetry, from 1947 to 1977, some thirty years of poetic output, will have to await a more comprehensive treatment by a future author. But White's colloquial prose readiness and casual speech combined with poetic depth and clear direct feeling was there in these early poems, in his language, a language for the whole mind in its most wakeful state.

So, too, were the difficult poems, the kind of poems that needed to be read over and over again, that required familiarity. And even then a persistent reader will not get all the poem and all the levels of meaning. White was to write a great deal in the years ahead and by the end of a lifetime he would write what a lifetime brought to him. It is one of the advantages of having some of your finest hours at the end of the road, in contrast to the early brilliance that many poets have enjoyed over the centuries. The reader did not have to understand every jot and tittle of White's verse. Part of the reason

readers are not able to understand every line and phrase in every poem is what you might call the aesthetic aspect of poetry. "Aesthetics," Louis Reid writes, "is difficult because it courts vagueness and evades precision." It is difficult to analyse poetry clearly and philosophically. There is a certain ineffable quality to poetry. To be "aesthetically equipped," Read goes on in his analysis, requires "a great sensitivity to the suggestiveness of the material which he perceives."

There is no doubt that the years 1971 to 1979, White's years in Haifa before the publication of Another Song, were an immense stimulus to his poetic creativity, to the wonder and delight, the joy and the sense of a certain fundamental assurance and happiness that had little to do with the glitter and tinsel of an affluent society. There is also little doubt that his years before arriving in Haifa laid an important foundation for his future literary output. Like T.S. Eliot's first marriage which some critics have seen as a heaven-sent trial that spurred on both his poetry and his faith, which gave him an opportunity to suffer and write poems, White's marriage and divorce during this second twenty-five year period, 1954-1979, helped to provide, it could be argued, some of that fertile base. White also suffered during his years in Canada, in Africa and in the USA, to say nothing of the eight years in Haifa. But whatever his suffering was, it is to his poetry that we must go to search out his lessons, not to his biography. There were romantic attachments in his life, tests in his various jobs and those inner demons we all face, but it has not been my purpose to describe these relationships, these tests and these demons in any detail. It would appear that to a large extent he fought his own spiritual battles by himself, as most of us must do for the most part.

Perhaps White's work could be seen as part of what Northrop Frye has called "the colossal verbal explosion" that took place in Canada after 1960. His poetry could also be seen as an art form which grew as the Canadian Baha'i community grew after the formation of its National Spiritual Assembly in 1948. White's work

was also part of a long history of poetry in the Babi and Baha'i Faiths going back to the 1840s. However suddenly his poetry may have appeared, like some miraculous tree sprung full grown, ex nihilo, in a desert, to most of those who had themselves become Baha'is in the generation after World War 2; however charming his work was - and indeed it did hold a special charm for thousands of readers by the 1980s - poetry written by Baha'is and Babis goes right back to the earliest days of their history. The artistic and ideological originality of White's poetry - and his prose - is partly the result of a slow, painful, joyful century-and-a-half-long process, a tradition richly impregnated with the inspirational poetry and prose of two manifestations of God.

The wider generation of poets who began publishing poetry in the 1940s and 1950s, at the same time White began his creative output and moved into his thirties, people like Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Delmore Schwartz and Randall Jarrell, were born a little earlier than White, around the time of World War 1. And they died in the sixties and seventies, fifteen years before he did. I always find it hard to identify White with these poetic luminaries of the mid-century, whose names and lives are known now only to a poetic literati. Even their poetry is slipping away into obscurity. There is in their lives and their poetry a tragedy, an obsessiveness, a psychological disorientation, perhaps partly due to living through both those experiences of collective insanity: World War 1 and World War 2. White is more what Richard Tillinghast, a professor of literature at the University of Michigan, calls "laid back". Perhaps, too, it is the perception of White's poetry as a magnificent ornament adorning an international literature, an ornament that can occupy the lives of his readers for generations to come.

The primary currents of this one-hundred-and-fifty-year poetic literary process will not be examined here, nor will White's tangential connection with the literary developments in Canada and North America in what was one of its most fertile periods of growth and development. Part of our difficulty is that we know so very little

about White's life during this time. We know he divorced just before embarking on his international service to the Baha'i Faith in 1971. We know he was busy with his new portfolio at the Baha'i World Centre which in the 1970s was engaged in the process of building the seat of its international administrative centre. Some future literary historian or literary biographer, I trust, will write to those who knew White and put together a more detailed picture of his activities, his interests and the influences on his poetry. My interest is a more focused one, namely, on his poetry, and the rest of this book will focus more sharply on this poetry - as Rabindranath Tagore counselled: the poem not the poet.

In the foreword to his autobiography American novelist John Updike wrote: "Description solidifies the past and creates a gravitational body that wasn't there before." There is a "background of dark matter - all that is not said," he goes on, "which remains buzzing." There is much in White's life that remains buzzing. But the hand of the maker - in this case, White - knows better than the eye of the observer, who are his readers. And this is the way White made it, the way he wanted it, as far as he was concerned the only way it could be. It was his poetic art that White wanted his readers to focus on. For it was art he knew so well, from his own experience, that could transform a life through its power to capture the vital nature of feeling in objectified, dynamic and artistic forms. Poetry, as he experienced it intimately, could give outer form to inner effect. It could refine, clarify, deepen and extend the quality of our inner subjectivities.

Identities are historically conferred, ambiguous, and subject to redefinition. The experience, the life, of a poet like White will be examined and explained differently each time some biographer goes to work. And each time readers will find out about the events, the people, the institutions, the ideas, the emotions and the relationships that became meaningful to a Canadian who used language to pattern his past and his world from a different perspective. His first memories, his childhood, consisted of the events of that horrific

decade of the 1930s when the Baha'i Administrative system assumed the framework of its present form and the first teaching plan swung into action. He became a Baha'i in the 1940s when there were about two hundred Baha'is in all of Canada and he grew in his middle age to become the major poet of the Canadian Baha'i community. With his extraordinarily original imagination he helped to create for us - so to speak - many new tastes, colours and sounds, many real people and a history alive with new meanings. In these discoveries we discover ourselves.

Chapter 6

## THE LETTERS OF ROGER WHITE

For a dozen years I wrote to Roger and from 1989 to 1991 I sent him essays I had written on his poetry. In reply I received his delightful letters, the occasional essay he had written, cartoons, jokes, poems, clippings from magazines and newspapers, a virtual cornucopia of printed and visual material. His letters and essays show a side of Roger quite different from his poetry. Roger's letters and essays were consistently light and humorous, although the themes were serious ones. His poetry did have a light and humorous side but I think, on balance, it tended to the serious. At least that is how I have come to see it. Some readers find much of White's poetry too complex and dense for their liking. Such readers would not find his letters and essays too dense. The letters and essays I received struck quite a different tone from White's poetry. Anne Gordon Perry has made a collection of White's letters but the only letters I will draw on here were ones I received during those twelve years. They are quite enough to provide a base of analysis and comment. In a book like this, devoted to a study of White's poetry, this commentary on White's letters provides a certain balance, a different perspective. It is, as I have said before, a concession to the biographical. In the end, though, I am inclined to agree with the sentiments of Henry Miller who wrote: "I don't care who the artist is, if you study him deeply, sincerely, detachedly, you will find that he and his work are one."

Some poets, like famous American poet Wallace Stevens, have a definite line between their poetry, their role as a poet, and their professional/social life. Stevens was for many years the vice-president of an insurance company and he did not like his professional associates even to know he wrote poetry. He lived in two worlds quite inscrutable to each other. White, on the other hand, was more like the poet Yeats whose life and work were all of one piece, part of a comprehensible whole, open for inspection by the rational intellect while containing irrational elements as all of our lives do. He may

have felt his life not interesting enough for someone to write a biography but he did not see the different parts of his life as separate compartments, with definite lines between them, quite as sternly as Stevens. White's letters certainly illustrate this interaction, this wholeness. Few poets in their letters write so freely about their art, their intentions, their observations of life. Fewer write so well, so entertainingly. Some poets, when not speaking about poetry and the arts in general, write in quite an ordinary, quite a banal way. White is as sparkling, as humorous, in his letters no matter what he writes about. White was like Jane Austen who "hardly ever wrote a letter that had not a smile or a laugh in it". I will provide a few examples below for the delectation of readers.

Looked at from without, White's life was uneventful - at least that is how he saw it. Like American novelist Henry James, White's adventure was an inner one "known only to himself except in so far as he himself put it into words" Self-revelation, letting it all hang out, has become in recent decades part of what might be called a confessional mode in letter writing and poetry. Genuine self-revelation, with its associations of wisdom, humour and delight, though, is a rare gift, almost a creative art form. Many people's autobiographies, their memories, their real confessions from the current of their days, are often alien and remote accounts leaving readers as distant from the writers as they were at the start. Alternatively autobiography is often overdone, overstated, with every sordid detail of a life set out before our eyes. Somehow knowing the intimacies of people's lives does not necessarily bring them closer. Five hundred page autobiographies often leave us out in the cold. A great life does not necessarily make a great book, or a great letter writer. So, although White did not keep his life in clearly separate compartments, as American poet Wallace Stevens did, neither did he open up his private domain for the minute inspection of the biographer. Rather, he felt there simply was little for the would-be biographer to inspect.

In the end though, at least in the several dozen letters I received, White was far from aloof. He created a sense of intimacy. I came to feel as if he were a close friend, even though I never met him. Like the biography of Henry James, whatever biography on White is eventually composed, it will draw heavily on his letters for its portrait; on that side of his life he showed to the world he lived in and loved and with a side that is little more than suggested here. In his letters to me White enters easily into my world and meets me on my own ground. I am sure these letters are not the exception. They are, I am confident, representative of a style that is endearing, honest and full of life.

So what I would like to do here is bring near the letters of a man I never met, but whom I came to feel close to, primarily through his letters and, secondarily, through his poetry. In reading these letters ten years after his passing I experience a piercing radiancy of meaning. Perhaps that is too strong a term; that is how the historian Thomas Carlyle described the letters of his wife that he was gathering together for publication after her death. I am reminded from reading White's letters not to grow tedious as a result of my religious proclivities. I am reminded too that the world, for the most part, does not care whether I bow my head before the latest Prophet of God.

In some ways my study of these letters confirms another poet Robert Graves' view of the poet and the man: namely, that there is no distinction. Henry David Thoreau put it in a similar vein: "the artist and his work are not to be separated... the deed and the doer together make ever one sober fact". This has not always been the case and White clearly saw the poet and the poem as two separate worlds, at least in so far as his life was concerned.

This whole question of the involvement of the consciousness of the writer in the reader's experience of his work is a relatively new way of experiencing literature. When Shakespeare's plays were published in 1623, seven years after his death, the editors were not

interested in satisfying any public interest in Shakespeare the man--for, indeed, there was no such interest. How much we have changed in four centuries! Publishers now have become hesitant to publish literary studies that do not give much attention to the writer's life.

I also get a sense from White's letters of the total span of a life, in this case White's, between the ages of fifty and his death at sixty-three reflecting as he did on his whole life back to 1929. I get a sense, from the fresh air in his letters, that I have a key to an unfamiliar room in my own house. It is a room filled with the memorabilia of my religion and everywhere there is laughter and joy, familiarity and a delightful common sense and an awesome sense of the tragic. But I am cautioned by a remark of Sharon Campbell in her analysis of the poet Emily Dickinson's letters: "It is questionable whether anyone's letters should be taken as a reliable form of biography... letters may, in fact, tell us more in fact about the postures that replace relationship than about the relationships themselves."

I feel some caution, too, in expressing my enthusiasm for White, indeed for anyone attempting to follow a spiritual path, by a remark made by Samuel Johnson about his biographer Savage: "The reigning Error of his Life was that he mistook the Love for the Practice of Virtue, and was indeed not so much a good Man as the Friend of Goodness." Of course White does not appear to have any of the gross indecencies or deficiencies of Savage and I do not want, here, to put White down in any way. Rather my point is that the lofty heights to which the Baha'i Faith exhorts its votaries inevitably make the individual believer, however much he or she has achieved, feel quite conscious of their sins of omission and commission. White knew he was no saint and, as he expressed this idea so succinctly in his poem Lines from a Battlefield: "I loved my enemy but sought the Friend."

Indeed one could argue that, since I never met White, how could I claim relationship. Surely the letters were like the postures one observes in a favourite comedian, entertainer or social analyst on

television. One feels close, but does one really become close? I suppose we all become close to different people in life in different ways. Although there are obvious similarities the whole thing, the process, the theme is idiosyncratic. Each individual must define just how, and in what way, closeness is achieved for him or her in their lives and with whom.

What I would like to do for the reader is to define and describe my correspondence with White. For it is my relationship with White, forged over twelve years with the aid of his letters and, to a much lesser extent, my responses that are the centre of the account here in this brief essay. There is something of the everyday person, the entertainer, the educated poet giving us his imaginative outpourings because he has the excuse, the occasion. There is in his letters a commentary on his work and on himself. Readers can get some idea of how he created his poems and how he created himself. But I provide only a glimpse. Readers need a more complete collection of his letters to really get the view through this window. Such a view may be the closest true biography we are likely to get or need.

White's last letter to me was written nine months before his passing. In its brief three paragraphs there is contained the three main characteristics of his correspondence: the practical, the humorous and the intellectual. White comments on the introduction I wrote for his last major book of poetry, Occasions of Grace. He comments on when I was likely to get my hardcover copy that he had paid for and had arranged for his publisher to send to me. The last words he wrote to me, as it turned out, were: "I am ever grateful to you..." I was about to turn forty-eight and my life as a serious writer of poetry was in the process of beginning, although I did not know it at the time. I had been writing occasional pieces of poetry during the years 1980 to 1992, although I referred to my poetry only rarely in my letters to Roger.

From July to October 1992, six months before he passed away, I received several books in the mail from Roger. He seemed to be clearing his decks, his desks, his library, in anticipation that the ship was finally coming into harbour. All of the books, save one, have been read over and over in the ten years since they arrived in the post. I would like to comment on these books, briefly, since they tell a story, something of White, each in their own way. The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, (editor: Thomas H. Johnson, Faber and Faber, 1984), arrived in July 1992. One of Roger's books of poetry One Bird One Cage One Flight was written in "homage of Emily Dickinson". I have written an essay on this book of poetry in the pages ahead and so I will leave comment on that book for now. Receiving this book did not surprise me, though it gave me great pleasure. Somehow it symbolized one of the many currents of our correspondence. It contained some 1,775 poems and it will pleasantly occupy some of my time each year as long as my mental faculties are operating. Dickinson is among the great poets who have ever lived, some argue the greatest.

In July two other books arrived: existential psychologist Rollo May's The Courage To Create, (W.W. Norton, London, 1975); and novelist Lawrence Durrell's Alexandria Quartet, (Simon and Schuster, 1957). I had read the former and promptly reread it. The latter I have still to read, although I have read several reviews. In early October 1992 I received copies of White's final two books of poetry: The Language of There, (New Leaf Pub., Richmond, BC, 1992); and Notes Postmarked The Mountain of God, (New Leaf Pub., Richmond, BC, 1992). Inside the front cover of the former, Roger wrote: "with these lines I probably exit - smiling, waving, heading for There".... And so he did six months later. I never heard from him again.

George Steiner wrote that Durrell was trying to keep literature literate and trap reality in a mesh of precise words. White tried to do the same thing. Perhaps that is why he sent me Durrell's four volumes. One day I will read Durrell, a writer whom American literary

critic Alfred Kasin says is "concerned with pleasing his own imagination" not with "making deeper contact with the world". While I certainly please my imagination through my writing and while I would like to make deeper contact with the world, I have not, as yet, done so - at least not in my writing. Rollo May is a thinker and writer I have been reading since 1973, with his book Love and Will. I will not go into the many ideas of May, since I am concerned here with my correspondence with White. Roger wrote on the inside of the hard cover: "much or maybe all May says about 'the experience' has been true of my encounters". He was of course talking about his experience of creativity and the relevance of Rollo May's views on the subject to his writing of poetry. One could write a separate essay on this book, on White's view of creativity, and one day I may.

Occasions of Grace came out in April 1992 and on April 24 Roger wrote, referring to the introduction of 2,500 words I had written: "your new piece is splendid; thank you for sending me a copy. I wouldn't change anything you've written". Roger also wrote, in that same letter - "pleased that you made friends with Epstein." Joseph Epstein wrote Plausible Prejudices: Essays on American Writing. White had sent this book to me in February 1992. Whatever wisdom Epstein possessed on reviewing books - and he had some clever comments on the subject - was a little late. It was late for Occasions of Grace but it was not late for the essays I was to write on all of White's works. I had no idea at the time; I had little appreciation of the wisdom of his sending me this, indeed most, of these particular books. It must have been my big ego that prevented me from seeing the meaning behind White's generosity. White was not casually casting off some unwanted volumes that he would have no need for beyond the grave. He was being very practical and I have little doubt that he had the needs of the Baha'i Faith at the top of his list of priorities, of reasons for doing what he was doing in sending me these several books.

Indeed Epstein's book was the first in a series of what you might call helpful perspectives that would and did help me in the years to

come as I pondered over all that White had written. White closed that letter of 24 April with the words, referring to Epstein, "You've found a true mate". By 24 April, I had indeed. This somewhat complex account has several messages and significances. I leave it to readers to interpret the various meanings themselves. White seemed to welcome any grain of reality, any speck of significance round which his imagination could pile its rings. So promptly and eagerly did he reach out to things that floated by in my letters, in his daily life and in the lives of others and the world at large. He then converted these specks into the richer and more adventurous life that he felt we should all lead. I felt from time to time that he was showing me 'the way' but oh so gently and without the sense of advice-giving that so often reduces advice to a form of dry and unwanted moralizing. He seemed to be so alive with the whole of his sensibility. At least that was the side I saw in the letters I received.

In mid-January 1992 Roger wrote at the beginning of his letter: "I never know the date - make one up, if you care to." A sign that the end was near? I had written a brief paper on The Tablet of the Holy Mariner and sent a copy to him. He thanked me for it and referred to Occasions of Grace. "Perhaps Occasions of Grace will not be a posthumous publication, after all." As it turned out, he lived for one year after its publication. White was a busy man in that last year. Three books of his poetry were published! If the strain was exhausting his strength, as well it might, it gave him one last year of the fullest and deepest experience that he had, perhaps, ever known. At least that was how I was reading it in his letters thousands of miles away on the other side of the Pacific Ocean in Australia.

White did not think his life would make much of a biography. This is clear from the last paragraph of this letter of mid-January 1992: "Hunched as I was over a typewriter most of my life transcribing other people's words, Anne Atkinson [working on a biography of White in 1992] may have some difficulty infusing excitement into her account of my activities. But she plods on." The main

reason why my short biography in these introductory chapters in this book is short, is this view White had of his life. Most of the significant stuff in his life involved writing. This view of the insignificance of the ordinary aspects of life is a common one among writers. A person who does a great deal of writing is taking part in a solitary activity that is difficult to describe as exciting. "What is needed," White goes on in that same paragraph, "is a cache of forgotten outrageous love letters written by or to me, preferably written by a woman of noble birth but unsavoury reputation."

White goes on, in closing that same letter, to expand on the essentially uneventful nature of his life, as he saw it. He carries on in a humorous vein explaining how he never would have found time to write such letters of romance because "secretaries are expected to be at their desks from 8 'til 5:30, and when one considers deadlines and overtime... And add to that, time devoted to firesides and committee meetings and gatherings of the Spiritual Assembly, the omission and commission of sins would surely have had to take second place." And so much of White's life was, in fact, serving someone as a secretary and the inevitable meetings in the evenings. To get at the inner dynamics of this aspect of his life would require a pen abler than mine.

In October 1991 I sent Roger one of the many essays I had written on his poetry. Roger had, by then, left the Baha'i World Centre. Two months after he left, on 12 June 1991, he wrote: "I received your letter postmarked 18 November 1990; it must have vacationed on the Riviere en route." His transfer to the west coast of Canada did not seem to affect his humour. Nor did the news that he had inoperable lung cancer. As he put it: "I was in Canada - as an officially retired gentleman - merely three days before I suffered acute shortage of breath, was confined for three weeks in hospital where I was subjected to various tortures and medical tests, and was pronounced a victim of inoperable lung cancer."

He continued in that same letter: "After all the discomfort of a quadruple bypass, I am vexed in the extreme by the news, though I recognise it gives one an unequalled opportunity to discover whether one really believes that death has been made a messenger of joy... And the verdict comes hot on the heels of my having at last invested in the jumbo edition of Webster's dictionary that I've coveted for years."

In what was probably the funniest letter I received, White goes on: "My doctor, a very likeable fellow, has predicted that I shall be one of those irritatingly noble and saintly beings who will bow to the inevitable with radiant acquiescence and whose last agonised hours, embraced with spiritual resolve, will be an example to the entire hospital ward and a comfort and confirmation to the medics and nurses."

And there is more: "Some friends, no doubt, will accept my news with a regret that is tinged with an astute enviousness." And finally: "From here can I hear you say, 'Wow! No more Assembly or committee meetings'?"

Roger's letters invariably enclosed "bits and pieces" as he called them. I collected a significant mass of material over those twelve years. Indeed, a separate study could be made of the 'little goodies' he enclosed with his letters. I may refer to the occasional piece in this essay but for the most part I ignore these inclusions: quotations, poems, cartoons, newspaper clippings, jokes, advertisements, magazine articles, a myriad array of places where the Baha'i Faith got mentioned, et cetera.

One such goodie is a must, though. It is a poem he wrote and sent to me "on leaving the World Centre". It's a gem:

*Those who his company eschew*
*complain, "His parting's overdue".*

*While those who count his presence dear*

*protest, "He was too briefly here".*

*Still others mutter with a yawn,*

*"Oh, was he here? So, has he gone?"*

The Universal House of Justice wrote the following, in a letter dated 23 April 1991, on the eve of White's departure from the Baha'i World Centre:

*"Dear Baha'i Friend*

*For twenty years you have rendered devoted and invaluable services at the Baha'i World Centre, and on the eve of your departure it is difficult to bid farewell to you. We cannot but recall with heartfelt gratitude your loving assistance as Secretary-Aide to our former colleague, Mr. David Hofman, as well as your noteworthy contribution to the Publishing Department. In addition to these specific assignments your manifold contributions to life at the World Centre have been a real source of enrichment.*

*Your talents and abilities have won the admiration and respect of all of us. Little did we know when you arrived in 1971 that there was now a budding poet in our midst - a field in which you have now distinguished yourself."*

About a week before White received this farewell letter of appreciation, he replied to my letter of 30 March. He was about to leave the World Centre. In that letter he gave me permission to quote from his letters, although the full text of his letters he felt "do not merit publication". He wrote: "Yes, of course, you have permission to quote from letters. I just have difficulty imagining their being of interest. When attention is focussed on my life my embarrassment

arises from the dullness of my existence; I should want to oblige any biographer by having an infinitely more complex and interesting life. Not that a list of the Baha'i committees I have served on is utterly without fascination - staying awake while reading it is the trick. Zzzzzzzzzzzzzz."

White kept coming back to Tagore's theme: 'the poem not the poet'. If we wanted to know Roger White we needed to study his poetry. That was his fundamental biographical point which I have repeated, I am sorry dear reader, ad nauseam. This is the basic rationale for the emphasis in this book on White's poetry. But these few words on his letters and essays will serve their purpose. It is natural in our society for people to want to know something about the artist as they go about studying his art. Men whose lives are crowded with incident and adventure make for quite a different biography than those whose dramatic adventures are played out silently between their ears in the corners of their parietal and frontal lobes. White was in this latter category. I find there is some truth in the words of Emilio Roma III, namely that "a critic will get at the meaning of a poem if and only if he does connect it with the poet's life... he must use this material if he is to be a good critic". White's letters have helped me here. For, as Thomas Hardy once wrote, "To cull from a dead writer's whole achievement in verse portions that shall exhibit him is a task of no small difficulty, and of some temerity." White's letters and essays helped provide me with some of that temerity.

"I write best to people I don't know," Wallace Stevens is reported to have said. By "best" he meant writing about his poetry and about art. Stevens' poetry did not become central to American poetic history until a decade after he had passed away and his letters were not published for three decades after his demise. It is too early to know if this would be true of White and his letters. It was certainly true of that portion of his letters that I received. For White certainly did not 'know' me in the normal sense in which people know each other. Like Stevens, White was also an intellectual's poet, a poet of ideas,

with a poetry above the economic and partisan-political squabbles of society, a poetry that travelled widely in the exotic places of the mind.

To return to his letters: with this letter of 15 April 1991 White enclosed "a list of reviews" of his poetry, "a list of appreciations, "an index of titles of his poems" and "an alphabetical index of first lines of his poems." He gave me a solid foundation for my personal exploration and contribution to the White industry. Indeed, I would have to live to be ninety-six, if I was to spend half my life exploring his poetry. With ten years under my belt, though, it looks as if I am off to a start. Time will tell if it's a flying one.

The same day White wrote to me, 15 April, he also wrote to the editors of Baha'i Canada, responding to a letter to the editor that criticized the inclusion of his poem A Letter to Keith in the March/April issue. Were this essay not primarily concerned with the White-Price correspondence and not the many other letters White wrote during his life I would quote this letter to the editor in full, for it is masterful if nothing else. It makes me wish White had written more essays, more literary criticism. For his prose is ingenious, self-revealing and does not soften or discount the awkwardness of the issue by impoverishing the facts. He takes the issue - male attitudes to women - head on, with intelligence and sensitivity. White also sent me in that same month an essay he entitled An Articulate Silence. It was an explanation of how he went about the process of writing. It was clear, concise and articulate. The Baha'i community may have found a poet, but it lost an essayist. Writing poetry was unquestionably White's first love. Like English poet, Thomas Hardy, other writing was utilitarian; poetry came first.

There is one thing that White's letter to the editor of Baha'i Canada, as well as his many letters to me, illustrates, and that is a distinction that the literary critic Leone Vivante makes "between poetic thought and the poet's thinking about or around his poetic thought". Something comes into being, some genuinely creative

form, some absolutely inherent richness and depth, that is new and that "can not be explained by other influences". The study of all of White's letters, his few essays, any biography that comes to be written, all stand outside "the inherent richness and depth" that is only available in White's poetry.

By April 1991 I had completed an outline of White's life, at least the first twenty-five years: 1929 to 1954. He returned my outline with several corrections of detail. I had informed him, in my letter of 30 March, that George Ronald felt that a book about him was "not timely at the moment", although they indicated that one day they would "want to publish such a book - perhaps under the title 'Official Poet Laureate' " Roger's response to this bit of news was: "The possibility they raise of a future publication in which the "un" is deleted from "unofficial" poet laureate is surely an advance, of sorts." I do not think the subject held his interest significantly, as he discarded the subject with his gentle humour.

Roger was interested in the close reading of his poetry by anyone who took the interest. My "generosity in devoting time to such close reading" he said touched him deeply and commanded his "heartfelt appreciation". In that same letter, 9 January, 1991, Roger described several poetry readings he had given at the end of December at what was to become the first Baha'i university, the Landegg Academy in Switzerland, where he was one of the guests of honour. He wrote: "....in breaks I just moped about looking poetic and gazing soulfully at the beautiful lake. Other than that I'm not aware of disgracing myself too seriously."

The Gulf War was just breaking out. White wrote: "Well, we have gasmasks, but other than that there isn't much we can do except proceed with 'business as usual'." And "I'm still hoping to head for Vancouver and retirement at the end of April, unless Armageddon places me into permanent retirement before then."

An enclosure with that letter was a short essay Roger wrote dated 13 December 1990. It was a description of his life at school. The

entire essay is a source of pleasure and delight. I will include two or three passages to convey the flavour. White started the essay by indicating he was good at all subjects except mathematics. Of mathematics he wrote: "I hadn't the type of headset that could accept the notion that if one had a pie and cut it into six pieces and gave three away, one was left with three pieces. If apple, which I despise, John and Mary could have all the pieces they wanted; if lemon, my favourite, I might or might not share it.... I've gone through life without knowing the multiplication tables, long division, fractions and algebra and all the mysterious trappings in which figures disguise themselves."

Of metalwork, he continued: "I do recall clearly a day in the class of our 'machine shop' teacher when, despairing of my inability to produce the simplest item in metal - a medium in which I have never liked to work, any more than I have been attracted to working in glass, preferring wood, paper or fabric, decided to make an example of me by employing his considerable skill in humiliating me before the entire class... But he was essentially a nice man and at one point I saw that he felt he had gone too far. Blushing profusely, he turned to the class and devoted several minutes to praising highly, and with utter sincerity, my stoicism, cooperation and unfailing politeness throughout the ordeal.... If he is still alive and I were to meet him, I'd like to praise his gesture."

In mid-1990 Roger wrote this in his letter: "The quadruple bypass is now behind me. It was, after all, no worse than being struck down by a herd of stampeding rogue elephants, or perhaps a small Sherman tank, and the surgeon is attempting, without much success, to convince me that I survived his attack on me with a scalpel, an attack I have no doubt that was inspired by his overexposure, in adolescence, to late-night re-runs of 'The Texas Chainsaw Massacre'."

White's entire letter is funny, but I will content myself with one short addition: "I was delighted to read in the hospital discharge

booklet, under 'Sex', that I am free to resume 'normal sexual activity' whenever I feel up to it, provided I avoid 'positions which require pressure on the chest or support from the arms'."

On 7 November 1990 White describes his welcome back on 7 September "to the office" at the Baha'i World Centre after ten months' absence and his bypass operation. In the same letter he describes how a French girl who had translated some of his poetry into French had become a Baha'i on her arrival back home. He also alluded to the passing of Canadian Baha'i Winnifred Harvey, the inaugural meeting of the physiotherapy unit of a Haifa hospital and a Canadian poetry reading. They all have their humorous flavour. Roger concludes his letter with an Irish blessing which he says he has "just this moment invented" – "May the good Lord whom you serve with such distinction always recognize you from behind and never place on your shoulders burdens intended for others."

It was a very timely prayer for in the early nineties I did get worn out from an excess of speech and meetings in both my professional work as a lecturer and in my service to the local Baha'i community. Gradually over the next decade such burdens were taken from my shoulders, or I took them off my shoulders myself, and I could seriously engage myself in writing as the early evening of my life approached. I wonder if Roger's Irish blessing had any role in the process.

Referring to the only time Roger and I may have met in 1966-7, Roger wrote: "one can never gauge what happens to one's inner workings through highly forgettable meetings". In that same letter Roger comments on his first major book of poetry Another Song: "I think perhaps the Baha'i community was ready for a book of that sort when it appeared, and someone or other had to write it; I drew the card. I suppose it will look rather primitive to the next generation."

I will close this essay with some quotations from the rest of Roger's letters, taken somewhat at random. They will continue to

give a flavour of the person behind the poetry, poetry being the main focus of this book. White's wit, it should be kept in mind, is more than just a poetic or literary flourish. It is a means that is much more than cleverness and goes beyond the telling of a joke. It preserves the seriousness of what he has to say from sentimentality and overstatement. His seriousness, on the other hand, keeps his sense of wit from being mere flippancy. If White's letters to me are any indication of his attitude to his readers it would appear he highly valued them. I think White would have agreed with English writer Martin Amis who said in an interview: "Readers are artists, in their way; they assign imaginative life to what they read. A writer is nothing without a reader; you need the reader to close the circle." Every time White wrote to me, little did I know it then, he was closing the circle.

In a letter of May 1985 Roger wrote the following in relation to my suggestion to remarry: "Remarry? I'm not very good at marriage; I failed 'taking-out-the-garbage' and 'watering-the-lawn'. But I'm in the throes of a very pleasant romance right at this very moment and who knows where it will end?" Roger never did remarry.

In February 1985 he wrote: "The Fast is nearly upon us; but happily it is followed by the Great Gnaw."

"I've always suspected," Roger writes in July 1984 about the Concourse on High "this is the real source of the impulse to create and that, when one is sure it isn't just an ego prompting, one is assisted by the Concourse; what else have they to do but run errands for heaven? They would surely seize on any willing channel. Sometimes I have had a sense almost of 'presence' when writing about one of the long-goners... But I would have difficulty formulating the experience into a presentable or acceptable theory. It's enough for me that it seems to be true... I'm content to accept that it is, rather than too zealously dismissing it as being in the realm of idle fancies and vain imaginings. And I'm not even very religious.

Heaven knows what the guys in the Spiritual Big Leagues experience in this respect."

Commenting on my concern about plagiarism, he wrote in February 1984: "Never apologize for recycling - can we do anything other than that, when everything comes from the one source, the Writings?" At the same time, he concluded, we must watch because often "the words of others simply don't fit our face.'

Referring to George Townshend's words about digging into the Writings and life's journey: "you may lose your first wind but if you get your second it is permanent though you run all day long". White writes: "The analogy of the long-distance runner is very accurate.... All seems easier after forty, though there is a dandy fifty-odd menopausal spin awaiting you." Mine was on the horizon, little did I know.

Writing about goals and processes, White wrote in October 1983: "I probably live like I write ... without qualification, training or premeditation - inventing it all as I go along and without formulating goals and objectives... I really have no idea where I stand in the fight and I almost don't care... I hope that by doing the thing that is under my nose, day to day, it might tally up at the end as acceptable service."

Writing about the sense of certitude in that same letter he wrote: "I once asked Bill Sears whether, at any point in his long Baha'i life, he knew for a certainty that he was where he should be and doing what he should do for the Cause. He replied that he knew that only once - when he had been with the Guardian who had assured him that his home in South Africa would be surrounded by Shoghi Effendi's prayers."

And, finally, in response to my question about what his father's "bravest lonely deed", referred to in one of his poems, might have been, Roger wrote in September 1982: "My father's conscious rejection of Baha'u'llah; I remember him once.... when a speaker was talking about the Faith on television, rising up and putting his foot

through the screen of the TV set. I reflected that anyone so concerned not to accept must have, in his heart, been deeply threatened and attracted by the Cause."

I feel that I have come to know Roger White not by direct contact with what he has written but by the tone, the manner, the mode of his voice. I feel the same way about White that Robert Bernard Martin felt about the nineteenth century poet Gerald Manley Hopkins: "I have slowly come to feel that understanding the poems is far less difficult than getting to know the mysterious man who wrote them."

Chapter 7

## ANOTHER SONG, ANOTHER SEASON, 1979
## THE CANADIAN WHO LIVES HERE

The supreme test of a book is that we should feel some unusual intelligence working behind the words. I find White's unusual intelligence acute rather than powerful, with a brilliant inventiveness rather than profundity. This is a distinction drawn by the literary critic George Saintsbury in describing the poetry of Alexander Pope. Roger White possessed this acute intelligence; at least there is a coterie of readers who sense that intelligence when they read the several books of his poetry. It is not my desire to make White into a poet of some inevitable and complex profundity, but for me there is certainly a delightful and wondrous intelligence that I sense behind his poetry. White's is a poetry which, in the words of Lionel Trilling, "goes on existing beyond our powers of explanation". "The aesthetic effect," Trilling goes on, "depends in large degree upon intellectual power." Part of our pleasure with White, too, is that we are not under any illusion that White has conquered the material he directs his attention toward. Like the great writers of this century White raises many questions about the social and political landscape of ideas in our liberal and democratic West. Like other great writers White, too, simply wanted to get something off his chest. In so doing he orders what for most of us is only partly ordered, insufficiently ordered or disordered in our minds. He creates a self-contained cosmos with its own centre of gravity. I think each of us might define that centre of gravity a little differently. For me it is that mystic centre at the heart of the religion both White and I share in common.

I aim in this book to convey some of White's subtle and not-so-subtle intelligence as I survey the major volumes of his poetry and examine some special subjects in his poetry toward the end of this book, a book that could be seen as one long essay. I hope in the process not to overestimate the values and virtues of White's work, to be overly approving or, in the words of literary critic David Daiches, to exhibit the dangers of an excessive catholicity. It is easy

for me to do this because I thoroughly enjoy White's poetry. White provided the kind of poetry I needed to teach me the use of my own voice. Until White's verse appeared in Another Song, Another Season when I was thirty-five such verse did not exist for me. I also think his poetry is underestimated by the wider Baha'i community and so, in part, this study is an exercise in establishing a balance and bringing into greater light a writer who speaks with particular directness or exaction to our present age. In that great discourse with the living dead which we call reading, when it is more than reverie or an indifferent appetite born of boredom, reading is a mode of action. We engage its presence and allow it to enter our inmost consciousness, imaginations and desires. White passed away just a few years ago but, for some, he is still alive and well. He is alive in his style, a style which involves having the "proper words in their proper places", as Coleridge once wrote, having a certain rhythm and voice and a certain aesthetic which Panofsky defines as an abandonment to the objects or ideas being perceived. He is alive, too, to the generation that emerged in the sixties, that had worked hard at defining itself but often inarticulately. White helped that generation and others along the long road to being articulate, to finding words for the immense complexity of existence. Perhaps, then, this essay, this exploration of White's first major book of poetry, will help to enlarge public literary taste, produce a finer discrimination and flesh out what often becomes a mere impressionism. For a simplistic chatter about personal likes and dislikes, when rampant, can be fatal to any critical appreciation of poetry or literature in general and in relation to White's total oeuvre in particular. At the same time, for the critic "his likings are facts in criticism for him" and they guide what he writes, so writes George Saintsbury ninety years ago in his outline of "articles for the catholic creed of the critic".

I trust that new readers can come to sense the intelligence behind this remarkable poetry and old readers, who have not really given White the full study he deserves, can come to see him anew. Many

read Shakespeare, Gibbon, Toynbee, indeed many of the great writers of history, and do not come away enriched. That is not the fault of the writers. The meanings and the relations between words are the outcomes, in the final analysis, of the genuinely creative activities of the individuals reading those words at a given time in history, in a given set of historical and personal circumstances. The reader, the individual, is the sole bearer of meaningful interpretation. The combustion takes place within readers who read White's work in a meditative way. Once the poet has written, only the reader can give the poem meaning. The discipline required by the reader is as great as the discipline that was required of White to write the poetry in the first place. Just as the poetic idea provides the generative kernel of a poem for White, so does the reader have to find some equivalent generative kernel, either easily and quickly as is the case in some of White's poems, or slowly and tortuously as in others. As I write, I keep the cautionary and provocative words of Edwin Muir in mind. Muir wrote, in his discussion of the analytical intellect in relation to poetry, "no matter how brilliant an analysis of a poem, (like some of mine, I trust, in this book!) that is not enough, and that is not even relevant…. This is not what poetry was made for." The mystery of the poem is in the readers; the poem is not "a problem to be solved". I also keep in mind another provocative English essayist as I write, William Hazlitt. It was his view that readers need "the greatest possible help of others" in relation to poetry and he saw his role as one of driving home the immortal contents of poetry "into any tolerably susceptible mind". Unlike Hazlitt, though, I criticize White very little in this book and some readers may see this as a serious omission. But like most readers, I have never habituated myself to the dissection of literature, only to its enjoyment. This book is essentially an expression of this enjoyment.

Poetry is not an answer book. If the reality of man is his thought, then the reality of Roger White is his poetry, for his poetry is his thought. The qualities of mind and of literary excellence which appear prominently and consistently in his poetry, these are White's

endowments, these are the revelations of his powers. But White was incredulous about reading his life and personal character out of his poems. To him, the two were quite separate, as I have already said all too often. Both life and poetry are an endless succession of engagements with people who are only partly explainable and with an experience which is only partly understandable. With White there is a rich coherence, a complex embedded comment and the cumulative effect of this comment is to predispose the reader in favour of a particular interpretation of self and society. Behind the facts of history and of his life, White is conscious of a swarming mass of causes on which he can turn his poetic microscope. This sensitivity to minute causality produces a sense of amazement at the road both he and others have travelled on, a sense of the difficulty, the toil with which performance struggles after ideal and a sense that much of the massive facts of our lives and of history are just too immense for our intellect.

But he strives. What Samuel Johnson wrote about the poet Alexander Pope could have been written about White, although White would probably be embarrassed to acknowledge its truth. But now that he has left this mortal coil we can more comfortably pour all the encomium we want onto White's shoulders. "A mind active, ambitious and adventurous, always investigating," wrote Johnson, "always aspiring; in its wildest searches still longing to go forward, in its highest flights still wishing to be higher; always imagining something greater than it knows, always endeavouring more than it can do." There is little doubt that readers of White see the results of a vigorous mind on a large landscape, an immense canvas, a panorama that consists of the first century and a half of the history of what Baha'is believe to be the emerging world religion of the coming millennium. White enlarges the boundaries of the understanding and conquers new intellectual regions of the Faith many of his readers have become associated with. He leads them back to their lives and their experience, after a journey through his particular

experience and what, for me, are often quite exquisite intellectual pathways. Poetry cannot be expected to accomplish anything more.

Writing in an age when religious controversy is conducted with violent bitterness and for millions often with disinterest and indifference, White quietly describes his own way of life, his modus vivendi, his religious ethos, without trying to put those who differ from him in the wrong. He takes his many stands firmly, grounded as they are in the Baha'i writings, its history and teachings. The metaphorical character of his language springs, in part, from his constant tendency to harmonize contraries, to coordinate polarities, to find commonality in divergence, to express a fluid and functional unity rather than a fixed and irrevocable one. His vital poetic norms move from equivalence and reciprocity to identity and fixed agreement. His poetry was his invitation to others and always it was with an awareness of the interdependence of diverse points of view rather than the totality of a single vision.

White does not always pass a verdict on every issue he takes up. He views his evidence from many standpoints. He opens up questions, looks at things from many angles, opens up imagination's active window to enlarge the narrow circle of our days. His questions become a form of answer, which itself contains the seeds of another question. But however complex the questions and however difficult the road, the journey and history's maze, he suggests to the reader a perspective, a direction. However awkward and tangled the reality of the material he deals with, he does not soften it by impoverishing the facts or discounting them. In White's hand the power of the past to elude the net of language must struggle with White's subtle strength and humour. The immensity and wonder of the century and a half of history, perhaps the most awful scenes in the history of man's religious experience, White deals with in lively images and with a commitment to his own narrative voice. He stocks his mind with fresh and original impressions from a storehouse of an inexhaustible variety. For it is his view that all of reality exists for our training, all of nature is itself "a dispensation of Providence".

The critic's function, my function in writing this book, is to interpret White's work in light of all that I know and to struggle, as best I can, to understand his work in terms of literature as a whole, the religion he seeks to examine and the society within which both that literature and that religion operate.

The first book of his poetry was Another Song, Another Season published in 1979. For many thousands of Baha'is this book "rocketed White to astonish", as the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas described the effect his own poetry had four decades before. And White would astonish again and again in his last dozen or so years with book after book of poetry, from the age of fifty to sixty-three. It was not the power of incantation, the rolling vigour of a voice or its melodic subtlety, the overwhelming lyric purity which characterized Thomas' work and style - and made him the most persuasive reader of poetry in his day, the most famous poet on radio. It was the power of insight into the nature and reality of the Baha'i Faith, its history and teachings. It was the vigorous intellect, the superb turn of phrase, a simplicity and complexity all rolled into one, a vein of humour and delight that appealed to high brow and low brow - indeed all brows - that made White a household name through parts of the Baha'i world. White was part of that movement in poetry whose aim and whose effort was to bring poetry closer to the people, not through a watering down due to an apparent public disregard for poetry, but through a belief that poetry had something of vital importance to offer society and its several, its many communities.

Another Song, Another Season gave to the Baha'i community its first book of poetry written in a contemporary idiom. In the words of David Hofman, who wrote the introduction, the book was written in modes of common speech and everyday concepts, although it does rise occasionally to a certain grandeur, especially with the aid of metaphor which White seems to take a special pleasure in using. His poetic style had been worked out in the three decades before Another Song, Another Season was published. "All a writer's qualities," wrote Lionel Trilling about the same time White put his first

poem on paper, "have their truest existence, in his style." It was a style especially suited to Baha'is. White became, consequently and quickly, a possession. He was their first Baha'i poet, up-to-date with living and breathing colloquialisms. It was Eunice Braun's view, expressed among the several testimonials on the back cover, that White's poetry was not obscure. It could be read and enjoyed even by those who had previously got little or nothing out of poetry. This was because White translated the experience of Baha'is into words, perhaps for many for the first time. Perhaps, too, some of the pleasure readers derived from his poetry was their sense that White's writing, as the poet Samuel Johnson once wrote, "reposed on the stability of truth". There is little doubt that part of White's motivation in writing poetry, as is the case with many a poet, was a desire to help people live their lives and understand the world they lived in. Undoubtedly some of the pleasures readers derived was due to White's success in achieving these goals.

The poet Charles Levendosky said, in a recent interview, that "one meaning must be immediately apparent on the first reading or hearing - not all the levels of meaning inherent in the poem, of course, but at least one meaning must jump out". This idea certainly makes sense to the common reader. The poet whose meaning is clear and who also happens to have an interesting subject is the one most likely to attract readers back to poetry. For many readers, though, it was necessary that they read White again and again, far more carefully than his humorous and often simple lines initially implied. For often his lines were dense with meaning and the ore just could not be extracted in a once-over-lightly reading. Sadly, as another poet, Alexander Pope, noted three hundred years ago, readers "care not to study or to anatomize a poem but only to read it for their entertainment". If these readers were to get more understanding of the Baha'i Faith from reading White's poetry than they could from many hours of patient study of other Baha'i texts, as Marzieh Gail suggested they could, they would require the patience to persist through difficult passages, the same patience that is required when

working though a play or a sonnet of Shakespeare. As one literary critic put it, readers need to keep their knowledge "in a servile relation" to their human response to what White's poetry was saying. Otherwise they would often simply miss out on White's sometimes sacred, sometimes secular, urbane, deeply touching and exhilarating voice with its quick changes of pace and tone, its blend of vigorous thought with subtle emotion, its tough reasonableness beneath a lyric grace. They will miss out on White's true greatness: his power to tell the truth.

Often the distinguished, the genuine, in art and in poetry, is uncommon and not accessible to the many. It is different; it must be different and so, in the process, provokes some hostility or simple incomprehension in the many. Over time the social, the intellectual, response to the received material is often softened and what was initially a puzzled lack of understanding becomes enjoyment without the effort, the demand, that initially turned the student off. Some of White's first poems puzzled and exasperated readers. They either did not appreciate his humour or simply did not understand what he was saying due to the demands he made on his readers' literary capacities. Much of the poetry in the twentieth century was difficult for readers. Indeed, a certain obscurity is one of the hallmarks of the entire tradition of poetry going back to Chaucer in the fourteenth century.

It has been more than two decades since White began to become somewhat of a household name in many communities of the Baha'i world. Perhaps that first decade, 1979 to 1989, was White's peak season. With a business and a private address for all these years of c/-Baha'i World Centre, PO Box 155, Haifa, Israel 31 001 many Baha'is who bought his poetry felt quite at home with White. And many Baha'is around the world wrote to express their appreciation to him for his poetry. And now, in this small volume, I seek to express my appreciation of White by examining his perceptions, his wisdoms, and seeking to understand their contemporary relevance.

"Ignorance is the first requisite of the historian", wrote the famous nineteenth century biographer Lytton Strachey. For it is ignorance which simplifies and clarifies, selects and omits with a placid perfection. It is the beginning of a method. It is crucial, especially for the Baha'i with pretensions, deserved or undeserved, to knowing a great deal about his or her Faith. Often, I think, a poem of White's is lost on a reader because the reader feels he already knows about the subject at hand and, therefore, could not learn anything more. Ignorance is bliss, to express the starting point in relation to White colloquially. Readers must also be aware of another warning of Strachey, namely, that "human beings are too important to be treated as mere symptoms of the past". This applies to obscure as well as eminent lives. White makes the familiar unfamiliar and the unfamiliar familiar. He brings a genuine breath of fresh air into so much of Baha'i history, its philosophy and its teachings. He often takes what is quite obscure in the life of some historical person and, from the exigencies and details of their history, he gives us insight. It is often a particular kind of insight, an insight that Henry James called the "truth of private experience".

Like Wordsworth's first and very successful decade, 1798 to 1808, White's first years in the public eye brought an enthusiastic response. His fame rose quickly. Unlike Wordsworth who lived another forty-two years after that first decade, White would be gone four years after that first decade of renown. He could not refine his style in his years of late adulthood and old age because he left this earth just as the years of late adulthood arrived - he passed away at 63. Perhaps the refining of his style was done in the years before 1979, in the three previous decades with its several chapbooks and life's steep learning curves.

As White himself put it, referring to Another Song, Another Season, "the Baha'i community was ready for a book of this sort when it appeared and someone or other had to write it; I drew the card". I am reminded of the poet William Carlos Williams' words in relation to his famous poem Paterson. He wrote that it was a poem

"crying to be written; the time demands it". The Baha'i community in 1979 was just beginning to emerge from an obscurity that had enshrouded its history. White happened along somewhat serendipitously at the same time as the Iranian revolution was giving the Baha'is a media profile they had not enjoyed since a previous religious persecution in that country in the mid-1950s. White provided somewhat of a seriously unserious note for a dozen years or so. It was timely that the Baha'is should have a poet. With the great number of new books that had come into Baha'i book shops in the years since the beginning of the Ten Year Crusade in 1953 when this new Faith literally spread around the world, there was little that was poetic in a modern idiom, little that was light. White fitted into a high seriousness, but he also brought something new, a Voltairean irreverence. He also brought a certain erudition but, for the most part, he avoided its display in his poetry. His poetry was not tortuous, it did not possess a harsh complexity in his phrasing or in the subtlety or vigour of his thought. His lively poetic intelligence was within the reach of an educated reader. But he made his readers work.

Like all good poets White conveyed much more than his poems dealt with explicitly. Yes, there was a Voltairean irreverence in his work. Some, like those who reacted to the visually eccentric poetry of e.e. cummings back in the 1920s, were not able to cope with White's revulsion of the meretricious, the sanctimonious and the pi. Hofman's reaction to White's words as far back as 1978 was apt: his poetry was "spiritual and religious" but not "didactic nor obscure". The influence of the Baha'i writings on White's work cannot be measured by an accurate notation of their echoes, by a quantification of Baha'i themes, in his poems. Rather this influence can be deduced from the ease with which White embarks upon his frequent colloquy with his Lord. The tenderness and the playfulness, though, are all White's. He packs a lot in, too; many ideas often exist within a small compass. The subtlety with which he often makes transitions from one aspect of the subject to another and the sureness of

his emotional control are in some ways just aspects of his wit, his clever use of language and his alert intelligence dealing as it does with poignant and complex issues.

Perhaps the first quality of White's poetry that deserves to be emphasized is the sense of liberation, happiness, delight and joy. There is a comic faith which runs like a golden seam of intensity suffusing the body of his poetry. White continues a tradition which began perhaps as far back as Aristophanes in the fifth century BC or in some of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. White's criticism, his activism, though trenchant is not a vociferous demand for aggressive assertion. White's voice is tempered with his own compassionate tolerance and a knowledge that arose out of study, out of his own vulnerability and weakness. The voice of the intellect is, as Freud once put it, a soft one. But, however soft, White uses his intellect to make his readers work, as I have said before. There is a quiet and relentless scrutiny of his motives and, by implication, his readers'. Perhaps this is inevitable in verse with a high religious content. There is an emotional honesty which strengthens the fabric of his poetry and it is often expressed in everyday language.

There are so many examples to choose from in this first major volume of his poetry to illustrate some of the things I am saying. Some poetry critics choose to quote an author, a poet, extensively in their essays; some hardly at all. I shall choose a middle path and leave it to readers to go to White on their own, hopefully encouraged by what I write here. For many readers White's poems need no comment at all; they establish a basic correspondence between writer and reader; they do not require the trappings of explanation. Other poems, on the other hand, will need rather more than I could ever give. Between these two extremes readers will find my reactions to the sound of the new voice I heard in White nearly twenty-five years ago now.

One poem well known to White fans, which I have selected somewhat at random, is called The Pioneer. There is a humorous vein

running all the way through its more than three pages. To Baha'is, who see establishing their Faith as the dominating passion of their lives, their role 'as pioneers' is described with lightness, delight, joy and that comic faith I mentioned before. Often, of course, that is not how Baha'is actually experience the process; often it acts as a weight in a secularized, pluralistic society whose members are either little interested in religion or are already committed to one of many of its labyrinthine branches. White does not sing one note or shine one light, otherwise his humorous song would lose its impact. His poem would be little more than a joke to add to the already endless pile occupying the social scene. There is seriousness in this poem The Pioneer, a high seriousness. The poem ends on a very serious note. After many light phrases that lift readers into light-hearted and cheery territory, they are left contemplating the profundity of the exercise.

*The moment is selected.*
*You will not see all heaven's angels,*
*all ancient good,*
*the very weight of history*
*rush to her support as she gathers breath ….*

*Have you heard the Message of Baha'u'llah? -*
*nor will you know that God Himself*
*throughout all worlds*
*gives ear to your reply.*
*I tell you, she is dangerous!*

You will not see any of this - the angels and the weight of history - but the irony is that this is just what happens from a Baha'i perspective. White continues a religious tradition begun by Erasmus, Swift, Rabelais and Sterne, four ordained clerics who belong to the congregation of satirists, the literary world of the comic imagination. He presents human life in the context of drama and mirth, among other contexts. This context of the dramatic and comic deals with suffering, in some ways, more effectively than the tragic. The comic takes away from tragedy its dominance, its often dangerous romantic grandeur. This is particularly important for the receptivity of White's verse in cultures where the undercurrent of humour and the ironic is pervuasive. In seeking temporary pleasure, what might be described as the tragi-comic transcends the tragic. White does this again and again. Humour for centuries was associated with the devil, with the sinful nature of humanity. Gradually over recent centuries it has come to be seen as part of his blessedness. Humour for White is a very disarming form of seriousness itself. For White the humorous provides diversion from the serious; a gentle irreverence provides balance. White apotheosises language. He grins like the satirist and loiters like Socrates. Plato knew he was dangerous and would not allow him into his utopian Republic in the fifth century BC., - a republic which had been battling for a generation with the acids of individualism and the anarchic effects of war.

The preceding poem, The Appointment, is not humorous, but its idiom, its tone and flavour convey a lightness of touch, of thought. It possesses a seriously unserious style, an apparent colloquialism, a language of simplicity which runs through six pages. Running through these short poetic lines, the force, the strength of the words comes from the slow build-up of simple ideas. The reader is slowly caught up with a philosophical idea, a historical experience, of some detail and significance. The reader is given, if he persists, a new perception, a fresh insight, into the past, into himself. He comes, in the end, to make more sense of life, his life. An event in history, the

building of the temple in Chicago, is given a whole new meaning. The familiar is made unfamiliar; the unfamiliar is made familiar.

White touches us with his vision and his understanding. He touches us frequently and we feel the texture of his touch, although we may not know the detailed architecture of his vision. But the more we read his poetry the more familiar we become with the particular choreography of his vision, his mise en scene. Unlike T.S. Eliot's immense poetic panorama of futility and anarchy, White's poetic panorama stretches before the reader the possibilities in existence that are based on a potentially integrated human being and a world view that is sensitive to the problematic nature of our age and the need of affirming a unified vision of life for all men.

In all his sketches and portraits of martyrs, pioneers and ordinary people White reveals a tender world, a world born of wisdom and sympathetic understanding. His words half conceal and half reveal the soul, as Tennyson once put it. His words also rescue the life, the situation, under examination from the abstraction of myth and the complexity of history. The brittleness and fragility of history and civilization as well as its polish and gloss are part and parcel of White's poetry so that the reader can reach out, touch it, bring it back from what might have been its rusty home in memory and know it for the first time.

Fujita With Pilgrims is one such poem which has been analysed by literary critics before.36 It illustrates what I am saying here about White's historical pieces so very well. It is not that we learn something about Fujita who may have lingered obscurely for us in a place in our own interpretive schema of history; rather it is that we learn something about particular virtues that help us understand life. Fujita made 'Abdu'l-Baha laugh; such is the focus of the first stanza. The gift of being able to make someone else laugh is a treasure that, in some of life's contexts, is just about priceless. The priceless value, too, of loneliness and isolation White brings to our minds in the second stanza:

*Acquitted of triviality by a pain and loneliness*
*that might instruct us,*
*rescued a halo's-breadth from isolating sainthood*
*by an exonerating intolerance and his need for us*
*but still a holy man….*

These few lines need unpacking. If you read them quickly you are likely to miss the point or points. A lot of White's poetry is like this. There are many meanings in many of his poems. Each reader reads his own soul's meanings. Often, too, a reader grasps a poem of White's without realizing how much they hold in their hand. 'A book on a page' I often think is what White gives us in some of his poems. Fugita With Pilgrims is such a poem and each time you come to it you take away a new depth. White's poetry needs to be kept at arm's reach and not gathering dust on your shelf after a quick flick. He needs to be tasted over and over again for his pithy and many-layered poetry.

It is not so much that Fujita was lonely and isolated from much of human society, that 'fact of history' could be debated, but what is the relevance of this loneliness - assuming that he was? Its relevance (one could argue) is that, if we too want to join the short line of saints, we might also have to endure loneliness and pain. Along that path to sainthood we, too, may develop an intolerance of others and a paradoxical need for their company. Is this too high a price for sainthood, one might ask? These lines are a good example of how White packs a great deal into a short space. They are a good example of the necessity on the part of readers to study White's words closely. In the end you often find yourself questioning your own interpretation of a poem, wondering at the mystery it contains. I am only suggesting, here, some lines of inquiry into this poem. White captures something of the essence of this first Japanese believer, this -

*mikado of mirth*
*the Servant's servant.*

*And we, having examined Fujita With Pilgrims thus far, are left standing -*

*disconsolately tracing our distance from the goal,*
*churning the weightless air*
*with our questions and our words,*
*our endless words.*
*Someone asks: Did you take his picture?*

It is easy to miss the point in this mixture of delicacy and directness. Fujita reminds the poet, and hopefully the reader should he need reminding, of the poet's distance from his spiritual goal in life. The poet is left churning the air with his words. The image is graphic and profound in its own right. The poet has taken a snapshot, a long exposure, of the outer personality and inner soul of Fujita by means of his poetic shaping. The tourists in the group may have forgotten to take Fujita's photograph and, however accurate the poet's analysis of Fujita, he and his readers are still left "churning the weightless air" with their questions and their words. For, in the last analysis, we are all left with our endless words in the face of so many of life's mysteries.

I could continue the analysis here for, as I said, White says a great deal in a few words. Reading quickly is for most of us the norm and to savour words, to read a passage several times goes against our grain. But often this is what we must do if we are to truly appreciate White's poetry, indeed a great deal of poetry written over

the ages, including much of the Revelation that inspired White in his lifetime.

White wrote imaginative portraits like the one above partly as a dialogue of his own mind with various people who stood out in Baha'i history, partly as ironic detachment, partly as studied dispassionateness and partly as a flirtation with ideas and the meaning of life and history. In the process, a character, a person, was created, disclosing to his readers a new capacity for knowing themselves. White takes us deep into history at many of its points. His poems become moral and psychological instruments of communication. His poetry is often simpler than God Passes By, slimmer and apparently easier to read than Nabil's Narrative. White is light, but you have to do some digging if you want to get to the roots of what he is on about. What might occupy anywhere from several pages to a whole book of history, White deftly deals with on a page, in a poem. And many of White's readers often learn more about that history in that page.

The Baha'i community had gone from 69,000 localities at the start of the Five Year Plan in 1974 to 96,000 localities at that plan's end in 1979. There had been a massive expansion of the Baha'i community in the quarter-century ending in 1979 from perhaps two-hundred thousand believers to about three million. White had arrived on the scene with his Another Song, Another Season at a timely juncture. White's critical dialectic, his delicate and gentle but provocative and witty words suggested a direction for dialogue for the decades ahead. White was, perhaps, a mid-wife of an idea whose time had come. He provided an imaginative interpretation of Baha'u'llah's vision as it applied to living in today's world. He was more than a popularizer. His deceptively easy, sometimes acutely complex passages of poetry sometimes require a dictionary to deal with his wordy wonders. White is a subtle quotient.

History and experience cry out to be recognized and understood as they spread out in their burgeoning, anarchic and often heart-break-

ing confusion before us. White helps us in this process, taking us a step toward understanding the metaphorical nature of physical reality, toward seeing the fragments of the past, of history and of everyday life, as part of a whole. Such an exercise requires a conscious effort of the mind and of the imagination on White's part and on ours in the rag-and-bone shop of everyday life. And we do not always win. Poetry, reading, much that is life, cannot be communicated easily, if at all, in spite of our efforts. We often lose. White is no facile optimist who believes you can do anything you want as long as you believe and persist long enough. Our love, White writes in Songs of Separation,

*.....will pass unnoticed into time*
*And history not record our names or cause,*
*Nor future lovers weep to read this rhyme,*
*The hastening crowd not give it thought or pause;*
*Yet must I write these lines for my heart's ease….*

White does not leave it here, however down-to-earth, however realistic, however much these words are an accurate statement of human experience. More needs to be said. Perhaps White is writing of someone's love, his lover, his former wife, the world. Several lines later in that same poem he is writing -

*Had I but known that exile were the toll*
*Still would I offer that committed kiss,*
*Release you then to God for His Own role*
*Though death itself were paler deed than this.*

*In banishment, I learn that this is true:*

*I gave Him all, thus gives He ever you.*

This optimistic-pessimistic-realistic note is, though, not the last word in this difficult poem. In the last stanza White writes, after expressing his wish that life was simpler and sweeter -

*.....but we*

*Are wrenched, torn, flung as unremembered leaves*

*Driven in doleful patterns the wind weaves.*

*Glad days are gone. A bastion given each*

*The long nightwatch begins.*

We are back in the battleground of life, if we ever really left it, as the poem comes to an end. The poet awakens from "fitful dreams" in "choking screams". Whoever it is that is his love, she or it is "beyond the reach" of his "caress and comfort". She or it dies and the poet can do nothing. Is this love part of that 'vapour in the desert which the thirsty dreams to be water'? Is it part of life's 'mere illusion'? However illusory life may be, however much it is a prelude to a fuller existence, White does not underestimate the worth, the value, the importance of this earthly life.

In another poem that honestly admits to human incapacity, to human inadequacy, Suppliant Bahji, White writes:

*Is this then all there is, a simple garden,*

*And a silence that displaces need for words?*

*What portent in the blood-red wayside poppy?*

*What message in the music of the birds?*

*The hero's heart is hoisted on a cypress,*
*The saint's is softly folded as a rose;*
*But mine lies shattered here among the pebbles*
*On the only path the fainting coward knows.*

Perhaps the note here is humility combined with a sense of awe. One is reminded of the words of the mystic Thomas à Kempis that we should consider none so frail as our own dear selves, or in the words of Shakespeare in the last lines of his play The Tempest:

*My ending is despair*
*Unless I be relieved by prayer*
*Which pierces as it assaults*
*Mercy itself and frees all faults.*

I have tried, throughout this essay and the ones following, to get behind White's poetry, to suggest the world that exists within the content of particular poems and White's poems in general and to point toward some underlying principle or principles. In so doing I have tried, as Samuel Johnson tried, "not to oversimplify what is complicated but to be faithful to the complex richness and variety" of the poet's mind. As White himself was to write several years later, "Attempting to apply a divine principle is usually a creative and dangerous act… one of those 'iffy things'." There is nothing so complex as a principle. I have tried, too, to suggest how readers might come to know White intimately as a friend. Knowing him it is impossible not to love him. But I have my doubts, as Wordsworth

did, about the value of literary criticism compared to the kind of inventive lines one finds in poetry, especially White's poetry and especially if one is in the game of trying to induce love of the poet.

"Original composition," said Wordsworth, speaking of poetry, does "infinitely less mischief." Let us hope there is little mischief here. Perhaps I should have stuck with writing poetry which I have come to enjoy as a literary avocation in the last decade. Readers will certainly find little overt criticism of White's work in these essays. I do not have that view of White, for example, which Arnold had of Wordsworth, even though he loved and admired Wordsworth, namely, that this was poetry that would have been richer, more complete and varied if he had read more books. Some of White's creative power comes from his being in the right place at the right time, when there were the materials and the basis for the emergence of a Baha'i consciousness in world literature. Like Athens in the mid to late fifth century BC, the mid to late twentieth century provided the milieux for the glow of life and thought and for world literature to make its first major strides. White happened to be there at the start. It was not the start of democracy or the breakdown of the architecture of the Middle Ages and the first stirrings of modern science that led to the literature of Sophocles or of Shakespeare, respectively, it was the start of a world literature and the first imprint of a new, a democratic theocracy, a vision with the future in its bones, that had just stuck its head above the ground and enshrined that priceless jewel, the world civilization, of which this infant Faith White had joined was "the sole begetter". White was well read, but not the scholar or academic, not the serious student with that rich, deep and varied reading behind him that Arnold would have liked Wordsworth to possess. But for me that is not important; indeed, I think, like Shakespeare, White is better for the freshness and spontaneity he brings to ideas, to his poetry. The absence of erudition is part of White's fresh-air and delightful everyday idiom.

We all see White through the prism of our own experience, perception and knowledge. For me, White provides a strong, a solid antidote or counterweight to so much of the superficial thinking that drifts over the interstices of our existence, from the power of positive thinking to astrology, from the occult to a vague emphasis on intuition, from so many of the superficialities of pop psychology and media hype. White's interpretive schema, his view, his vision of this emerging new religion on this planet accords with my experience and my views. We like people who see things the way we do. It's natural. He also gives me so much more, so many original insights into my own life, my religion and the complex realities of the world.

Another Song, Another Season is divided into six parts. The classification or sectional names for the parts are ingenious, suggestive and provide a useful organizing principle for the poetry in the book: portrayals, lines from a Persian notebook, songs and sonnets, the confused muse, a twist of lemon. The division is natural, not artificial, as poetic categories often are in books of poetry. White was to use this method in all his books of poetry, except his last, his The Language of There. In Another Song there are fifty-nine poems, four letter sketches and ten pages of notes and bibliography; together they fill some 180 pages. They are dedicated to White's parents. The pattern of introducing both individual sections and poems with quotations from the Baha'i literary corpus and the writing of famous and not-so-famous people is established in this first major book of White's poetry. It was a pattern that would remain with all White's volumes of poetry. The cover of the book depicts a view that clearly spells out 'Canada' – a forested seascape in British Columbia. It reminds Canadians that White is one of them. White, indeed, was "the Canadian who lives here" - here being of course Haifa. And White was able, perhaps due to the imparting of some expansion and sensation to his mind, some heightened consciousness, to experience propitious poetic moments while in Haifa. He had been there for eight years by the time Another Song was

published. Unquestionably many of his insights were associated with developments on Mount Carmel and the very atmosphere of the place. Inevitably, too, what animated the mass of his knowledge was a bright and active imagination. Another Song was his first major poetic result. White was fifty.

White had been away from Canada for thirteen years by the time Another Song, Another Season was published. He had been "precipitated into homesickness" many times - "images of northness, seasonality, spaciousness, magnificence, extravagant teeming abundance" still supported his reality in "the relentless Hebrew sun" with its "unalleviated glare". But one does not get that sense, so common in twentieth century poets, especially those who left their homeland, of White as the outsider. He became accepted, not only by the Baha'i community in Haifa but by a community of poets in Haifa that he belonged to and academics whom he had some association with. If leaving Canada was a sacrifice, and there is no strong evidence that it was, the experience, it would appear, nourished rather than inhibited his creativity. He gained a great deal, so much that he could not have found in Canada had he stayed there.

Herbert Read, in his analysis of the poetry of Wordsworth, argues that the highest quality of poetry escapes analysis. It is, he goes on, an intangible essence, a synthetic occasion. This is true of the best of White. But White's best has become for many what Wordsworth became for the young John Stuart Mill as he expressed it in 1828, "a medicine for my state of mind... not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty... the very culture of feeling... a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings... poetry of deeper and loftier feeling could not have done for me at that time what his did". White's poetry is also for many what English poetry was to Voltaire, the treatment of moral ideas "with more energy and depth" than other nations and poets, and a powerful and profound application of ideas to life.

Chapter 8

## THE WITNESS OF PEBBLES, 1981

Two years later, in 1981, the second of what would eventually be three books of Roger White's poetry from George Ronald publishers of Oxford was produced. This second volume contained nearly three times as many poems as the first. Geoffrey Nash, who had finished his doctorate on Thomas Carlyle and had just completed writing Iran's Secret Pogrom, wrote the introduction. The following year, in 1982, Nash was to go on to write the first significant essay on the work of Roger White: The Heroic Soul and the Ordinary Self.

The publication of this volume of poetry was timely. Robert Hayden, a Baha'i and an American poet laureate in the 1970s, had died the previous year. He had been a Baha'i and a poet for over forty years. In some important ways the Baha'i consciousness in world literature that this book is discussing found its first significant poetic expression in the poetry of Robert Hayden. John Hatcher points out that Hayden came of age as a poet in the early forties, during the first teaching plan, 1937-1944. A Baha'i consciousness slowly grew in his poetic expression beginning in 1943 when he joined the Baha'i Faith, although it did not become obvious, did not express significant Baha'i themes, until at least 1962 in Hayden's collection A Ballad of Remembrance.

It should be noted, though, that Hayden became poet laureate for the library of Congress from 1969 to 1980. White had begun writing poetry and a poetry clearly influenced by the teachings of the Baha'i Faith perhaps beginning in the early 1950s. It is not my purpose to examine the minutiae connected with who was the first poet to write poems influenced by this new religion. Both poets were writing poems as early as the 1940s. I think I would give the nod to Hayden as the first poet on the block by a clear margin. But it seems to me this emergence of a Baha'i consciousness is more of a process and both these poets were involved in the process. This book focuses on White's part. White fully achieved, if there was any doubt before, with this latest volume of poetry, what literary critic A. Alvarez in

1962 said that poetry needed: "a new seriousness". This he defined as: "the poet's ability and willingness to face the full range of his experience with his full intelligence; not to take the easy exits of either the conventional response or choking incoherence." Poets, Alvarez went on, needed to cope openly with the quick of their experience. This was what he called "a new depth poetry". White had already begun to find this depth by 1962 when Alvarez wrote this and by 1981, some two decades later, he had made out of his rich internal resources and self-contained strength his own style and his own identity.

The Witness of Pebbles, as White called this new volume, was dedicated "to all who witness in life or in death". The 'pebbles' of the title came from Baha'u'llah's writings where He refers to His revelation as enabling "every least pebble to resound again with Thy praise". Whether one views this corpus of poems from a literary or a non-literary standpoint, it is great poetry. T.S. Eliot once argued that 'great poetry' had to be based on a great philosophy. "We can hardly doubt," he put it "that the truest philosophy is the best material for the greatest poet." White, of course, derives his philosophy from the Baha'i Faith. His poetic inspiration - the poets who have clearly had an influence on him - comes from George Herbert, Emily Dickinson and T.S. Eliot among others, although White once wrote in an essay that he felt the critical inspiration behind his poetry were holy souls who had passed on to the next world and influenced his writing in quite inexplicable ways. For years White had been his own Aristotle, laying down the laws his poetry was subject to. There is a deep and important relationship between philosophical thought about poetry and poetry. These essays about White's poetry shine a light on some of that subtle and not-so-subtle relationship. It is a relationship that results, for this critic anyway, in the diffusion of a tone and spirit of unity, a complex unity that blends and fuses so much of that rag-and-bone-shop of life into a synthesis through White's imaginative power. For the essence of the poetic process is its "unifying and harmonizing activity".

One of the means White uses to get at truth is to examine the lives of historical figures. Like Shakespeare, Euripides or one of a host of others, White translates the great truths of his philosophy into a comprehensive text book on how to live. But like the literary outputs of all the great poets and dramatists of history, White's text book requires some work from his readers. His is not a how-to manual, not systematic in its organization - perhaps 'creative-resource-manual' might be a better comparison than text book, for there is little that is set out in a sequenced, ordered way that covers the material. It is impossible to read White's poetry without feeling that we are being initiated into the company of a unique personality - a personality as original and authentic as it is intellectually thought-provoking and a delight to the mind, a personality who defined himself through his poetry, a work of art that is produced by a special handling of language.

In the first section of this resource manual, containing some twenty-eight poems, White does what Wordsworth did at the dawn of this modern age: he gives the spirit of the past a restoration, a transformation. White is that poet of memory and one can learn a great deal about Baha'i history and its philosophy by examining some of the poems here. Some of that history is recent; for example, the passing of Hand of the Cause A.Q. Faizi in 1980. White gives us a sonnet in rhyming couplets. But it is not the form that impresses so much as the content. Here is one of many examples of spiritual history being rendered, as the poet Roethke said it should be rendered, by dramatic poetry. White brings to the poem a sharp sense of who and what Faizi was. This sharp sense of another person brings to White, paradoxically, a heightened awareness of his own self and the self of others. It also allows him to make those "intuitive leaps" which Roethke says "are one of the ways man..... approaches the divine in this comprehensive act, the really good poem". I would like to take you through the poem In Memoriam: A.Q. Faizi commenting occasionally to make a point:

*The children by the upturned sod*
*strew flowers, weeping. Only God*
*Who holds the slightest winged thing dear*
*knows all the sweetness folded here.*

And so it was for those who knew Hand of the Cause Faizi: sweetness was the operative word. This was no intuitive leap. But in the second half of the octave White writes:

*Were such love possible? ask we*
*who dole it with economy,*
*squander doubt and hoard affection*
*in private vaults beyond detection.*

After warming us up in the first four lines with sentiments of tender loving care, White brings us down to earth, not so much with an intuitive leap but with an honest statement, pithy and poignant, of human inadequacy. He continues, going back to Faizi's funeral ceremony:

*On Carmel trails the sun's gilt sleeve*
*as we chilled mourners slowly leave ….*

*And then comes the intuitive leap:*

*to seize the thought this death installs:*
*who'd serve the King must love His thralls.*

Of course the idea is not entirely intuitive but this last couplet is clearly, for me anyway, the climax of the poem. For me there is surprise, truth, wisdom, an idea that is unfamiliar that White makes familiar.

There is a loveliness in White's craft. Sometimes a simplistic, idealistic, coherent view of a person can turn out to be too brittle for the complex facts of a life - and the biographer must shift grounds. That is not the case here. There is in White's work a sensitivity to "the sophisticated complexity of life" that the great post-World War 2 American poet Robert Lowell said was critical to any successful poetry. But however complex the idea there is a simplicity too. It is not a simplicity that orders experience; rather, it is a simplicity that, in the words of Theodore Roethke, attends "an experience with the conviction that there is order in it". White is simply giving voice to a truth inherent in the death of the beloved Hand of the Cause - namely, that he must be loved - and why. White is also giving us a poem that "is so organized that the interplay between the elements sets up a complex of meaning in which" White "wins through to his final utterance".

Again the analysis could continue, but that is the reader's task. "Criticism is the endeavour" wrote Saintsbury back in 1911, "to find, to know, to love and to recommend the best that is known and written in the world," but not to explain every detail. Poetry is most fully realized when a reader's mind subjects that poetry to its own serious and systematic contemplation. In the process the poetry is raised up to "its highest possibility", writes Richard Kuhns.

I will deal now with another poem which, though rooted in a literal historical personality, recreates it. Solemnity is coated with the colloquial, with the idiom of the everyday, its simple cliches and a sense of immediacy. I am talking here of the first poem in the book The True Brother, although I could have chosen many others. Shoghi Effendi is brought into the here and now. The reader

engages with a pivotal figure of his Faith in a unique, a fresh, a human, a probing way. An inner landscape is seen with a quiet eye.

The poem opens:

*You.....*
*across the Twin resplendent seas*
*which cast this pearl*
*we ask what praise*
*is adequate to you?*

A simple question is conjoined with what, to Baha'is, is some familiar nomenclature: 'Twin resplendent sea.'. So the poem begins in its unassuming way. It continues:

*You.....*
*who knew far more than we*
*how little was the little*
*that we knew.*

After nearly twenty years these lines have become a type of bottom-line, a fundamental starting position in my relation to and understanding of Shoghi Effendi. And yet the words are so simple, so easy, so profoundly basic. The poem ends with the following two stanzas:

*You.....*
*how belatedly we see*

*that you were more than brother,*

*more than true.*

*You.....*

*through a mercy*

*we've not earned O! comfort us*

*who did not comfort*

*you.....*

Such pure symmetry. If there is such a thing as a perfect poem, this one is mine. How does one define a perfect poem? Which one will be yours? I had had a love for Shoghi Effendi for perhaps twenty-five years when I first read this poem in 1983 but White gave me words, expressed a feeling, that had been inside me. This is one of the reasons for his great popularity. I find White a superbly rational poet. It is a rationality that arises from, in the words of Susanne Langer, "an elaboration of feeling". Perhaps, too, what White does here and in so many of his poems is to take the imprecise, the vague and undefined, unexpressed feelings and thoughts of life that we encounter again and again and give them form, precision, definition. And some readers find it thrilling, beautiful.

The remaining six sections of this book of poetry are all shorter than the opening one which is called "The Witness of Pebbles – Poems and Portrayals". I will not attempt to examine all the directions and thrusts these poems take in each section. Rather I will make some selections of poems I particularly enjoyed and comment on them as a way of introducing this book of White's poetry. The second section is called "Songs and Sonnets" and contains twenty-two poems. White's poem Coral and Pearls was written for Hilda and Morrie Phillips and the title comes from the words of a

marriage prayer by 'Abdu'l-Baha. It is written in the form of a sonnet, one of the many sonnets in this section.

I find the poem is much like another of White's poems on marriage - Mark's Madrigal which we will discuss later in this essay, only there is not that humorous undercurrent here. This poem is serious all the way. "The only chance of doing some arresting writing, something that the world is waiting for with open arms," writes Marilyn Kallet, "is to be ready." In the late 1970s and early 1980s, White was ready. There was a world of underlying meaning waiting to be recovered like metal out of ore. That world could be found in Baha'i history, in relationships, in day-to-day life, all over the mountains and hills of existence. This poem is an engagement with the institution of marriage. Again, many of the lines in the poem require time, thought and the engagement of the reader. This is no quick stroll through an in-depth magazine article on marriage in the weekend supplement. Like so much of White's poetry, be prepared for contemplation, for pondering. He takes you into your inner life by way of the thinking process. His poetry engages you in a process that some have called the raid on the inarticulate. It is a process of persuasion, of ambush, of dogged hunting and sometimes of surrender but, however you describe it, this thinking process must be set in motion or your minds will lie, as English poet Ted Hughes once wrote, "like fish in the pond of a man who cannot fish".

But to return to Coral and Pearls. I will not go through every line in the poem; I will leave that to you with your own copy of The Witness of Pebbles. But I will examine several of the provocative and somewhat demanding lines:

*.....It is your unmingled light,*
*Inviolate, self-kindled and enhancing that might*
*Tempt my pride to snuff it, eclipse the inner white*
*Wonder my warrant forged in passion cannot own.*

*Teach me that not in trespass do I harvest more*

*Than your surging tenderness yields to my sight.*

I find these lines just enthralling in their meaning and beauty, perhaps this is due to the fact that it had taken me some thirty years of marriage to learn them. It is passages like these that have made me a White-fan, perhaps fanatic. "The inner white wonder" is a delightful and wondrous phrase to describe both the external and inner beauty of a woman. It is this "inner white wonder" that gets eclipsed and snuffed out in marital relationships. The "warrant" is something which authorizes action, in this case a something "forged in passion" which cannot be owned. How many men - and women - have 'trespassed' and 'harvested' more than they should have, more than "surging tenderness" yielded. In the end each reader has to unpack each poem for himself. I have just taken a few items out of the suitcase here to start the ball rolling, to do some intellectual and spiritual travelling. And, of course, poems that work for me will not necessarily work for you. It must be admitted, too, that some of White's poems, more for me in The Witness of Pebbles, have implications and bearings that are difficult to grasp, an inevitability in a poet whose appeal is not to the interests and caprices of the market, who does not beat the big drum or shout his wares. The voice of the intellect, Freud once said, is quiet.

The third section of this book is called 'The Milk, The Honey' and its twenty-four poems are all 'from Israel'. There are many poems about the Baha'i World Centre in White's opus; I would like to comment briefly on his poem The Artefact written in the years immediately preceding the occupation by the Universal House of Justice of its permanent seat above the Arc on the slopes of Mount Carmel.

I am not sure I understand all the poem, but I understand enough of it to give me a deep satisfaction from reading it. And I read it again and again enjoying what I do understand and trying to understand more. Poetry is undoubtedly, among other things, an

exploratory activity and White explores the beauty of the Baha'i Faith, a beauty expressed in the developments on Mount Carmel, in Baha'i history and in the Baha'i teachings generally. Poetry also deals with things that touch us deeply and is a place of pollination and cross-pollination for the actual, enlarging on, engaging in, life as it goes. Like the poet William Carlos Williams, White wants to make the unknown shine, like a sunrise. The known in this poem is the religion White joined over thirty years before and in a short epigraph White offers a cautionary note from William Collins, a Baha'i then working at the Baha'i World Centre: "We must resist the temptation to intellectually distance ourselves from the living reality of the Cause of God, enclosing it in a glass coffin of our pride's devising, which we circumambulate admiring our own handiwork."

White begins the poem comparing the Cause to "a shipwreck victim washed ashore" who has been "coffined... in glass". Having "set it in a place of honour in the central square" we came to "stare or lean above her". No one, White continues, now near the end of the second of three stanzas, asked "what exquisite power she might wield". No one asked what effect "Such intolerable beauty" could have, although it was thought it could "disregulate the city's ordered ways".

Some of the greatest poetry is to be found at the beginning of things: Homer at the start of Greek civilization, Pindar at the start of the great experiment in Athenian democracy; Virgil at the start of the Roman Empire, Shakespeare at the start of the modern age, arguably White at the start of the great drama in democratic theocracy or the process of the institutionalization of charisma that is at the heart of the development of the Baha'i Faith. Each poet provides his readers with a Weltanschauung, a world view, a perspective on the world that gives it coherence, meaning, a framework.

In the final stanza of the poem under consideration White writes:

*Long she lay there and we grew accustomed*

*to the crystal concentrate of beauty*

*.....*

*grateful that grace be so contained*

*as to pose no threat.*

This poem is often difficult to contain, to get at or to. By 1980, the Baha'is had been on Mount Carmel for about a century. The Bab's remains had been entombed on Mount Carmel for some seventy years; the Guardian had been gone for nearly twenty-five. One of the main functions of poetry is to put in verse some of the intense emotion that accumulates in life. White's poem does this. It begins in delight, as Robert Frost once said, and ends in wisdom or, as Wordsworth once put it more mysteriously:

*.....Visionary power*

*Attends the motions of the viewless winds,*

*Embodied in the mystery of words.*

And there is a mystery to White's words, not all the time but from time to time and in specific poems like the one being discussed here. There is something that tantalizes; there is a fragrance, but you have to like White's perfume. He integrates thought and imagination; he achieves a high intensity of poetic and imaginative awareness in his writing of poetry. He shares this with his readers and through a participation in a common past, a common memory, from which his stories, his poems, are so often drawn, there is a revivification of the virtues inherent in sacred places and people.

Often people and places in history elude us and unless they can be given life in poetry or some form of art they are lost to us. They

remain as dry dust in history books. White so often brings, awakens, a sense of Presence, of the Divine, in some historical setting. White or his poetry bestows a benediction, a sense of blessedness, upon some of those who read his poetry. The renewed awareness that these readers gain becomes a source of and support for personal conviction and both the individual and the community are strengthened. White helps these readers create their world. He creates it out of himself sub specie aeternitatis.

In the remaining four sections of The Witness of Pebbles White gives us poems with religious feeling that deepen our awareness of life, poems that increase our sense of identity and self-understanding, poems that have a simple grace of image and style, poems that are poeticized prose, poems that deal with the enigma of life's transience and art's enduring truth, poems that present a Baha'i analysis of history as a divinely ordained and logical process and this era as a transition to an expanded identity and humankind's maturity, more poems that are tragi-comic and much more.

Perhaps Mark's Madrigal will illustrate some of my main contentions about White's poetry more graphically. The history here is not the history of the Baha'i Faith but the history, the experience, of so many millions in the marriage relationship. The poem opens with some of that colloquial tone and dramatic speech:

*Breathes there the man so limp with dread*
*Who never of his wife hath said,*
*"I love the wench but wish her dead!"*

The rhyme, the lightness, the humour and the tragi-comic continue:

*O lissom lass, O languid lad,*

*In wedlock are love's lessons had.*

Then White, having got his reader gently swimming along in this casually poetic idiom, starts to get serious and a little elliptical. The reader has to do a little work:

*Were freedom gained, what is allowed*

*But from a stranger's hand a shroud?*

How many people, feeling imprisoned and gaining their "freedom", experience a "shroud" from a "stranger"? A second relationship so often just does not have the anticipated pay-off. Some readers will go all the way with White in these lines.

White keeps the tone and the style light, engaging, irreverent, calling a spade a spade:

*Lives there the woman so unsound*

*Who never thought, in marriage bound,*

*"I'll sleep best when he's underground!"*

*.....*

*For all are granted fleeting terms*

*And restive are the amorous worms.*

*.....*

*"What chain hath love that rubs me raw?"*

Then, in the last three stanzas, in lines that could come from one of Shakespeare's sonnets, thought-provoking words and ideas, some enigmatic, some solemn and serious:

*Both winsome maid and handsome squire*
*Know love's the chief prize we acquire*
*But count it, wed or celibate,*
*A hellish torment, soon or late.*

So, love is something we "acquire" and we may have to experience "a hellish torment". And we reach the climax, the finale in the last two stanzas:

*'Tis not the mate by whom we're soured*
*But love itself which proves us coward.*
*To tame the fear's to tame the fire,*
*'Tis fear of love of which we tire.*

*Have done, good folks, with suffering,*
*Brave choice secures diviner thing.*
*Love won by courage shall endure*
*For love, methinks, is love's own cure.*
*Rejoice, rejoice in love!*

There is a great deal said here about love in the same way that Shakespeare packed a great deal into his sonnets. There is a profundity here as there was in Shakespeare but the reader does not have

to puzzle over the meaning to anything like the same extent. The reward, the pay-off, in meaning in this poem of White's is reflected in these words of Marilyn Kallet: "The poem is a kind of flower.... rich with the truth of our lives, a working through of the poet's experience of hurting, healing and preparation through love."

White sprinkles humour throughout this, his second booklet of poetry. It is part of White's signature. He opens his final section - "Toddling Toward Salvation" - with a quotation from Thomas Carlyle: "Laughter is a token of virtue. No man who has once heartily and wholly laughed can be altogether irreclaimably bad." I think it is this laughter that allows White to get away with some profoundly serious poetry in between the laughs, poetry that is not just serious and profound but very provocative, very challenging and, at times, threatening to much of our conventional thinking, both as Baha'is and as the world of liberal and secular thought.

I would like to close this analysis of The Witness of Pebbles with two such examples. I could choose two from at least a batch of half a dozen poems which made me think quite seriously about their implications. "A poem," as John Hatcher emphasizes in his analysis of the poetic process, "is written to be experienced, not dissected." The poem A Sudden Music I experienced with some force nearly twenty years ago when I first read it. I would like to dissect the poem to some extent to try to explain the source of, the reason for, the impact this poem had on me.

The poem establishes for me an honesty, an introspectivity, a framework for the examination of the forms of prayer, indeed my very interaction process with others. The poem makes me take a look at myself. It begins:

*A taint of preening calculation*
*makes of our knowledge knowingness,*

*carries us too soon from innocence*

*and exaltation.*

I would call the law that White invokes the "is this me?" law. Have I been carried away by habit, by years of experience and familiarity, from my original sense of innocence and sense of exaltation? Yes and no, I say to myself. Do I make of my knowing, now that I know so very much more than I used to when I first became a Baha'i, a "knowingness"? Do I do any "preening" of myself in all this knowingness? Yes and no, I say to myself. White is struggling and taking us along with him in this struggle to reach higher levels of spiritual reality. He is struggling, to use Plato's analogy of the cave, to find the light of understanding from the images cast on the dark walls of life. White is the active explorer shining the lamp of his poetic insight into the dark shadows of our lives. Who can fail to be stimulated into an introspection in relation to their spiritual life by the following lines which close the poem:

*We, deft practitioners*

*of protocols of piety*

*are stranded on uncertainty*

*who had entered and then left*

*that rare Presence,*

*rehearsed petitioners,*

*joylessly*

*and empty-handed.*

Writing poems was for White, as it was for Robert Hayden before him in this emergence of a Baha'i consciousness in world literature,

"a way of coming to grips with inner and outer realities, a spiritual act, a sort of prayer for illumination." Writing poems was a way of enriching human experience by poetic translation of its particulars, a way of continually scrutinizing his own experience for answers that could often not be final ones, final statements, just points along the road of analysis and description. His poems were ultimately acts of consciousness triggered by life, by the intensity of the mind and the imagination of a man who could be safely and logically called a great devotional poet.

The spiritual life, one's own spiritual life, certainly needs to be examined and re-examined. This poem, with many others, provides a point of reflection for the "deft practitioners", the "rehearsed petitioners" who attempt to experience that "rare Presence". In some ways, too, this poem is a meditation on the words of the Bab: "The most acceptable prayer is the one offered with the utmost spirituality and radiance; its prolongation hath not been and is not beloved of God." In the middle of the poem, having opened and closed the poem expressing serious doubts about the value of his "protocols of piety", White inserts the dramatic account of a "pilgrim child" who was happy while at the Master's Shrine and "broke into dance rapturously". As White put it in an earlier poem "it is joy that is remembered".

A final poem from The Witness of Pebbles is another personal reflection on the spiritual journey, on the spiritual value of the phenomenal world. White gives his insight an artistic form so that others may share in his perception. White is, among other things, a perceiver and maker of symbols and metaphors. This is certainly at the centre of how White articulates his role, his station, as poet, how he interprets his world. As Louis Simpson has stated, discussing the metaphorical process at the heart of poetry, "Metaphor is a process of comparing and identifying one thing with another.... the ability to see the relation between one thing and another is almost a definition of intelligence."

Of course each reader's task is to give his or her own meaning to the symbol or metaphor. Each of us must do that task for ourself. At the start of the poem The Other Shore 40 I see that shore as death, the end of a journey, a personal goal, some promising part of the future. White tells us at the start of the poem:

*Let us not stroke too swiftly toward*
*the green opposite shore*
*where death rehearses.*

This third line brings the focus of the metaphor to 'shore = death.' White continues:

*.....we have tried these*
*pearl-promising waves before*
*and might guess the danger.*

So many times in life we get our hopes up high in relation to some event or process and there is disappointment and loss. Hope gets a kick in the teeth, so to speak. White suggests that this experience we all have at one time or another should prepare us to view death with some caution, some sense of the possibility of danger.

Continuing the metaphor in the second stanza, the metaphor of shore, waves and sand, White writes:

*Recall how always we turn back spent*
*to the sun-warmed sand*
*and stand anguished in separate solitudes,*

*though hand in hand,*

*each to each grown stranger.*

For me, White is widening the metaphor here to include not just the shore but the place where we go in the summer to swim and enjoy ourselves. We go there every summer. We seek life's pleasures quite naturally but so often these pleasures lead us to an aloneness. No matter how close we get to those we love, there is a fundamental aloneness we all must face in life and the experience is often most acute in our most personal of relationships with family and friends.

The final stanza is for me the most enigmatic. I have to work hardest to make out its meaning. The language is veiled. But of course, as John Hatcher points out, perhaps with more emphasis than anything else he has said in his several books now on the subject, "every man's principal goal in his physical experience (is) the discerning of spiritual meaning in phenomenal reality and the subsequent incorporation of that insight into deeds" 41

Here is the phenomenal reality White closes his poem with:

*Not that the brave bird lied. But that*

*we, young, too soon said*

*Land! Land! and, plunging, did not see*

*his torn pinion, his bloodied head.*

*Ease us, wise love, toward this wet danger.*

The question of course is, "What does this mean?" White so often himself said, "Don't ask me what it means!" It is the task of the reader to give the poem meaning, indeed to give his life meaning. Just as the stones - "every least pebble... resound again with Thy praise" - so, too, may our own dear lives find "wings" and "ladders"

for our ascent so that we may understand the deeper meanings of existence - and the beauty of the last stanza of a poem like this.

Part of the poet's task is to give historical perspective to an era, an epoch, an age. White here is talking to me about my experience since the 1950s in both the Baha'i community and in my personal life. Back in the late 1950s as a young Baha'i I had far too high an expectation regarding the response of Western society to the religion I had come to believe in. No one had lied to me; "the big bird" - whoever it was that planted the latest wisdom in my mind - had left my impressionable soul with the view that the world was going to respond to this Cause in much greater numbers than it did. And marriage was going to be a much easier process than I had ever anticipated. But in the next forty years I experienced "his torn pinion", "his bloodied head". Was it mine? Was it my society? My religion? You read the poem and your mind plays with the options, the optional meaning systems that poetry presents. White's readers are part of that wider process: The Witness of Pebbles.

41 John Hatcher, op.cit., p.244

## ONE BIRD ONE CAGE ONE FLIGHT, 1982

Chapter 9

Roger White's poetry, for all its unmistakable religious flavour, is part and parcel of world literature. Like Pushkin and his work, which signalled the emergence of Russian literature on the world stage, White's work possesses a balance and harmony, an artistic and intellectual versatility, a formal perfection and vigour "not to be found in the details of his biography".* It was White, among several other writers in the twentieth century, who helped to forge what could be called a Baha'i consciousness in world literature. This consciousness has certain special peculiarities, a certain spiritual identity, a certain global perspective, a particular wide-angled lens. The emergence of this consciousness became apparent at the very moment when the Baha'i Faith was itself emerging from an obscurity in which it had existed for a century and a half.

- Ron Price, with thanks to Marc Slonim, * The Epic of Russian Literature: From Its Origins Through Tolstoy, Oxford University Press, NY, 1975 (1950), pp.96-7.

In 1983 White's novella A Sudden Music appeared from George Ronald and One Bird One Cage One Flight was published by Naturegraph Publishers Inc., Happy Camp in California. This was the slimmest of White's volumes thus far, although a collector's edition of a small selection of his poems, Whitewash, also came out in 1982 under the name of an editor, Reuben Rose, who lived in Haifa. An equally slim account of martyrdom, The Shell and the Pearl, was published in 1984. White was consolidating the new-found popularity of his poetry with little volumes.

One Bird One Cage One Flight however slim gave White, in what he called on the cover a "homage to Emily Dickinson", an opportunity to commune across a century of time with the spirit and the mind of a person who may very well have been the greatest female poetic genius that America and the world has ever produced.

Perhaps it was more an effort to resolve some of the questions about her poetry, about her metaphysical perspectives and about his own soul's aspirations. Perhaps it was part of White's way of dealing with the beguiling leisureliness of life's journey to death, his various preoccupations associated with death and its deceptive, always somewhat obscure but potentially wondrous purpose. Perhaps it was his identification with a poet who tried to distil "amazing sense/From ordinary Meanings" or, in the words of Mircea Eliade, tried to reveal "the essence of things", life's immense and many mysteries with an obsessive devotion to her vocation as poet. Perhaps it was simply White's way of expressing what was a qualitatively different poetry than any of the verse written by Baha'is before.

According to Yale's literary guru Harold Bloom, whose theory of poetry, a theory of poetic influence, a poet is engaged in a struggle with the poet who has gone before, whose presence exists in the legacy of that dead poet's works. There are many relations, mostly revisionary, of a quasi-filial sort which can prevail between a poet and a precursor. One sort of poetry completes the poems it follows, those poems in that legacy, sometimes by altering them, by rewriting them, by interpreting their subject matter differently. The poetry of a past, a previous poet actively intervenes in the present and must be dealt with physically, as if in Oedipal revolt against 'the poetic mother', that mother symbolizing that poet, that precursor. Poetic creation, the animating force in poetry, writes Bloom, involves a desperate wrestling with one's forebears, one's precursors, one's poetic fathers and mothers. This is the core of Bloom's theory. If any body of poetry has a canonical status or quality, it derives that status from a strangeness and a certain idiosyncratic originality. White's poetry, for me, is canonical. His poetry is 'the poetic father' I struggle with. He is my major poetic inspiration and the poet I also write 'against' in Bloom's sense as outlined briefly above. One could argue that the poet White argues against is Dickinson.

Whatever White's purpose, One Bird One Cage One Flight contributed a clever and original addition to the White corpus and to

the literature written on Emily Dickinson in the first hundred years since her passing in 1886. There remains for us, for our world with its insatiable interest in the psychology of the individual, a corpus of poetry in which White speaks in his own person or for Emily Dickinson - one is never quite sure. But, more importantly, for many of his readers anyway, he speaks for us. The poems are intensely personal, often moralizing and peculiarly characteristic of White. He often dramatizes a spiritual situation in which he is participating and speaking in the first person, though the other actors and the setting belong to the world of story, metaphor or parable. White puts into practice here an approach to poetry by one of the twentieth century's great poets, William Carlos Williams: "My idea is that in order to carry a thing to the extreme, to convey it, one has to stick to it… Given a fixed point of view, realistic, imagistic, or what you will, everything adjusts to that point of view; and the process of adjustment is a world in flux, as it should be for the poet. But to fidget with points of view leads always to new beginnings and incessant new beginnings lead to sterility. A single manner or mood thoroughly matured and exploited is that fresh thing."

There is in these poems a mastery of repetition. The full effect of the poetry comes from this repetition, a repetition of what could be called a 'Dickinson/Baha'i perspective'. There is an extraordinary evocation of aspects of the life of Emily Dickinson and of the Baha'i Faith. Poem after poem interlaces Dickinson, the Baha'i Faith and White himself. The repetitions are of course variations. Readers, I am sure, will find a sameness in these poems but the change comes in the context of this sameness. It is, as Williams notes above, "a single manner or mood thoroughly matured" in such a way that it becomes, again and again, "that fresh thing". I have found over the last twenty years, since I first began reading White, that some of his lines have become memorized simply by the force of another type of repetition. Sometimes, when out walking for example, quite involuntarily a stanza occurs to me and, if I am alone, I recite it. There is something mysterious about the reciting that keeps the

poem fresh. The following stanza is perhaps the most commonly recited of White's poems in this volume:

*I wind my thoughts in knotless skein,*
*Unspoken mile by mile, -*
*A league from immortality*
*Lay down my wool and smile.*

It seems to me that we can say of White's poems in this volume, if not in all his volume but especially in this volume, that they are at once autobiographical and universal, personal and impersonal, ironical and passionate, wounded and integral. White does not hide behind some literary mask, some persona. For the most part, the "I" in White's poems is White himself.

On opening One Bird One Cage One Flight we see the first lines stamped with the magic of style, of a style that obeys its own laws of grace and beauty and inner harmony. But it is precisely its quiet passion and spiritual tenderness that tells us that here is a poetry of a rare order. "Here is a poetry," as Goethe referred to it two centuries ago, "of a true real natural vision of life". It possesses, he continued, "descriptive power of the highest degree rendering a poet's pictures so lifelike that they become actualities to every reader." Here are those first lines, the first poem, entitled Spring Song:

*My hope put out white petals*
*In tentative delight*
*But twice there came concussive frost,*
*Obliterating blight*
*Which, blotting out my April,*

*Stirred wisdom in my root.*

*Should another burgeoning come*

*Will twig renew? 'Tis moot.*

White recognized in Dickinson his twin, at least someone whose inquiring mind was excited by the unknown expanse of immortality, its perplexity, its mystery and, ultimately, its intimacy. Indeed there is an intimacy in Dickinson's work that the reader finds in White's, but White's is gentler, simpler, far more penetrable. The intimacy is paradoxical in both cases because what we actually learn about the person, the poet, has little to do about their daily life in a direct, explicit sense. There is an anonymity about the person, the poet. The focus is squarely on the poem, on the poetry, not on the poet's daily life. The reader does not learn what White did during the day, the year, the decade, during his middle age, with his wife, inter alia. But, however simple White's poetry is, from time to time it needs to be read and re-read far more carefully than its not infrequently humorous, deftly-drafted surfaces suggest. There is no getting rid of a certain apprehension that not all of his ore will have been extracted by a cursory read. White changes a poem's direction in a few lines or a few words. He may, in fact, be pursuing a wholly different direction to the one the reader is ostensibly following. But whatever direction he is going in, the reader feels, as Dryden did of Chaucer, that here is God's plenty, here is a perpetual fountain of good sense. Part of the experience of this fountain lies in the fact that readers can return again and again to White's verse without exhausting their interest or the quiet imaginative spell of his verse; their imagination reaches back to White's imagination and the two enfold. At least that is how I experience his poetry and I am sure many others have a similar experience.

Poetry has been described by one literary critic as "a unique representation of some mental situation, some acute awareness, part of a cult of sincerity". In spite of this representation, this exposure of

their heart's and mind's most subtle secrets, the examination of the phenomenon of their individual consciousnesses, the persona in their poems, at least in the case of White and Dickinson, frequently address us with perceptions that we sense are ours as well as theirs. There is what you might call an externalization of the poet's experience in an attempt to make it valid for others. This is how Joyce Carol Oates sees Emily Dickinson and her work. And there is some value in this perspective for our study of White. It is in this way that the poet - in this case White - defines or makes an epoch, perhaps the third and fourth of the Formative Age of the Bahá'i Faith.

In the above poem, Spring Song, we find in the poet's wondering that there is a tone of purest anonymity or perhaps universality, as if the poet, speaking out of his "tentative delight" with "wisdom in (his) root" were speaking of our condition as well. There is in White's words a speaking from the interior of a life as we might imagine ourselves speaking, gifted with White's delightful way of putting things and not bound by the merely local and time-bound nature of our life. "If anonymity is the soul's essential voice," as Oates writes describing Dickinson's, "then Emily Dickinson is our poet of the soul". And White is for me - and my particular perspectives - the poet of my soul who addresses and helps create my unknowable interior. And this is no small achievement given the importance of that "inner life and private character" upon which so much depends.

White, like Dickinson, offers readers riddlesome, obsessive, haunting, sometimes frustrating poetry. But for the most part White's poetry is much simpler and easier to understand than Dickinson's. White does not ram words onto lines with a force that in Dickinson often shatters the syntax, cramps the structure and "pinches the words like a vise". There is a romance of epic proportions in both poets but, with White, the heroic sense is softened by the humour, the light touch, which runs through poem after poem. The far simpler language and word patterns and a focusing of the heroic in history, amply mixed with White's (and our) ordinary self, give

these epic proportions a human, an everyday touch. The world that White lives in certainly requires a heroism, but it is of such a different kind from the one which required martyrs in Iran in the nineteenth century or the one which Emily Dickinson occupied in her intense and private poetic, in her clearly eccentric life-style of virtually total isolation, for the most part during the years of Baha'u'llah's Revelation.

White creates a poetry of transcendence, the kind that outlives its human habitation and its name. In One Bird One Cage One Flight White does this through a repeated focus on Emily Dickinson and her life. The following poem, Emily's Song, is a good example. So much simpler than so much of Dickinson, who is also interested in transcendence, this poem begins:

*Had hearts the art of porcelain*
*The mending were small feat*
*But I have owned one whose repair*
*Earth's craftsmen can't complete.*

*Had love asked only giving*
*The donor were content*
*But I have known a stealthy hand*
*Twice prove our loves are lent.*

*Had death comprised mere dying*
*The handiwork were sweet*

*But I mark its keen audition*

*In every eye I greet.*

There is for many readers the benefit of clearly feeling and of deeply enjoying White's work, classic poetry in the right meaning of that word, work belonging "to the class of the very best". There may, of course, be weaknesses, failures, poems that come short, poems that slip out of the net of the very best either because of an immense complexity and obscurity as in the case of Dickinson, a similar complexity or an irrepressible tongue-in-cheekness which the reader is not able to appreciate due to the so very idiosyncratic nature of humour, as in the case of White. If the reader or critic is enabled to obtain a clearer sense and a deeper enjoyment of a poet through some negative criticism then, as Arnold argues, that activity is no mere "literary dilettantism". The enjoyment of the poetry should be that much increased, refined, deepened. Not every poem will delight or stimulate the intellectual and sensory emporiums to the same extent. The personal proclivities, affinities and circumstances of a reader have great power to sway the estimates of a poet's work, often attach more importance to a poem than it really possesses or diminish the real worth of a poem in various degrees due to a host of reasons. The language of encomium, of praise, for example, that I attach to White's work may be somewhat exaggerated or overrated, what Arnold calls a "personal fallacy". The language of opprobrium or simple lack of appreciation can be attached to White's poetry equally easily.

All physical activity is capable of revealing mysteries. Like Dickinson, White is fascinated by the mystery of death. Perhaps that is ultimately why he has chosen to focus on Dickinson in this volume of poetry. White, like many poets of old, is charting his, and our, progress toward his/our ultimate destiny. Here is an outline of more of that journey in the last three stanzas of Emily's Song:

*Had heaven held sure solace*
*To hasten there were wise*
*But I, grown timid, cautious,*
*Search for ambush, man's and sky's.*

*One day I'll meet fate's boldest stare*
*And ask its harsh command*
*My apron full of gentian and*
*Lone daisy in my hand.*

*Till then, like Jonah in the dark,*
*I ride the journey out*
*And count truth's ribs, bemused that faith*
*So multiplies my doubt.*

It has been the view of many writers throughout history that literature is the voice of a particular soil. The voice of the Russian soil was for long the power of abstract ideas over concrete reality. The flood of illumination in relation to the work of a particular writer comes to some readers only after intensive study. Middleton Murray's study of Dostoevsky was one such example. My own study of the poetry of Roger White is, for me anyway, another. The poetry of White is not so much the voice of a particular soil as it is the voice of a participation in the life of a community "which preserves in living shape certain treasures of the past and certain expectations of the future". These treasures have multiple roots in an environment, a community, where White and his poetry now form a natural part. White deals with abstract ideas but they are contextualized in history, in the lives of people, in nature, in the seasons and

in the ordinarily ordinary. For White philosophy, ideas, the text and texture of his poetry are a species of voluntary and involuntary, conscious and unconscious autobiography. That is why White urged his readers to read his poetry if they wanted to know about him. The poem, Emily's Song, tells a great deal about how White found the journey of life. But he tells about his journey "slant". In the process he tells the story for many of his readers, many who have come to love his work because he speaks so quintessentially of their own lives.

But all is not philosophy and ideas in his poetry. The simple, the quotidian, the ordinary is as poetical as the transcendent, if it is treated right. White brings to poetry a lively sense or feeling for situation and so he can treat any theme, however mundane or lofty, as he pleases. Indeed, the more prosaic the vesture of everyday life appears, the greater is his triumph in seizing and representing the enduring human interest of its familiar features. Perhaps this is partly, if not mainly, due to White's sense of vision. Even the most eccentric divagations in human conduct can be exhibited in their true spiritual perspective by the poet-psychologist of insight. One such "eccentric divagation" was Emily Dickinson's almost total withdrawal into herself which for many analysts of her life and poetry amounted to an illness, more than agoraphobia. Here is one of White's poems on the theme – it is titled The Beloved:

*I could not spell your name, my love;*
*No letters could contain you.*
*Embarrassed was the pen that tried*
*To address or to name you.*

*I could not paint your portrait, dear,*
*Whose face defied all palettes;*

*The shrinking brush, despairing hand,*
*Lacked craft to truly tell it.*

*I could not match your praise to song -*
*Unfit my voice and cadence,*
*Nor music ever was composed*
*Adequate to radiance.*

*Death came before I found the means*
*To spell or paint or sing you.*
*My silent soul which all inscribed*
*I hasten now to bring you.*

In many of White's poems it does not matter whether the reader shares the same religious faith as White. The poems are universal in the fullest sense and will appeal to the secular spirituality so pervasive in Western society as the new millennium begins its long road ahead. But many of White's poems, both in this book of verse and in his others, will simply be uninteresting and irrelevant to people for whom the very idea of commitment to a religion - in this case the Baha'i Faith - is inimical to their tastes. They will not make much of a good deal of White's poetry. That was also true of the work of Emily Dickinson - and she had no commitment to a specific religion at all. The reader, as in reading any poetry, must be willing and able to assume the perspective of the person writing the poem. There is much in this poem that could be autobiographical, could be an expression of White's own spiritual/personal experience vis-à-vis the exalted Founder of the Baha'i Faith, Baha'u'llah. I read this poem in quintessentially personal terms and find rich meanings unfold.

Art is, at least some of the time, an experience of tension and the poetry White writes is an art of strain, the nerves held tight but relaxed from time to time due to the presence of some dispassionate intellectual tentativeness, a tentativeness where humour can make its appearance free of what is often the dangerous romance of passionate intensity. It is as if White were saying 'perhaps' after every expression of conviction: 'perhaps' is the wisest of all words, 'Abdu'l-Baha once said in a story for children. It is not a matter of the free expression of truth but more a matter of how to work toward the truth. In the case of White's poetry the language is private, allusive, teasing, idiosyncratic, delicate, partly unfathomable to the ordinary mind. So, too, was the poetry of the nineteenth century American poet, Emily Dickinson, only more so. So White would agree with Dickinson's sentiments in her poem:

*Tell all the Truth but tell it slant -*
*Success in Circuit lies*
*Too bright for our infirm Delight*
*The Truth's superb surprise.*
*As Lightning to the Children eased*
*With expression kind*
*The Truth must dazzle gradually*
*Or every man be blind -*

White is the poet who comes at things, at readers, with indirection, with glimpses, through the subtly distorting mirror of art. But he comes at things after he has thought long and hard and what he gives, as Wordsworth once wrote, is "the spontaneous overflow", "an emotion recollected in tranquillity" and, finally, "a release from emotion". After a lifetime of pondering some of the questions

regarding the afterlife and this one (White had another dozen years to live after he wrote most of the poetry in this volume), after some thirty-five years as a Baha'i, White does not parade his simple certitudes before us in these stanzas. He approaches the next world with: caution, doubt, timidity, some grief, daily readiness, humility. Should one ask more?

Emily's Song, among his many poems involving the subject of death, and Dickinson's words above, is an honest expression of White's inner life, his inner attitude to much that is life and death and, for many of his readers, of theirs.

White distances his poems from his personality, as Robert Hayden had done before him. Poetic thought and emotion should have their "life in the poem and not in the history of the poet: such was White's view regarding the writing of poetry. The emotion of poetry, for White, was essentially impersonal". This was the position of the New Critical Movement in poetry that had its beginnings at the turn of the century. The writer of the poem is not delivering a personal letter but rather he is the medium of an experience. He ceases to exist and it is the experience that belongs to all who can read and understand. The poem often, if not always, has its origins in the history, the life, of the poet, but the poet tells it "slant", indirectly and his words become, for the attentive reader, theirs.

Virtually all of White's poems are a reflection of this spirit, this critical attitude. In The Sermon and Ladies' Verse, - and one could cite many more examples - like Dickinson, White frequently writes of death, the afterlife, heaven and hell, God, the soul. Some might say that, like Dickinson, he is obsessed with these subjects. But, given that this book of poetry is a "homage to Emily Dickinson", it is only fitting that White should be concerned with the same subjects that concerned Dickinson in her 1775 poetic oeuvre. White often sees things in ways his readers have not seen before. He asks readers to look at things they might not want to, face realities they might not want to. Without quoting from poem after poem, I shall

content myself with some simple ideas and perhaps a few illustrative lines.

In The Traveller White writes throughout most of the poem of the excitement, the pride, the cheering, the jostling throng, the enthusiasms associated with much of life's short-term goals. For me, I could not help but reminisce over the rich experience that has been my Baha'i life since the 1950s, but White finishes the poem on a note of quiet realism. For the generation of Baha'is who, like White, have been working in the Baha'i community for between thirty and fifty years or more the note, expressed in the last two lines, is just right:

*But one seeks New Jerusalem*

*And knows her journey long.*

Anyone who has worked in this Cause for most of the last half of the twentieth century knows that the road is 'long, stony and tortuous'. The wondrous new buildings on Mount Carmel are certainly a sign of the 'New Jerusalem'. There is much reason for celebration, for cheering but, in the end, he or she knows the journey is long and will require all they have in the midst of the darkness both in the world and, from time to time, in their own dear lives.

Ostensibly, so much of White's poetry is, as I said before, about immortality, death and eternity. But Baha'is learn a great deal about their Faith or, to put it more precisely, White writes so superbly about their experience that they understand their lives more fully than before. And that is enough to make White a much-loved poet. In the poem Disclosure , for example, White begins by describing the process of Baha'u'llah's Revelation perhaps as beautifully as anyone has hitherto described it:

*The hieroglyphics gouged in air*
*By an impatient fire-gloved hand*

And the purpose of this Revelation, these hieroglyphics, White tells us -

*Are given as our library -*

Baha'u'llah has ordained for our "training every atom in existence and the essence of all created things", as He writes in The Hidden Words; or, as He states in another context, if we look at the atom we will find the sun. There is wisdom 'from on high' in His Words, in the Revelation and in all of existence. White continues:

*We, star-affrighted, gaze to land*
*Where furnished in an atom's tome*
*Is erudition of the sky -*

The reader can interpret these words in various ways to translate their meanings. For my money I see the "star-affrighted" individual turning to the world of phenomenal existence, the "land", where he will find a world of learning and meaning. Such an individual turns to this material existence and away from the stars, the Writings, because they are too awesome, too mysterious. The individual finds "erudition" in the land and misses the erudition of higher forms: the Writings, the stars, the sky. The reader, of course, can unpack these lines in other ways. To each his own. This is part of the very beauty of poetry. White continues:

*The dust-affronted student lifts*

*A blank uncomprehending eye.*

We are one and all "affronted" by the "dust", the overwhelming, the pervasive, aspect of our existence and we, thus, exhibit "A blank uncomprehending eye". One can only understand a small portion of the entire world.

*And swivelling will not read the book*

*From which his glance will dart again,*

*Though it's indexed in his jugular*

*Where love annunciates its name.*

This "uncomprehending", "dust-affronted" individual - and there are hundreds of millions of them - swivels away on his chair from the Baha'i book he was loaned. Or he looks at the book for a short time, but "his glance" darts away "again". The idea that the Baha'i message is meant for everyone to hear is expressed so graphically in the phrase "indexed in his jugular".
And finally the last stanza:

*Will not admit magnificence*

*Which looms a startled blink away*

*To bleach with gold the retina*

*Resigned in arrogance to grey.*

I find the metaphorical significance, indeed beauty, of what White writes here helps to put in focus the teaching process that I have

been engaged in for over forty years. White is easy to underestimate because his metaphors are so stunning, so gentle, so elegant. The Baha'i writings, White is saying here, can "bleach with gold the retina", but most people are "resigned in arrogance to grey" because they "Will not admit" the wonder, the grandeur, the "magnificence" of this newly emerging world religion. What a world of meaning in the words "resigned in arrogance to grey"! Disbelief is a rejection of divine reality; it implies a refusal of grace. White is expressing here his belief, in words that echo Baha'u'llah's utterance in one of His tablets: "woe betide him who hath rejected the grace of God and His bounty, and hath denied His tender mercy and authority".

Like Dickinson, White knows that the highest perceptual ecstasy comes just as the object vanishes from sight. The more fleeting our perceptions the greater their distinctiveness. The transience and formlessness of experience give lustre to what we do achieve. Expressing that lustre in the form of a covenant, an "exquisite bond", and introducing his poem with the words from one of Emily's letters: "everyday life seems mightier", White writes:

*Life gives so strong a covenant*
*Who shall not sign in trust?*
*Its smallest clause empowered to*
*Bind atom - sun, or dust.*

*To all-compelling contract,*
*Though codicil be pain,*
*Adheres the constant signatory*
*Till only God remains.*

*All that fidelity attracts*
*A lenient bench reviews;*
*Sealed by the very hand of God*
*Exquisite bond renews.*

Unlike Dickinson, who "delineates a oneness that is really a seething competition of irreconcilable opposites", who cannot see any divine plan in this overwhelming, omnipresent cosmic oneness, for whom unity collapses under her genuinely tragic gaze, White has found such a unity, a basis for unity, and has examined its basis for over thirty years before he came to write this poem. He has believed and sought to understand this in the context of a quite literal 'covenant', a covenant that binds all of creation. He accepts that pain is at the heart of life, at the heart of this covenant and that fidelity is a crucial aspect of this covenant – this "exquisite bond".

For White there is no separation of the "active" and the "contemplative" facets of our lives, no more separation of "mysticism" from "practicality". There is a oneness of vision and form, and he gathers the powers of his mind and imagination to serve the establishment of a spiritual kingdom. He strives to do this in a language that is "moderate, tempered and infinitely courteous", and not filled with "dissent, discord and disdain". In so doing he whispers in our bones and arteries and "the isolated and speechless elements in a community" can find their voices in his poetic harmony. White becomes, for many of his readers, "the clear song of the hidden bird" in their own hearts. Part of his ability to do this derives from the grounding of his awareness in his own shortcomings, his own vulnerabilities and weaknesses. This tempers his voice and trains, in the words of Bahiyyih Nakhjavani, "his vision with compassionate tolerance".

The 'death poetry' of Dickinson and White needs to be given some special attention in any essay on One Bird One Cage One Flight. Both poets characterize death with images of light. In the

last poem before the epilogue, a poem entitled Last Words, for example, White writes about a radiant, unbearable and burning light:

*and a rank, radiant as light,*
*a rank of angels -*
*Oh what a dear confusion!*
*.....*
*and God's face bright, not angry*
*.....*
*and the gleaming City, white and past imagining.*

Dickinson frequently balanced the visionary optimism she occasionally expressed with a rather grim picture of death. Not so with White. He often muses on death with a sadness and a tongue in cheek:

*That solemn artist, death,*
*Left her portrait on the pillow -*
*Detail complete, save breath.*

Or:

*I wind my thoughts in knotless skein,*
*Unspoken, mile by mile -*
*A league from immortality*
*Lay down my wool and smile.*

Like Dickinson, White explores the effects of death upon human perception. The ability to perceive is the most cherished aspect of human identity so that, when perception is gone at the point of death, what might the experience after death be like when we are 'sucked into its deep'? White offers us none of 'her secrets.' Death's lips are sealed 'with stone.' This is about as cold, as indifferent, as horrific, as White gets.

*Death is like the ruthless Nile -*
*The scaled beast it gives keep*
*Will, careless, swim its dark coil's length*
*Till sucked into its deep.*

*Who'd tell its gulping treachery,*
*Irrevocably gone -*
*While down indifferent centuries*
*The blanching Sphinx looks on*

*And none may pry her secrets -*
*Her reason overthrown -*
*The horror fixed her mindless stare*
*And sealed her lips with stone.35*

In another context, somewhat softer, when death comes with its "fang":

*It gives no cause to weep*

*That greater pen enfold the lamb*

*In everlasting keep.*

Here our perception of death, our view of its meaning, is the very source of our identity. Death has no horror; indeed, it is inviting. As the poem closes death turns us toward life and forces us to admire and cherish it:

*Then ring the bell and call the flock,*

*Ingather all that stray,*

*But mark the beast intractable*

*The fields invite to stay 36*

White's unflinching acknowledgment of death provides him with a tragi-comic view of life. With Dickinson the reader is presented with her enhanced perceptions of life. With White we laugh and, almost in the same breath, we view the tragic but the tragic has soft edges:

*Till then, like Jonah in the dark,*

*I ride the journey out*

*And count truth's ribs, bemused that faith*

*So multiplies my doubt.*

Doubt for White is, as it clearly is for William Hatcher in his several articles about science and religion, the logical concomitant of faith. Explanation does not dispel mystery and doubt. Progress is the product not only of transcending the old, but it is also an appreciа-

tion of perspectives old and new. So often it is how we view things that inhibits our capacity to wonder. White, viewing things sub specie aeternitatis, views them with irony in a context of eternal struggle, an eternal struggle that is accepted as part and parcel of the reality of life itself:

*Across his soul's scarred battlefield*
*Where all his pride was slain*
*The legions of his enemy*
*Prepare to strike again.*

The lines he writes are only a slight "palliative" for the "ravages of grief" when they come. He will continue to "hobble to the page for ease" and doubt will continue to be part of his human experience:

*A mosquito buzzes round my faith*
*I think to name him doubt.*

This small book of poems is divided into four parts of between twenty-five and thirty-one poems each with an epilogue of three poems. Fifteen pages of notes and a bibliography are included to guide readers through the life of the woman whose journey and poetry has inspired White. Each section opens with a quotation from the Baha'i writings or the Bible. A simple drawing also embellishes both the cover and the opening page of each section. A tone of child-like simplicity is conveyed by these drawings. It is a tone that is also one of the many outstanding qualities of White's poetry.

Many of the poems are preceded by quotations from the more than seven hundred extant letters that Dickinson wrote between 1865 and 1885. It is not the purpose of this essay to examine the life

of Emily Dickinson, rather the purpose is to examine the poetry of White and Dickinson, to the extent that each of their respective works throws light on the other's.

The first section of the book, some twenty-nine poems, takes us through Emily's years eleven to nineteen, her adolescence, and is called 'Spring Song.' Most of the poems are written in the abcb rhyme pattern and some in the aabb style. The rhythm is iambic tetrametre and trimetre. They are usually quite easy to read compared to Dickinson's poetic complexity, ambiguity and her often seeming chaotic meandering. While Dickinson's universe often seems to be "a cosmos in tatters", White presents a world that seems balanced, cogent, elegant, elevated, graceful and, most importantly, familiar. Humorous, perspicuous, satirical and sentimental, his poetry rarely seems far away. On a clear day White can smile forever, especially through the mundane:

*Deliver me from cooking-stoves*
*From kitchens, pots and pans;*
*The only menu I select*
*Is that which heaven plans.*

Only unbearable stress can extract the precious essence of life. Dickinson and White both know this. White puts it this way:

*Attentive is the scholar*
*That Master, pain, instructs;*

*A vivid erudition*
*His tutelage inducts.*

White knows life is a battle. In the following stanzas he shows his understanding of the battle in life and a desire to be rid of it:

*Long has the chafing struggle raged*
*And God alone can know*
*When might the captive, fervour gained,*
*Slip his lax chains and go.*

There is an anguish, a depth of passion in the occasional tormented lament. There is the story of pain endured and of life's travail in White's poetry but, for the most part, this experience seems to have bred "an ancient dignity", and some amalgam of that robust and virile quality that is part of the very stock of White's ancestry and that gentleness and wisdom which has come, it would seem, from a lifetime's association with the newest of the world's religions.

Dickinson's attitude to God was at times suspicious, fearful and resentful. White's is one that sees a danger in death, but in the long haul a warmth and fulfilment in the heavenly experience. He contrasts death's "stone" and "iced, mean bone" with heaven's "kinder home" and its "pillows with fulfilment". And meanwhile, in this earthly life, death "stalks across" his "choicest day" and plunders everything he sees. There is clearly a gentle side to death's ambience in White's poetry.

In the latter stages of Dickinson's life 'the pearl' comes to occupy the symbolic centre-stage of her poetry. Dickinson seems to deal more effectively with existential loss in her later years. In White's work light comes to occupy the centre of his mise-en-scene. These, too, are White's later years. Nothing stains the white radiance of eternity in this climactic poem Last Words:

*Oh Father, calling, calling - and the light!*

*The light an immolation! Unto Thee lift I up mine eyes...*

*Oh this lifting, lifting -*

*lifting beyond sense,*

*past doubt and why and how!*

*Bright Presence, lift me now!*

Between this consummation in Part Four and many of the opening poems discussed above in Part One we have the core of the book: the summer and autumn seasons. The most prolific years of Dickinson's life were the 1860s, especially the early 1860s. White gives us some thirty-one poems in this section, the years 1860 to 1869, the most of any of the four seasons. They were also Dickinson's most prolific years.

"The life of action," says Stephen Spender in his The Making of a Poem in the Creative Process, "always seems to me an act of cutting oneself off from life."

That was unquestionably true of Dickinson who is now seen down the corridors of time as the eccentric recluse who increasingly shut herself off from the world as she got older. White captures the terror of her reclusiveness and the elusiveness, fear and potential intimacy of the Divine Who is always waiting at our metaphorical door with His 'hello', as The Caller:

*The lady's tread upon the step,*

*Her hand upon the bell,*

*And all the rattling house grows wise*

*As when a solemn knell….*

The lady, here, is the Divine Caller Who comes for us at our death. When She does -

*My heart knifed by insistent ring*
*I steel myself to go*
*With dread-swamped pulse to swing the door*
*Upon her fraught hello.*

White gives his readers, through the window of the poetry of Emily Dickinson, a series of perspectives on death that are consistent with the Baha'i writings but provide insights that are refreshing in their profundity, their wisdom, their sheer delight.

"Talent perceives differences," wrote W.B. Yeats, "genius unity." A major concern in Yeats' life was to hammer his thoughts into unity. White's, possessing a philosophy of unity, draws quintessentially on the everyday and articulates a poetic with unity at its centre. But it is a unity surrounded by an immense diversity and a certain anguish:

*To everything but anguish*
*The mind will soon adjust;*
*Uninvited, that marauder,*
*Invading, trails his dust*

*About the scrupulous household*
*The tidy mind maintains,*
*Sets soiling boots on ottoman,*
*Remotest chamber gains -*

*Wrenches down the damask curtains,*

*Break's housewife's favourite bowl*

*And storms up faith's chaste stairway*

*To bed the balking soul.*

The context for this anguish is the simple everyday reality, a reality we all understand only too well, for anguish is unquestionably a universal experience.

Part Two (1860-1869), Part Three (1870-1879) and Part Four (1880-1886) deal with their respective sections of Dickinson's life. Her particular cosmology, her world view, is played with a Calvinistic Christian orientation and a personal vision embodying the imagination at its centre. White's play is with an imagination sharing "a path or circuit of things through forms and so makes them translucid to others". White attempts to wed the powers of mystic and poet in a process of perpetual motion back and forth across all points of the sphere, so to speak. He tries to fuse vision and form. Light for him is a unifying idea. Some of his work can be appreciated quickly, but the depths do not reveal themselves quickly. His poetic art only opens up to readers with patience and time. White had another decade of poetry to give to his readers. Many had been hooked on White before reading this, his third main book of poetry. But most of his readers had yet to arrive on the scene.

There is a humility that graces so many of White's poems. It has nothing to do with a creeping submissiveness. Although he is quick to point out his own lack of loyalty and obedience to the divine Message, he takes no perverse pleasure in making himself out to be a scoundrel. Sober self-knowledge, a low estimate of his own worth, a reliance on God's love that is so confident that it overcomes his despondency, a beauteous character that shines through his poetry like light through clear glass, an ingenuousness - qualities that, for me anyway, produce a complex human being. He had his inner con-

flicts, as we all do, and his poems are partly an expression of those conflicts. Yet at times he wrote with a childlike, lucid simplicity, with the voice of true innocence, an innocence that one can find only on the far side of experience.

He did not simply acquiesce in his creed. He grasped it imaginatively and presented it to his contemporaries with a storehouse of symbols familiar to their worlds. In the process he forged for himself a style that was unmistakable and inimitable. If a poet can do this, he is not obliged to do anything else.

Chapter 10

# MARTYRDOM, AND DOING WHAT IS UNDER YOUR NOSE

Perhaps it was in writing the poetry in honour of Emily Dickinson; perhaps it was the latest generation of martyrs that the Baha'i world was experiencing in the early 1980s; perhaps it was a desire to get back to the Faith's origins since, in many ways, especially with the completion of the new building for the permanent seat of the Universal House of Justice in 1984, the Baha'i community was going through another period of 'new beginnings'; perhaps it was just a simple desire to use a different form to express his creative output: but in 1983 and 1984 White wrote two books of prose. The first was a two-hundred page novella, A Sudden Music, and the second was "an account of the martyrdom of 'Ali-Asghar of Yazd", The Shell and the Pearl. One was part fact and part fiction and the other a brief historical work. They were both written in memory of martyrs.

These were not the first pieces of prose that White had written, for he sprinkled prose pieces throughout his books of poetry, long pieces of several pages or shorter epilogues to many of his poems. Perhaps he was having some time off from poetry for he had written a great deal in the late seventies and early eighties. Only a serious examination of the White archives in Haifa and Toronto will answer this question. There is a charm in White's prose, not a sensuous or imaginative charm, at least not for me, but rather an intellectual charm. It comes from the texture of his style rather than its elements, not so much in the content but more in the turn of phrase, in the happy cast and flow of his sentences.

One of the objects of writing poetry, as Howard Nemerov once noted, is similar to making love, that is the perpetuation to immortality - although it is not what you think of at the time. Perhaps it was, then, that White had immortality on his mind, which is not at all surprising, particularly after writing all those poems in homage to Emily Dickinson for whom the subject of death was what you might call her great passion. Or it may be, again as Nemerov point-

ed out somewhat risquely, that writing verses is like your relation with your bowels - first you can't and then you can and, then at last, you must (and then you reach for the paper). Whatever it was, in 1983 and 1984 White published prose works and he was not to publish any poetry until 1992, a year before his passing.

A Sudden Music was set in Paris at the turn of the twentieth century and it is a poetic re-creation of the first Baha'i centre in Europe. Ostensibly about a young American student, Althea Edison Benedict, and her awakening to the spiritual receptivity of the age, this delightful series of letters which White creates gives us an interpretation of the spiritual and of how to apply the Baha'i teachings to the complex everyday life we had in the late twentieth century society that White was writing for - or today, for that matter, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In the process White gives his readers a vision, a window, into the lives of 'Abdu'l-Baha and May Maxwell, the mother teacher of the West who was asked by 'Abdu'l-Baha to stay in Paris and in a few months established the first Baha'i centre there. White dedicates this book "in memory of May Ellis Maxwell".

Alex Aronson, in the first review of A Sudden Music, characterizes the book as the unfolding, the development "of a spiritual commitment to an ideal that may, but need not, be called religious". "This ideal," he goes on, "embraces the moral, social and aesthetic life of humankind." Aronson calls the book "most unfashionable". In this book White restores the grammar of belief and at the same time uses its conventional language infused with a new spirit. The novella moves at one level, that of spiritual rebirth and, as the story is told, art and artists constitute the raw material out of which a new Faith is born. White "finds meaning in the transcendental," Aronson concludes, "without ever becoming esoteric". Indeed, I remember writing to White in the mid-1980s, congratulating him on writing a book with a remarkable everyday flavour even though it travelled on lofty spiritual planes. The book had, I thought, important issues for the mind and heart to deal with.

The Shell and the Pearl, on the other hand, tells the story of the martyrdom of 'Ali-Asghar of Yazd in 1891. It is one of the many and, to the average western mind, inexplicable stories of the incredible tenacity of faith which fill the records of Baha'i history. 'Ali-Asghar had his head severed by a howling mob in the city of Yazd. The mob threw his severed head through the window of his family home. His mother picked up the head, wiped off the dripping blood and threw it back to the street. While throwing it she is reported to have said: "What we have given to God we do not ask back."

Before White passed away he was to write many poems in memory of, or inspired by, the many martyrs, historical and contemporary, that are part of the history of the Baha'i Faith since 1844 and before. One cannot help but think of two of White's poems that, in different ways, speak to the heroic, the martyr, the sudden music in which our own voice is raised in a spiralling 'Yes!' to the calls of service to this Cause.

The first such poem, Conversation, begins with what could be the words of a typical westerner contemplating martyrs, martyrs to any cause; or they could be the words of an enthusiastic believer contemplating the relative indifference of those typical westerners who could not imagine dieing for any belief or cause:

*The temperature of other minds -*
*How new and strange an awe!*

Having spoken of that gap between minds and hearts, White goes on to describe the experience of that gap, that difference in temperature, in enthusiasm, in belief:

*My own words chill and burn me*
*Chafing my brain raw.*

So intense are they, so heart-felt and emotionally laden, that -

*Moderate words from lips of guests*
*Alarm--as zephyr blown -*
*One whom extremes have nourished*
*But was not quite alone;*

Thus even "moderate words" of friends and associates bring alarm to the believer because he cannot understand how anyone can live without some sort of commitment, some passion for a cause, a belief. Such a believer has been "nourished" on "extremes" not on moderation and the leisured pursuits of the middle class where entertainment is usually the focus of life, earning an income and attending to the responsibilities of family life and friends. Such a believer, however involved in the extremes of his commitment or, perhaps, because of the emotional and intellectual extremes that are part of this commitment, was never "quite alone". In the case of the Baha'i Faith this commitment tended to generate a high degree of people involvement, involved as he or she was in building a new world order. And finally, in the last stanza, White concludes:

*One who conversed in accents*
*Temperate tongues disown -*
*The delirium of fever,*
*The chink of frozen bone.*

As anyone who has spent many years serving any cause, any commitment, with a passionate intellectual and emotional attachment, particularly a commitment like the Baha'i Faith with the obligation

to extend its influence by sharing it with others they meet in their various walks of life, will find the above words so apt. There is something about the "temperate tongues" of others which "disown" the "accents" which the believer wants to share. The result for the believer is that he or she often feels "The delirium of fever/The chink of frozen bone". A book on martyrdom is one such example. This is a booklet, only twenty-six pages, for the believer. The typical person with a more "temperate" tongue would, for the most part, be estranged, bemused, puzzled by such a phenomenon as someone like 'Ali-Asghar "refusing to recant his faith in the Revelation of Baha'u'llah" and, therefore, being martyred. Such a reader would experience "a new and strange sense of awe". It is unlikely that he or she would feel "nourished" by such a reading, although some have been known to be strangely attracted by such an extreme.

The early years after the revolution in Iran in 1979 were years of great persecution. White's book, The Shell and the Pearl, was part of the response of the Baha'i community to this persecution. The Baha'i response to the persecution, particularly in Yazd, was characterized by an "unconventionally positive stress-belief pattern" It was not White's purpose to outline the response of Baha'is in the 1980s. A distinctive quality of personal behaviour, though, can be seen in the response of the Baha'is continuing a tradition going back to 'Ali Asghar's mother. The fundamental nature of social groups becomes apparent during times of social conflict and stress.

White gives a detailed but succinct account of the martyrdom of 'Ali Asghar drawing on a range of sources from Baha'i history since the 1890s. By 1984 when he published The Shell and the Pearl Yazd had become a centre of extensive martyrdoms yet again. There were dozens of Baha'is in Iran who had lost their lives in the five-year period 1978 to 1983 and White drew on those accounts to write the poetry he did. For this book, though, the focus was on 'Ali Asghar. The second such poem, Love's Fare, is quite explicitly about the martyr:

*The martyr may not choose his food*
*But gourmand won't complain*
*If cup holds only suffering*
*And plate be heaped with pain.*

*The tart fare, tribulation,*
*His appetite but whets,*
*Each lavish course a banquet whose*
*Swift passage he regrets.*

*Consumed is each least morsel -*
*Crumb, stem, stone, rind and all,*
*The victuals of love's festal board*
*Were ever sugared gall.*

*Were final wine a scarlet brew*
*He'll drain the keg, if able,*
*And rising long embrace sweet Host*
*Who sets so rich a table.*

It is not my intent to write an extended analysis of The Shell and the Pearl, but only to draw the attention of readers to some of the prose works of Roger White. In the process, though, of referring to this small twenty-six page booklet I would like to draw the attention of readers to White's many poems with martyrdom as their theme. Like this poem, of great beauty and intensity, White may come as close as anyone can to providing an intellectual perspective

that may move cynical and sceptical readers with their broadly liberal-humanist perspectives.

Nor is it my intention to go into great detail in summarizing the content of A Sudden Music. Rather I would simply like to draw the readers' attention to several quotations from this book, quotations which throw light on the thorny problems we all face in our individual and community lives. They are taken somewhat at random from A Sudden Music, but they capture something of the flavour of what White is writing.

On spiritual principles: "attempting to apply a divine principle," says White, is usually a "creative and dangerous act...." He refers to it as one of those "iffy things". (p.88)

On domineering personalities and ego: "I have … grown alarmed at the subtle way one comes to think of the impersonal power of the Cause as being one's own personal power." (p.156)

On meeting 'Abdu'l-Baha: "the plane of words and appearances is not the one on which one truly and most productively meets Him". (p.109)

On goals and aspirations: "There is nothing like exposure to perfection to reduce [one's] aspirations to size." (p.98)

On the spiritual and the physical: "There is something false about a spiritual life that denies being rooted in our animal existence." (p.62)

On courtesy: Regrettably "courteousness... seals [people] in as effectively as a suit of armour…" they "become models of mediocrity, smug and safe and cowardly". (p.48)

On suffering: it "can spring from many sources but it means little unless it is faced heroically and triumphed over." (pp.47-8)

On emotions: "Emotions are so untrustworthy and I detest the inner turmoil they cause." (p.40)

On the inspiration of poets (and he should know): "I shall forever remain suspicious of the real cause of the inspiration of poets." (p.9)

And some one-liners:

"All that reason destroys, hope must recreate." (p.175)

" analysis is the disease of this century." (p.103)

"God achieves through our innocence what we cannot through our calculation." (p.102)

These are some snippets of White's prose-aphorisms.

For the next seven years White continued to serve at the Baha'i World Centre before retiring to Vancouver in May 1991 where he lived for two years before passing away. While in Vancouver he published his final major work Occasions of Grace and two smaller books of poetry, The Language of There and Notes Postmarked The Mountain of God. All three came out a year before he passed away. So White continued to work, fully engaged in "the highest service a Baha'i can render" - which he defined in A Sudden Music as: always doing "the thing under his nose that needs doing". (p.71)

Chapter 11

## LIPSTICK AND BRUISES

Although this book is devoted primarily to the poetry of Roger White, I have added special chapters to focus on a small selection of his letters, on his books of prose, and here in this chapter on some of his other activities involving writing and poetry. I have done this to place his poetry in an additional perspective, that of a creative and imaginative life.

In a book celebrating the first hundred years of Hansard in Canada's parliament, John Ward wrote that Roger White was "acknowledged by his colleagues as one of the finest shorthand writers ever to serve his country". He also served as the official reporter for the Supreme Court of British Columbia. These were some of the skills White brought to the Publishing Department at the Baha'i World Centre where he was editor-in-chief of several volumes of The Baha'i World during the 1980s. He wrote the lyrics for 'Songs for Solo Voice' by Jean South in Luxembourg and the text for the book Forever in Bloom: The Lotus of Bahapur. Indeed, I am confident White had many other talents and abilities that are not mentioned in this book, devoted as it is to a study of White's poetry not his life's activities.

In 1989 White gave a poetry reading in Haifa. At that time he had been at the Baha'i World Centre for eighteen years. The evening's program was called 'Lipstick and Bruises'. The tone was entertaining with a gentle satire in the air as he read and spoke. White was a sit-down, not a stand-up, comedian. He really was quite funny, not a surprising quality to anyone who knew his poetry and had received some of his letters. White satirized almost everything that the Baha'i community stood for but, in the end, everything and everyone's emotions and standards were left intact. Most contemporary comedians who have gained popularity leave not a stone or an institution standing after a thorough-going evening of satirical work is done. Not so with White. He certainly

turned stones over with his satire but the process was gentle and embodied an etiquette, a refinement of expression.

I was reminded, as I listened, of the Jews who for centuries have been 'the funny guys', the comedians. There seems to be something about suffering that brings out the lighter side of life as a survival mechanism. It seemed most fitting that two hundred Baha'is should join White in an evening of laughter and pure delight. Somehow it was a sign of the maturity of the Baha'i community, so often measured in blood, sweat and tears, dogged persistence in the face of massive indifference and a faith which it was their hope and belief would move mountains, if not tomorrow, then over the centuries. One way of characterizing the Baha'i experience, White's experience, perhaps, was with, as White put it in the title he gave to the program, 'Lipstick and Bruises'.

White read many of his old favourites and the audience's. He also read some new material: from letters he had received, from his experiences and those of others. He joked; he played the raconteur, the provocateur, the stimulator, the titillator, the poet-who-lived-there, the kind man that he was.

I was not present at the evening's entertainment which was organized, White informed us, by the Department of Organization and Personnel. I was one of those who received a cassette tape with the background music of Iranian musician Masoud Rowshan who played the santour. I was one of those who heard the voice of the poet, I think for the first time, after enjoying his many voices in poetry.

There was a dryness in his voice, a little like the dry humour that comes out of Canada. But there was that kindness, the kindness that 'Abdu'l-Baha had pointed to when He visited Canada in 1912. White was one of those 'kind friends' that 'Abdu'l-Baha had raised up just about the time when Canada was forming its first National Spiritual Assembly in 1948. With a lifetime of service, over forty years, and the experiences of lipstick and bruises behind him, White

was a veteran. He was also greatly loved. There would be four more years of 'lipstick and bruises' to go before his innings were to be completed.

I wish I could have been there, although I was able to savour each line as it came off that cassette tape. I felt as if I finally had White to myself after all these years, such are the illusions of technology. Nineteen months after this poetry reading White would leave the Baha'i World Centre. With a quadruple bypass operation under his belt, so to speak, which he likened to "being struck down by a herd of stampeding rogue elephants or perhaps a small Sherman tank", he still had a little left. He put that little into three books of poetry which were published within three years of this public reading at the Baha'i World Centre.

Chapter 12

## OCCASIONS OF GRACE

The major failing of Socrates, it has been argued, was that he did not enact a genuine political irony. The over-serious teacher, possessed of an improvement morality, was put to death as the Athenian experiment in democracy became unstuck. Socrates was a threat. His politics was anti-democratic in a crucial period of the frightening anti-democratic revolutions, 411 and 404 BC. So, too, were the politics of Socrates' student, Plato, whose visions of community grew out of his fears of anti-community associated with the Peloponnesian War of 431 to 404 BC, of the secular humanism of the sophists and of the rootless individualism of the masses. Plato wanted a new form of political community. This same desire motivates the poetry of Roger White. White does not find his political community in the Republic but, rather, in the embryonic order associated with the teachings of the prophet-founder of the Baha'i Faith, Baha'u'llah.

Aristophanes, the poet, writing in that same fifth century BC during that first experiment in democracy, provided the Western world's first political satire. People laughed at themselves and their institutions as Aristophanes put his society under his literary microscope. In recent centuries satire's rich vein of intellectual freedom has been on the come-back trail after centuries in which humour was seen as an expression of the devil. Since the Renaissance and Reformation the congregation of satirists have made humour a part of peoples' blessedness. As political philosophers have been struggling to articulate a new basis for community in the last several centuries a Voltairean irreverence, an antidote, has come to occupy the public space. The smile of reason has kept many people sane in what seems an insane world. To counteract the excessive moralizing, the meretricious, the sanctimonious, the bitter melancholy, the acids of individualism and the stupidity of collectivities a 'comic faith' has grown in our midst.

Beginning, perhaps, with Erasmus, Swift, Rabelais and Sterne, four ordained clerics, this vein of comedy has shown that the ridiculous can be sublime and that the comic imagination can change our experience of reality. But the game is deathly serious. Comedy seeks to transcend the tragic and overcome its dominance and dangerous romantic grandeur that so often leads to fanaticism's passionate intensity. Bertolt Brecht goes so far as to say that comedy deals with the sufferings of humankind more seriously than tragedy. This idea seems on the surface to be somewhat shocking. Hannah Arendt suggests that, although it may be shocking, it is true. Whether it is or not, I introduce these ideas in an essay on White's Occasions of Grace because White's poetry is underpinned with a sense, a spirit of play, a sense of homo ludens, play as a way of establishing order in an often complex, absurd and difficult world, play as a way of mastering experience by combining the light and the serious in delightful juxtapositions, play in the context of a tendency to apotheosise language, to give it a power not of God but a power which reflects His informing and transforming power. For some it is the spiritualization of wonder; for others it is secularization. But irony is everywhere.

After a decade that saw two more volumes of his poetry, Occasions of Grace continues a poetic construction that is part of the slow growth in the prestige of a prophetic message with an important role to play in creating dialogue among presently competing creeds. His construction is clever. An ingenious manipulator of words, he provokes admiration and titillates the sensibilities. Of the nearly 200 pages of text, fifty are prose and notes on the poetry. White divides his poetry into six major sections. There are more than a dozen poems to and about Baha'i martyrs. Another dozen or so, as we find in virtually all of White's books of poetry, about major figures in Baha'i history. There are the familiar poems to friends, to actors, to Israel, to love, to a pot-pourri of themes too long to list.

The reader leans forward to learn from White as he places his own frail vulnerability on the firing line. His openness creates a bridge of trust. He whispers in the readers' bones and arteries and one finds that his song is often the hidden bird in one's own heart. But bring your dictionary along or you may not hear any song at all. The Baha'i Faith suggests an alternative political order with the future in its bones - a phoenix which has been growing slowly in the ashes of orthodoxies that have long held people's minds and society's definition of reality. The lance and parry techniques of an archaic tournament continue to fill the intellectual air and prevent fluid and collaborative exchange. The jangling mockery of our own limited understanding is paraded in the absence of an artistic and critical humility. In the whirlwind of a distracted hour getting command over the craft of self-expression has become an awesome feat.

This is true for both individuals and for society's institutions. An organic change in the structure of present-day society and the profundity of a change in the standard of public discussion is heralded in the poetry of Roger White. The artist is predictive. In his language, his struggles and his joys White allows the reader to see the texture of our age. The psychological problems of people in this dark age of transition are a product of sociohistorical changes. White charts these changes in his powerful poetic idiom. He packs a great deal into his more than one hundred and thirty poems, his several thousand lines of poetry.

At the centre of White's perspective is an assumption, a philosophy, a principle - that "dissidence is a moral and intellectual contradiction" to those who would be peacemakers and unifiers of the children of men. The charm of this perspective is present in poem after poem in an etiquette of expression that possesses a candour, a tone, a motive, a manner, a mode that takes the faintest hints of life and converts them into a basis for dialogue. But the dialogue White apotheosises implies a nobler and ampler manifestation of human achievement, a relationship between our outer and inner selves not yet achieved. His vocabulary of humour and seriousness, of joy and

sorrow, which encompasses both the trivial and the profound, engender a perspective that seeks both immortality and temporary pleasure. White's readers must love words if they are to love White.

As a wordsmith he works at his anvil. He plays with his own fears, his loneliness, ignorance, despair, with the world's random sordidness, vulgarity and sadness. He plays with his readers; he smiles. I enjoy playing with White. It is a little like playing marbles when I was a kid. But you have to like playing marbles. His marbles are words. They bounce sharply into holes; they scatter all over the place; they are bright, hard and clear as crystal. Art forms are often best at their beginnings: Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Dickens in poetry, drama, art and the novel, respectively. The poet, the novelist, the artist, the dramatist once commanded a respect. From a certain height of grandeur they possessed a common touch. After two centuries of modernism the intellectual elites have been overthrown. The cultural mandarins of post-modernism do not possess any value system; much of contemporary cultural production is scarcely different from commercials. Insidious shifts in our value systems have vastly broadened the acceptable boundaries of high culture and the nature of creativity that sustains it. The artist, the poet, is unable to compete for public attention or favour with the new mandarins of public entertainment, pop-psychology and the media. White's pages whirl about on the wings of the spirit. He knows that for many they might as well be blank. You can just about hear him say: 'Don't ask me what it means!'

White does not cultivate obscurity. But in his encounter with the reality of experience - his and ours - he takes no little pain to inform his readers of the asphyxia of soul, the offence against life that comes from a hedonistic materialism which denies that at the heart of life there is pain. White offers a challenge: to transcend the ordinary, the comfortable, the protective chrysalis of the contemporary, the corporate and the candy-floss suburban mediocrity. For those who journey with White the spiritual texture of our times takes on definition. History and sociology are poetry. It is construct-

ed of infinitely instructive surprises resulting from a systematic introspection, an introspection which courts bafflement, misunderstanding and rejection.

In 1983, two years after The Witness of Pebbles, his One Bird One Cage One Flight appeared. It was a gift to all those who find that they must make everything out of their solitariness and the privacy of their thought. Ostensibly a homage to Emily Dickinson, this slim volume was a testimony to the confrontation with self and to the cry of all romantic artists since the industrial revolution: "I don't want comfort; I want God; I want poetry; I want real danger; I want freedom; I want goodness. I want sin." People living out their lives in unobtrusive and quiet ways, those who do want comfort and do not want sin, come under White's microscope. His meditative eye looks at the microcosm of the human drama in all its detail and provides a window for the reader to enter the cosmos. The ordinary person, the boredom, the fragility, the doubts and the fears of people in their ordinariness are paraded for us in all their panoply and pageantry. White has married his words and out of this marriage poetry is born. He has married solitude. So, too, has he married the social. I offer this one poem, chosen somewhat at random, to give a taste, a texture, of White's solitude and social and their juxtaposition. It is titled Adequate Heaven:

*Adolescence, I thought, and not for the first time, could be hell.*
- Dick Francis

*You sit hooded in discontent*
*oblivious of the sunlit garden*
*telling of the boy who has your heart.*
*It does not suffice you to be*
*young and bright and to wear*

*an innocent loveliness.*
*Love is too great a burden, you sigh,*
*I long to be happy; to leap, to fly.*

*I nod, sage to your novitiate,*
*knowing you would despise my shabby wisdom.*
*It is adequate heaven*
*that you are young and beautiful,*
*that the light so irradiates your flawless cheek,*
*that with moist lashes*
*you should sit with me - among the blind flowers*
*under a freshly-laundered sky -*
*yearning to be happy*
*and unaware of how effortlessly I soar*
*bearing the weightless burden of my love for you. 5*

Emily Dickinson becomes, in White's evocation, a prototype of a path some must take in their search for themselves, their God, or just a true friend. That path is one of solitude. For it is in solitude that the richness of the inner life is to be found. There is an awe, a wonder and an awareness of the good and the bad in all of us that leads to insight and prevents moral arrogance. The reader finds it is in community where he locates his aloneness. White locates this paradoxical home for us in all its perplexing complexity. White seems to be saying that the future lies with that man or woman who can live as an individual conscious of the solidarity of the human race. Within this solidarity is a tension between individual and community that is the very source of ethical creativity. The communication that binds people in solidarity is conciliatory and

restorative. The tension is seen in the distinguishing characteristic of the artist - his restlessness.

In the day-to-day round of everyday existence the challenge and the risk of life seem so often to leave us. White puts courage back in the game. Experiences of meaning and significance are the heart of White's world. Temperamentally unable to accept success and the ease it brings, he kicks against the pricks. When one frontier is conquered he soon becomes ill at ease and pushes on to a new one. He is drawn to unquiet minds with a rebellion that helps define his vision. The humanity of this poetic gadfly, this Voltairean rebel, lies in the fact that civilization will arise from the very needs he exposes in his vulnerability. White's story, his poetry, is the agony of the creative individual whose nightly rest only resuscitates him so that he can endure his agonies the next day. But there are flecks of gold in a seam of joy that comes from his passion, a quality of commitment, and a realization that he is helping to form the structure of a new world.

White knows that he is working at the beginning of this new world and its embryonic order. With all its strangeness, darkness and insecurity that all true beginnings bring to those who search, White deals with the existential questions of the human

5 Roger White, Occasions of Grace, George Ronald, Oxford, 1992, p.76

predicament with both timeliness and timelessness. In the process he helps empower his readers to define who they are, where they have been and where they want to go.

White knows there is no escape from living through the dialectical relationship between individual and society. He points the way to live it through constructively, with zest, with humour and dignity without wasting one's energy on protest against a universe not organized to one's liking. The artist-poet who lights up our world lives and breathes with the daemonic. The hunger for meaning makes White appear like a bee fetching sweetness out of everything.

But he is not oriented to the easy. If something is difficult there is all the more reason to do it. Love exerts an exacting claim on him and calls him to vast things. Love, for White and for us, is both burden and apprenticeship. His poetry, like that of any aspiring master-craftsman's, is the most valid expression of his spirit.

There is a melancholy that haunts the isolation of genius. But in White it is a melancholy that he does not carry about in order to drown people out. It is rather a sadness that is lonely and attentive and waiting for the future to enter in ways that transform. Our destiny, White knows, goes from within us. Holding to the difficult, to what is most alien and strange, we must try to love the abuses and dangers and, in time, they will be our trusted and faithful friends. What we find most terrible is, perhaps, something helpless that wants help from us. Sickness is the means by which an organism frees itself of what is foreign. Life never ceases to be difficult. One must move beyond the sense of victory and loss, find the patience to endure and the simplicity to believe. White has this simplicity but it is not compounded of innocence. His eyes are wide open; he insists on arguments and will not give in.

The fine delicacy in human relationships is also at the centre of White's poetry. He is never embittered, although he often shrinks and is appalled. His awareness of human misery has opened him up and helped him to crystallize his individual character: but infinitely slowly. This outburst of poetry has come to a man in his fifties and early sixties. This anchorage in his poetic form was denied him in Canada and Africa. But since 1979 an awakening creative urge has found its outlet and the Baha'i Faith has found a provisional poet-laureate. He has found a happiness in being a beginner. But the longest road through life is found in artistic form and White is more than a little conscious of how beginnerish he really is. In writing about his first publication Another Song, Another Season he said in a letter to a friend:

"I suppose it will look primitive to the next generation."

White has been building, inwardly, preparing something invisible but fundamental. The fruit of a constant introspection has resulted, for White, in Occasions of Grace and, for us, in a public resource of private optimism. The bonds of community are mostly private renditions, private perceptions, private needs and private strengths sketched out in a pattern interdependent of other privacies. Private citizen White shares another view of his life and his world - and ours. His poetry is exquisite and brings both his and our highest faculties into play. Like good conversation it often seems that he does it all for the sake of something quite evanescent - just for the sake of pure delight.

It seems fitting to close this brief comment with the last poem on the last page of Occasions of Grace. It expresses so succinctly the reception White knew only so well of much of his poetry by most of his audience, an experience common among poets. This one is titled Report from the Grand Canyon:

*Publishing a volume of verse is like dropping a rose petal*
*down the Grand Canyon and waiting for the echo.*
- Donald Marquis

*So, Don, you waited futilely?*
*Well, you expressed it beautifully.*

*But I find it's even worse*
*When echoes do attend my verse.*

*With every book of mine*
*Some excited pedant's on the line.*

*Enthusiastically telling*
*That he's noticed a misspelling*

*And, warming to the attack,*
*Lists errors of mere fact*

*Relishing each transgression -*
*(Does he want a signed confession?)*

*But how did you CLICK! like the poem?*
*I'm left listening to the dial tone.*

*Readers like that are obnoxious;*
*They should read only cereal boxious*

*Or be dropped into a canyon -*
*The Grand, or one chosen at randyom.*

*Or consigned, Don, to some tome-lined hell*
*that lacks your archie and mehitabel*

*Its books ponderous and fustian*
*and written in futhark or Etruscian. 6*

6 Roger White, op.cit., p.166

Chapter 13

## THE LANGUAGE OF THERE

1992 was indeed "an auspicious juncture in the history of His Cause.". That year White published not only his final major book of poetry, Occasions of Grace, but also two small volumes: The Language of There and Notes Postmarked the Mountain of God. 1992 also marked the hundredth anniversary of the ascension of Baha'u'llah in 1892. In the Ridvan Message of that year, in April 1992, the Universal House of Justice referred to "an onrushing wind... clearing the ground for new conceptions", "some mysterious, rampant force" and a "quickening wind". It was this wind which was ventilating our "modes of thought... renewing, clarifying and amplifying our perspectives". Perhaps White's final blasts of poetry were part of this "befitting demarcation", this Holy Year. By the end of that Holy Year in May 1993 White had left this earthly life. This "special time for a rendezvous of the soul with the Source of its light.... a time of retreat to one's innermost being", to which the Universal House of Justice called all Baha'is in April 1992 did arrive quite literally for Roger White. Perchance the soul of Roger White was being filled, as that year came to an end, in that undiscovered country "with the revivifying breath" of Baha'u'llah's celestial power "from His retreat of deathless splendour".

In October 1992 I received a copy of The Language of There in the mail. Six months later Roger left this mortal coil and all "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune", "the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to" that Hamlet spoke of so eloquently in the beautifully modulated rhythms of that soliloquy in Act III Scene I of Shakespeare's play by that name. The last published poem and piece of prose on the last two pages of this small volume of poetry speak volumes and so I will quote them here. White's last words, quite literally, seem perfectly appropriate in this essay on his final works. These last words embody the thinking of a lifetime, as so many of White's poems do, and the delight he found for his spirit in giving expression to the truths he found in

life. He introduces this poem, titled The Language of There, with a quote from James Merrill:

*I mean to learn, in the language of where I am going,*
*barely enough to ask for food and love.*
- James Merrill

*Yes. There, light will be our language,*
*a tongue without words for*
*perhaps, or arid, or futile,*
*though shadow will be retained*
*that we may contrast the radiance.*
*Almost will no longer be a measure.*

*We will learn a hundred synonyms for certitude,*
*and love will have a thousand conjugations.*
*Ours will be the italicised vocabulary*
*of delectable astonishments.*

*The possessive case will play no part*
*in the grammar of joy and burgeoning,*
*infants will speak at birth, and only the ancients*
*will remember the obscenity exile.*

*There, laughter will be spelt in capitals,*
*sadness grow obsolete,*

*and negation be declared archaic.*
*Hell will be pronounced remoteness,*
*and vast tomes will be devoted*
*to the derivations of yes.*
*Where all is elation and surprise*
*exclamation points will fall into disuse.*

*There, food and affection will be ours for a smile,*
*and immortality for a fluent, knowing wink.*
*In time, our desire to speak will abandon us.*
*All that need be said the light will say. Yes.*

It would seem that White found - at least he gave expression to it in his poetry - what literary critic Leone Vivante describes in the opening paragraph of his book as "a principle of inward light, an original self-active principle, which characterizes life and spontaneity as contrasted with mechanism". This concept of self-activity revealed and developed itself in White's poetry in a supremely genuine and direct way. There is a quality of truth in some poetry, what Vivante says can claim to be "an ultimate truth which is essential to their poetical value". While I'm not sure I would go all the way here with Vivante, I can appreciate the direction of his philosophical thought. For there is, for me, a certain 'truth claim' which gives White's poetry much of its impact, its force, its unity. There is a certain 'spiritual essence' in his work which gives me a deeper sense of the spirit, deeper than I would normally have had without his art. White's literary value is partly, for me, a reflection, a discovery, of the intrinsic nature of my inner being and the truths of the religion I joined nearly half a century ago. For the "grand power of poetry", as Matthew Arnold wrote back in the 1860s, "is its interpretive

power… the power of so dealing with things as to awaken in us a wonderfully full, new, and intimate sense of them, and of our relations with them".3 As I read White's poetry, I frequently sense he is putting me in touch with the essential nature of things, taking some of life's bewilderment out of things, giving me some of the secret of things and some of their calm and harmonious inner life. This, too, is poetry's highest powers.

White's short essay, Bring Chocolate, which closes this book, is subtitled "Advice From a Poet" and is worth quoting in full because of its comment on the 'spiritual essence' of his work and how he envisages it. It is addressed to "World Centre Baha'i Youth Group" and is dated 31 October 1990:

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

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

Artists - not tricksters and conjurers, but committed artists - will be a vital force in preventing inflexibility in our community. They will be a source of rejuvenation. They will serve as a bulwark against fundamentalism, stagnation and administrative sterility. Artists call us away from formulas, caution us against the fake, and accustom us to unpredictability - that trait which so characterizes life. They validate our senses. They link us to our own history. They clothe and give expression to our dreams and aspirations. They teach us impatience with stasis. They aid us to befriend our private experiences and heed our inner voices. They reveal how we may subvert our unexamined mechanistic responses to the world. They

sabotage our smugness. They alert us to divine intimations. Art conveys information about ourselves and our universe which can be found nowhere else. Our artists are our benefactors.

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

In general, society's artists are often at war with their world and live on its fringes. Their lack of discretion in expressing their criticism - which may be hostile, vituperative, negative, and offer no solutions - may lead to their rejection and dismissal by the very society they long to influence. Artists are frequently seen as trouble-makers, menacers, destroyers of order, or as frivolous clowns. Sometimes the kindest thing said of them is that they are neurotic or mad. In the Baha'i community it must be different. Baha'u'llah said so. Consider that the Baha'i Writings state that All art is a gift of the Holy Spirit and exhort us to respect those engaged in science, art and crafts.

The artist has, among other responsibilities, those of questioning our values, of leading us to new insights that release our potential for growth, of illuminating our humanity, of renewing our authenticity by putting us in touch with our inner selves, and of creating works of art that challenge us - as Rilke says - to change our lives. The artist aids in our transformation.

In the Baha'i Order the artists will find their home at the centre of their community, free to interact constructively with the people who are served by their art; free to give and to receive strength and inspiration. It is my hope that all of us who are gathered here will be in the vanguard of this reconciliation between artists and their world. As Baha'u'llah foretells, the artists are coming home to claim their place. I urge you: Be there! Welcome them! Bring chocolate!

White's views here had arisen out of more than forty years of writing poetry and now he was going. Indeed, inside the cover of

the copy of The Language of There that he sent me in September 1992, six months before he died, he wrote: "with these lines I probably exit - smiling, waving, heading for 'There'...." There is a consciousness of this theme of the afterlife in the one hundred and two poems that make up this volume. It is the first major published collection of poetry that White did not divide into thematic-sections. Emily Dickinson is still there: White writes six new poems, right at the beginning of the volume, in which her life and her poetry are mentioned. To read Emily Dickinson had been for White what Robert Smith said it should be: "a profound engagement, an imaginative reconstruction, a crystallizing of attitudes, on her flickering presence" Her "arduous and lifelong pursuit of a speech fitting to God... (to)... divine Unnameability" was, as Elisa New once wrote, a thorny and difficult problem that she got around only by a genuine "humility". White got around the problem, for the most part, by his commitment to a religion which provided ample amounts of that "speech fitting to God". He also got around the problem in several ways which we can see by examining his poetry throughout his several volumes, but particularly - and not coincidentally - in the last half a dozen poems in this volume, his last published poems. I would like to deal here with these last 'death' poems, or perhaps I should call them 'life' poems.

The Language of There may well go down as one of White's most famous and quoted poems. There is an optimism, a texture and context that appeals even to the most hardened atheist or agnostic, to say nothing of the avowed believer in virtually any religion. That in itself is no mean achievement. "The thing that should eventually make him truly important," wrote the American poet James Dickey, speaking about the special poet in our time, is "the quietly joyful sense of celebration and praise out of which he writes". White had put this idea a little differently in one of his first poems in which he was writing about "the banality of pain/and the ordinariness of suffering". "It is joy that is remembered," he added. White certainly gives us a golden seam of joy amidst his other contributions to our

intellectual and sensory emporiums, amidst the inevitable fortuitousness of his poetic impulse which the poet and four time winner of the Pulitzer Prize, Robert Frost, says ideally begins in "tantalizing vagueness" and then finds or "makes its thought".

The humility and joy that White apotheosizes in his penultimate poem Learning New Ways may not be everyone's long-range vision in what may be one of White's many images of an afterlife but, in its basic simplicity or, perhaps I should say, profound simplicity, there is something deftly appealing and - who knows - accurate about the picture it paints, however succinctly:

*..... Released from*

*wanting and having, I shall only be.*

*.....*

*Occupied with boundlessness*

*I shall yet divine your unspoken question:*

*Were you drawn away by the music,*

*the laughter,*

*the promised ecstasy of reunion?*

Many poets after making immense imaginative efforts, such as Wordsworth and Browning, seem to experience a certain psychic exhaustion. While such a sense of exhaustion, of sadness, is not entirely absent from the last poetic efforts of White written after the age of sixty and on death's door, there is also awe, humour, joy, calm, peace, wisdom…. These last poems are a study in themselves and tell much of White's ultimate view of life and death. There is a delicacy and penetration in White, a richness and power. His final production, far superior to what his nature first seemed to promise in the late 1940s and early 50s, was abundant and varied. He sup-

plied to the Baha'i community what the poet Coleridge provided to England in the early nineteenth century: "a stimulus to all minds in the generation which grew up around him, capable of profiting by it". The memory of Coleridge, writes Arnold, inspires a certain repugnance as well as gratitude. The behaviour and activity of White, at least so far as we know thus far, has a cleaner, more consistent record to underpin and invest his memory as one of the founding fathers of poetry in the Baha'i community in its first two centuries. "Every poet," wrote the French poet Maurice de Guerin, "has his own art of poetry written on the ground of his soul; there is no other". White has left us with the ground of his soul both in his last volumes of poetry written in 1992 and in the whole of his previous oeuvre.

Before commenting on some specific poems in White's The Language of There, I would like to make a general point about his appeal to our human need or impulse for novelty which stirs within us and often, if not always, provides the necessary momentum and incentive for us to seek insight and a sense of achievement in life. Our desire for novelty is part of the pleasure we take in life itself and is, as Samuel Johnson once wrote, the only and real end of writing. This appeal to his readers' need for novelty was there right to the end. The rich prism, the intensified record that was his poetry, fluid and diverse as it was even to the end - and especially in the end - in his last two books of poetry published in 1992, seemed to be part of White's abundance. In the last few months of 1992 and the first four of 1993, after the publication of his final two volumes of poetry, he was somewhat of a husk of a man, a somewhat drained specimen. Weariness began to prevail by 'silent encroachments' but, again, I have little detail to go on and I leave the sketch of White's final notes to his first and future biographer.

White writes poems about several departures: from the Baha'i World Centre, from the intensive care unit, from this earthly life, from sadnesses, from joy and laughter - all in the last nine poems. Ten poems from the end he writes of "returning" to his home town

which he had just done in 1991. The themes of the poems that occupy White throughout the booklet illustrate his preoccupations in the last year of his life. To comment on them all in a befitting way is beyond the scope of this brief essay and would lead to prolixity. The poems have that concision, that slight obscurity and illusiveness that is part of poetry's nutritive function and a sensibility that Marianne Moore says "imposes a silence transmuted by the imagination into eloquence". Read with patience and receptivity they provide an exercise in pleasure. I shall select two poems on which to close this brief commentary on The Language of There.

Since the first poetic writings in the 1940s of the two major poets associated with the emergence of a Baha'i consciousness in world literature, Robert Hayden and Roger White, the number of local spiritual assemblies had grown from several hundred to many thousands. It is not my intention to expatiate on the brilliant conception underlying the Baha'i administrative order, itself the nucleus and pattern of a future world order, but I would like to include below one of White's poems that conveys the experience that many hundreds of thousands of Baha'is have had in serving on local administrative bodies. The Baha'i system of decision making is far removed from the Western parliamentary process and its debate oriented lance-and-parry thrust. The Baha'i administrative system is based on consultation in small groups and, although apparently simple in design, it is a very demanding process for those called upon to serve. Here is the poem, Nine Ascending:

*Nine of us, equipollent,*
*precariously balanced*
*in ragged semicircle*
*our eyes glazed by the impasse*
*we have reached*

*far from the decision*
*distantly drawing us forward.*
*Tension leaves us dry-mouthed,*
*chokes off the fatal sundering words*
*any one of us might speak*
*that will plunge us into the chasm.*
*This is a good terror.*

*With delicate calm*
*the Book is passed*
*hand to hand,*
*its words reweave*
*the disciplining cord*
*that binds us to our purpose.*
*Again the humbling summit is assaulted;*
*we make our vertical ascent*
*past fault and fissure.*

*Sing in gratitude*
*for the fragile resolution*
*that leads us in ginger circumspection*
*from the miasmal ooze*
*from which we so painfully inch*
*our consequential necessary way.*

I have always been most moved, in the ten years since I first read this poem, by White's use of the term 'good terror'. The reason I was moved by these words is that I found they were so apt. They describe how I often felt in the nearly forty years since I began serving on local spiritual assemblies. This same 'terror' is often part of the experience men and women have in secular organizations as well. We are all in it together now as the world forges the instruments for its salvation in the centuries to come.

Like so much of White's poetry there is a direct appeal in this poem to the experience and knowledge, the convictions and commitments of Baha'is the world over. So many of the Baha'is, in the half century since both White and Hayden began writing poetry, have been knee-deep in that "miasmal ooze" during the consultative process while they inched their "consequential necessary way". It is not my intention for this elucidation of White's poem to turn my comments into evaluation. I leave that to readers, as I say so often in these essays. But there is a power in this poem, as in so many of White's poems, which makes itself felt immediately. If I had to define this power in a word it would be honesty. There is also a gentle undercurrent of humour, as there is in so many of White's poems, which gives just enough leaven or lightness to balance the outer seriousness of the poem. The style is so White: colloquial, elevated, even quirky, uniting opposites in his own unique way.

Many of the poems in this selection of nearly nine dozen pieces are salutes, nods, waves, hellos and good-byes to famous and not-so-famous poets, writers and artists who had influenced his writing and thinking: Ogden Nash, T.S. Eliot, Keats, some Canadian poets, Bahiyyih Nakhjavani, Ovid, Walt Whitman, Scott Joplin, William Sears, Anais Nin and the inevitable Emily - and others. White's faculty for absorbing incidents from real life, his keen eye for a good scene, his memory for detail, quotation and anecdote; in addition, his knowledge of a remarkable circle, an extraordinary collection of intimate and not-so-intimate friends and people from history, gave

to White and to this final collection of poetry the qualities his readers enjoy.

Many readers of poetry and literature may dislike my attempts to confine White's free and varied insights within the limits of a system of thought that is, perhaps, too ordered, too neat and tidy, too abstract for their liking. They will want to read his poetry, but not analyse it. For me, the generalizing faculty asserts itself and must find a hearing. The poetry surveyed persistently raises metaphysical questions making some theological discussion inevitable, even if not desired by some readers. Theological discussion serves to deepen not restrict our insight and usually raises questions of moral and humanistic concern which are of increasing interest to even secular minds. But, however theological or philosophical a poem, there is over any collection of White's verse some of that feeling, expressed once by Carl Sandburg, that "poetry is the synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits" Appreciation of a poem does not require literary criticism but it is often enriched by such criticism, if it is well written.

My final selection from among this rich repertoire of poems that gave me pleasure in one way or another is called Sometimes The Poem... I will quote the entire poem and make some brief comment as I go along:

*Sometimes the poem is heard as a nighttime footstep*
*echoing from another room*
*or a creaking floorboard on the dim stairs.*
*Often it leaves a chair rocking silently*
*in an emptiness filled with dustmotes*
*and a sense of precipitate departure.*
*Later it may be heard in the kitchen*
*warming milk and rummaging for biscuits*

*or may mock with the banging of a door*
*and the crunching sound of retreating feet on gravel.*

While I am writing this I am listening to a tape of the voice of Australian writer Alan Marshall who is talking about the importance of small details, of writing down things that you might not remember, because so many of the stories in life come from little things. Of course, he is talking about writing stories and fiction, but the same applies to writing poetry, as White indicates above. What Marshall tries to do, White tries to do also - connect the micro-world and the macro-world and in the process of observation and analysis he gave it new life, significance, meaning. Poetry serves the function, for White, of interpretress of life's many worlds. Poetry helps White on his long journey down life's enchanted and not-so-enchanted stream as it alternately rushes, meanders and winds its way to the sea.

White continues in the second stanza of that poem Sometimes the Poem:

*Sometimes it huddles in shadow*
*outside the window or claws at the shutter*
*sobbing tormentedly in the wind and tearing its breast.*
*I have glimpsed its eyes, transparent and haunted,*
*beyond the rainstreaked glass*
*and heard it babbling dementedly in the poplars*
*under an intermittent moon that glinted like steel.*
*In the darkness it has whizzed past my ear*
*with a knife's chilling whoosh.*

In this second stanza those "little things" seem to have moved inward in a subtle way. White is writing here about what Robert Creeley says about a poem: that it "can be an instance of all the complexity of a way of thinking.... all the emotional conflicts involved in the act of thinking". Perhaps Peter Stitt puts it better: "Wherever real liveliness of emotion and intellect is happening, I feel poetry is near." White continues:

With the glue of cobwebs
it has brushed against my sleeping face
awakened me with its distant cries of anguish
or taunting laughter only to elude me
in the hushed corridor or the deserted garden.
It has called me urgently from dreams
to rise and shiver at the desk
staring for hours at a blank page.
I've known it to watch from the corner
then creep up behind me
its breath smelling of wet leaves and apples
cold and moist on my nape.

I hear the call of life here in this third stanza. "A writer is not trying for a product, but accepting sequential signals toward an always arriving present," as Stitt again says. There are so many ways of saying what White is saying here, as poets and critics at least since Shakespeare and as far back as Pintar or the writers of the Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament, have tried to express the poetic impulse. Perhaps the "always arriving present", soon to be White's experience and calling him urgently, is that boundlessness, music,

laughter and "the promised ecstasy of reunion" that he wrote of in his poem Learning New Ways. A final five lines from this same poem:

*Sometimes it stares faint and helpless*
*from the mirror where*
*in a wavering aqueous light*
*my image drowns signalling*
*Befriend me! I am the poem you would write.*

Perhaps White is referring here, partly, alluding as he does to an 'unwritten poem', to what that French poet Guerin describes when he writes: "There is more power and beauty in the well-kept secret of one's self and one's thoughts, than in the display of a whole heaven that one may have inside one."

The poet Shelley once defined the poetic Sublime as an experience that persuaded readers to give up easier pleasures for more difficult ones. The reading of the best poems, the best literature, constitutes more difficult pleasures than most of what is given to us visually by television, films and video games. Shelley's definition reveals an important aspect of what I am saying about White and his poetry. For White is both entertainer in the finest sense and intellectual provocateur, in the supreme difficulty that often arises for his readers due to the power of his intellect and his capacity to use words. He can hold you in a spell, but it is not the vacuous spell of mental inactivity offered by electronic media; it is the spell that derives from the indubitable powers of poetry. The refreshment White offers comes from the pleasures of change in meaning each time you read his poetry. There is often, too, a shock, a kind of violence, that we do not find in fiction and certainly not on television. It startles us out of our sleep-of-death into a more capacious sense of life.

It does not find its origins in visual and auditory stimulation but rather in the powers of the mind and imagination ,and their "new and wonderful configurations". They are configurations, as 'Abdu'l-Baha once wrote, derived from "a fresh grace… an ever-varying splendor… from wisdom and the power of thought."

Chapter 14

# NOTES POSTMARKED THE MOUNTAIN OF GOD

A second booklet of Roger White's poetry was published in 1992 by New Leaf Publishing of Richmond, British Columbia. It had already been accepted by Rob Weinberg for inclusion in his forthcoming anthology of reflections on Mount Carmel. New Leaf Publishing reprinted the booklet, Notes Postmarked The Mountain of God, which consists of one poem White had written in 1990. It was the longest poem he had written. While not following strictly the program of pilgrimage nor alluding to every point of historic interest visited by Baha'i pilgrims during the course of their stay in the Holy Land, the poem was structured in nine parts following the nine days of pilgrimage. Of course, as in any literary work, this poem will not be admired by all readers everywhere. Perhaps the Romans had some wisdom in regard to poetry. They advised that there be no arguing over tastes. It would appear that often, in today's world, people argue about nothing else. As far as my comments here are concerned, they reflect my taste, my susceptibility to the impressions of White's verse, seized as I was by it when I first read this volume in 1992 and what I hope is an unimpassioned analysis. My aim is to be a catalytic agent, as the critic-philosopher H.L. Mencken advised, to induce readers to react to White's poem and perhaps, in the process, "to attain the ultimate worm's eye view" of White's poem.

What White brings his readers in this poem is what the poet Shelley said the mind in creation must be if it is to be truly successful in the writing of poetry. The mind must be as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness. What he awakens to a wonderful brightness for the reader is his experience of pilgrimage, certainly one of the more introspective and thoughtful pieces written thus far on this important aspect of the Baha'i life. White would write poetry for two more years. He brings us, then, in what may be the most perceptive and finely articulated statement on the Baha'i pilgrimage, his fading

coals. In 1990 he had his quadruple bypass operation and he did not anticipate "an enthusiastic return to a full life". At least the goal of a full life was one which he said he limped towards "without much conviction". As he mentioned in one of his poems from the 1980s his old friends from the forties and fifties, in and out of the movie industry, started dieing or complaining of their ailments. In September 1990 his old friend, the person from whom he learned of the Cause, Winnifred Harvey died. As he wrote in the last four lines of the poem Returning, as he was about to leave hospital:

*No one had asked him whether he wished to return*
*from his murky indolence,*
*human, hapless and vulnerable,*
*to this profane, irresistible confusion.*

And so, this long poem written in 1990 entitled Notes Postmarked The Mountain of God might be seen as a transitory brightness, thirty-three pages of a flash of brilliance, awakened as he was by some invisible influence, some inconstant wind on the fading coals of his life. He had worked at the Baha'i World Centre for nineteen years. It was fitting that he should at last have his pilgrimage although at the age of sixty-one, as he writes in the first few lines, a pilgrimage is a venture that tastes of beginnings. His plane touched down at Ben Gurion airport and -

*The luggage he struggles with*
*bulges with untried convictions,*
*rusted resolve and unrelinquished disappointments.*
.....
*Hope, his best provision,*

*is crammed in among random indiscretions,*

*outworn hesitancies and inappropriate tweeds*

He has already won the heart of this reader by the time he gets to the end of that first sixteen-line stanza. "Poetic truth," as Wordsworth once wrote, "is operative - it works on us, it carries its own conviction with it." Part of the pleasure we derive from White, achieved for me right at the start, is the pleasure I experience from having my "basic psychological structure touched and illuminated". Among the orange blossoms, the warm tarmac, the Levantine confusion and the humid air are the normal internal complications and conflicts we all have, we Baha'is who are the followers of the Blessed Beauty, trying as best we can to live lives consistent with His teachings.

This longest of White's poems is not so much a glorification of his religion as, say, Walt Whitman's long poem The Leaves of Grass was a glorification of America, as it is a meditation on its meaning. By filtering its citizenry, landscape, and history through a sensitive and thoughtful, a graphic and, for me, an extremely sensual subjective persona, the "self" of this longest and perhaps most highly regarded poem Notes Postmarked The Mountain of God journeys with his readers and takes them on their own pilgrimage. Eschewing conventional rhyming verse forms and formal diction, White wrote in a restrained but moving, a familiar but idiosyncratic style that reflected the vision of his personal outlook. I like to think that the future of this poem will be somewhat like that of Whitman's, as literary historian Roy Harvey Pearce has described it: "the history of American poetry could be written as the continuing discovery and rediscovery of Whitman, an on-going affirmation of his crucial relevance to the mission of this American poet."

Ralph Waldo Emerson in his 1842 lecture "The Poet" called for an American poet to capture the spirit of the burgeoning republic. Many have felt that Whitman's poem The Leaves of Grass did just

that. For my tastes, my sensibilities, White captured the spirit of the Baha'i Faith as it continued its rise from obscurity in the late twentieth century and the breathtaking splendour of the evidences of Mount Carmel as they were just emerging in the Arc and the terraces, in the years that White wrote this poem. Indeed, White integrates "imagination, experience and voice… to make words take hold of the phenomena of his age", as Emerson said was the poet's function or, to put it another way, he makes a "metamorphosis of circumstances into consciousness". In this case the circumstances are those of a simple pilgrimage.

White gives his loyal readers what is by now a familiar language: the everyday, the colloquial, the ordinary, packed in with the trenchant, the pithy and the profound. Piercing, exact, coherent and complex: words I would use to describe White's rendition of the vision of his Faith, part of his individuality, the experience of one man who has served this new world religion for over forty years. His vision is not some set of dogmas saluted to but not contemplated over and over again. It is the personal experience of one man with belief and doubt, passion and thought, memory and desire so closely interwoven that it is often difficult to distinguish their separate expressions. White's poem is a whole world of order and beauty; it has little to do with political and religious formulae. White gives his readers what the great American poetry critic Ivor Winters says a poem should give: "a clear understanding of motive and a just evaluation of feeling; it calls upon the full life of the spirit; it is difficult of attainment". Winters continues, and what he writes I think applies to White's poetry of pilgrimage, an experience that pilgrims so often have difficulty putting into words: "by his art he makes clearings of sanity in the encroaching jungle of experience; and because of his skill, these clearings are more lucid, more precise, more generally meaningful than those of other people". By putting his own passions, prejudices and human weaknesses on the line White helps his readers to be more pleased and accepting of their own while, at the same time, he gently encourages his readers to lift their game.

White brings into this poem many stanzas of previous poems. He incorporates into its text relevant passages from poems in earlier volumes, not so much to attain a synthesis of his life's work but rather to deepen the meaning and effect of this particular poem. The opening section entitled 'Beginning' is stage one of his journey, a plane to Tel-Aviv and a hotel. These were part of "the suburbs of authentic arrival" and "the alphabet of homecoming" as he characterizes this "lightweight wardrobe of beginnings".

The reader then proceeds on a poetic journey through nine days of pilgrimage for some thirty pages. It is not my intention to take you through each day step by step; for that you must read the poem. But I would like to comment on some of the aspects of White's pilgrimage in a poem that stood out for me and had a particular meaning. White's aim is not to excite, as T.S. Eliot once wrote of the aim of Dante's poetry, but simply "to set something down". The reader's task is to perceive "what the poet has caught in words".

At the end of 'Day Three' White includes a quotation which he first 'caught in words' in his poem A Sudden Music. Indeed much of what White writes about 'Day Three' seems to have had its beginnings in that poem which also became the name of White's novella. He writes about "the choreography of reverence" and continues:

*We, deft practitioners*
*of protocols of piety*
*are stranded on uncertainty*
*who had entered and then left*
*that rare Presence,*
*rehearsed petitioners,*

*joylessly*

*and empty-handed.*

There is an honesty here which is central to White's whole poetic opus. This is how so many millions of people, both inside the Bahá'i Faith and out, experience prayer and much that is the routines of traditional religious experience. They know of the words, they know the motions to go through, but little joy is experienced in the process. This may not be as it should, but it certainly is the way it is. And White's task is to tell it as it is or at least how he experiences it. In the process he wins over many readers, for this is their experience too.

Twenty-one years before, in an article in theWorld Order magazine, William Hatcher wrote about "the theoretical uncertainty" that must remain "even with the surest of statements". For it was, he went on, "our explicit awareness of this uncertainty which is our greatest asset in adapting to our human situation". The feeling of certitude, Hatcher pointed out, is a psychological state and can be part of our life even without knowing much at all. He went on to say that, if we accept something as true, then our emotions organize themselves around that something. Then that something becomes part of the way we live. Faith, here, is the process of organizing our emotional life around our assumptions.

"No statement can be held to be absolutely true, for no statement is independent of other statements and facts.... Our knowledge, then, is relative," Hatcher writes again. So it is, when White refers to the believers as "deft practitioners of protocols of piety" and says, in the next line, that we "are stranded on uncertainty" - perhaps he is thinking of the kinds of things that Hatcher is saying above.

But uncertainty and doubt do not exclude the experience of certitude and belief. In the first line of 'Day One: Visit to the Shrine of the Bab' White refers to the sense of assurance the pilgrim gets

when he has his first glimpse of the shrines and the gardens. For they are as he or she has seen them on postcards and they possess "a sense of familiarity". "Mingling at Pilgrim House" more assurance and certitude are his with "expectations peopled", a "sense of belonging" invading him and the experience of "immediate acceptance" as familiar Allah-u-Abhas greet him with every step. Once in the Shrine of the Bab the pilgrim feels even more assurance in the "awesome silence" and the "mounting ecstasy". White describes the effect on his inner self of the beauties and wonders of the threshold of the shrine, its exterior and the gardens. By the time the reader is halfway through the second stanza the issue of certitude and doubt is not on his agenda, far from his mind and heart, as he "longs to have his own heart break or conflagrate".

Before going to bed on that first night the Shrine of the Bab and some of the Bab's life is permanently etched on his sensory emporium, freshly minted by the pull of the "exquisite details" that had invaded him during the day:

*He Who had no candle*
*has here, ensconced in circled circle,*
*amid adoring flowers*
*and green deferential trees,*
*this whitest marble taper*
*tipped in gold.*
*It gleams serenely from Carmel,*
*inextinguishably lights the world,*
*our reverential hearts*
*the willing wick.*

And so the intellectual issue of doubt and certitude disappears in a complex of experiences from 'Day One': the heart's enthusiasm, reverence, life's disappointments, a past he brought on his pilgrimage and a whole world that he summarizes in a poem which, it appears, he has just written. He calls it Punctuation:

*Tentative as commas*
*they balance on wind-swung wires*
*along which our voices speed …*

So goes the first stanza and its allusion to the tentativeness of so much of life, especially our thoughts which balance "on wind-swung wires/along which our voices speed". The poem goes on to express a fascinatingly introspective piece of sociological and psychological analysis. He begins this analysis, in stanza two, by expressing his consciousness of presiding "with feigned indifference" over the things he sends or others send to him (or that we send to ourselves) over those 'crackling wires' with their 'garbled' statement of our anguish and with their news of his triumphs and defeats. He continues referring to some of his writing, his poetry, one of his tragic personal experiences in life and his own inability to "soar". I did not find this section of the poem simple, easy to translate into personally meaningful terms. I shall have to return to it again and again with the years. But given the fact that this poem is one of the few poems, few pieces of analysis, about the inner meaning of a pilgrimage, and given the fact that I am unlikely to go to Haifa again before I die, White's poem will be worth my pursuing.

In 'Day Two: The Trouble With Mountains' White describes Mount Carmel as a whole. He goes on, as the poem develops, to mention his father, Shoghi Effendi and Baha'u'llah before he ponders "why he has waited so long/to approach this unprepossessing hill" and "whether his commitment is adequate". In the evening he

writes a poem - the poem was, in fact, written some ten years before but, with poetic licence, he indicates to the reader that he writes it in the evening. One can only imagine that this earlier poem's contents seemed so perfectly appropriate to this tribute to pilgrimage He titled the poem The Trouble with Mountains:

*We come to this mountain late*
*in laggard wonder*
*and atrophied awe,*
*in distrust of the prompting of angels,*
*the voice in the thunder.*

*Like the old plainsman brought dazed*
*to the coast to die,*
*needing to hate*
*Vancouver and his death,*
*who glared sullenly at its peaks*
*which to outwit defeat*
*he'd never try*
*protesting they block the view*
*and stifle breath.*

*An ant's dusty truth. We gaze*
*at our thorn-stabbed feet.*
*It is too late, too late,*
*the bruising stones reveal*

*to follow to the summit*
*One Whose feet were steel.*

*And do not hear the battered bird*
*high in the torturing wind: Pass! Pass!*
*With adamant soul*
*and sharpest sight*
*on feet of brass.*

This bird comes into his dreams that night. This poem says so much about White and perhaps about his readers, at least some of them. That he had come on his pilgrimage too late, that he should have come earlier in his Baha'i life. But still, whenever we come we must follow Baha'u'llah "with adamant soul/and sharpest sight/on feet of brass". He finishes his poetic exposition about 'Day Two' by referring to "hope". He wants to explore its implications with someone, anyone, and discuss poetry but concludes "poetry has no place/amid the clatter of cutlery", for "the insistent world is never far away".

And so in this brief review of White's pilgrimage poem, I have taken you through the first three days of his experience, his thoughts, his private world. On the remaining six days he writes of: the meals, Bahji, Akka, the house of Abbud, writing his poetry each night back in his room, the gardens, the social exchanges with the other pilgrims, the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-Baha, the inevitable Emily Dickinson, the gravesites on Mount Carmel, the Pilgrim House and, finally, the cab, and smuggling "his convictions past Customs" and the aircraft that takes him away.

White did not have to choose his poetic subjects; they chose him. On 'Day Six', leaning against a tree at Bahji, "its walks the very corridors of heaven", he writes:

*Is this then all there is, a simple garden,*
*And a silence that displaces need for words?*
*What portent in the blood-red wayside poppy?*
*What message in the music of the birds?*

*The hero's heart is hoisted on a cypress,*
*the saint's is softly folded as a rose;*
*But mine lies shattered here among the pebbles*
*On the only path the fainting coward knows.*

In these years at the dark heart of an age of transition, with society in general grappling with a torrent of conflicting interests in the most turbulent period in history, at one of the great - perhaps the greatest - turning points in history, attempting to grasp the significance of the historical transformation that has been the twentieth century, it is not surprising that individuals in the Bahá'i Faith, and poets like White, feel that sense of cowardice, that they have not done enough, that they are far from the requirements of heroism or saintliness they would like to exemplify in their lives.

The victories the Baha'i Faith had won in the forty years or more since White had joined its army of spiritual teachers in the late 1940s in Canada had indeed been immense, "one of the most enriching periods" it had experienced in its history. But White was giving voice to an experience all Baha'is have, given the immensity of the task, the social paralysis, the tyranny and anarchy in the world and "the phantoms of a wrongly informed imagination" that they have to do battle with daily in the minds of millions upon millions who are "as yet unaware of the Day in which they are living".

On 'Day Seven' which White describes and analyses in more detail than any of the nine days he visits the Shrine of the Master.

While alone here he feels the Master's "warm laughter that offers renewal of courage". It is in this section that one of his modifications of Emily Dickinson's poems is included; the poet George Herbert is mentioned and he composes a poem while "resting on a low stone wall" that he will later include in his last major hardcover book of poetry, Occasions of Grace. The poem is called A Desert Place. This poem describes Haifa and Israel especially during the summer season:

*In the sandy convolutions of this landscape*
*grainy, parched and impersonal as God's brain*
*perception shifts and shimmers*
*and the crazed hot wind mutters apocalyptically.*
*Here, we are beyond the known and possible.*

*Israel is a difficult place with the heat; White asks:*

*Can anything survive the unquenchable sun?*
*A solitary lizard darting from invisibility*
*to invisibility like a fleeting thought*
*leaves no trace.*

Having described so many of Israel's inhabitants succinctly, White goes on to outline the effects of the heat:

*The stinging eye, amazed,*
*sees the heat as a solid malignancy*

*hulking on the horizon*

*mesmerizing and merciless.*

*.....*

*Small wonder the Prophets were placed in this oven*

*where the heat consumes all but compassion …*

Anyone who has been in Israel in the summer can appreciate these words. White writes much of the setting, all the settings that are part of the pilgrimage experience. But his autobiographical impulse is less a Lutheran 'I can do no other' than a joy in the deed and a reaching out, a desire to accept, to accept. "Waves of admiration sweep over him./For each dear name a smile of recognition and a prayer", as he enters the palm-fringed place of the graves of holy ones and their white tombstones with familiar names at the foot of Mount Carmel.

The many moods, emotions, feelings and thoughts that are the inner experiences of the poet, these autobiographical writings, are as personal as White gets in all his poetic journey. What Peter Steele says of the autobiographical passion, namely, that it "is a species of play.... an act of wit", is true of this five to six-thousand word poem of Roger White. White's desire in writing this poem is much like the desire of one of his mentors, George Herbert, many centuries before: "to let the variable mind and heart play out the drama of... psychic predicament and aspiration". The examples of this "psychic predicament" seem legion, but to choose one simple example: when he is at the Pilgrim House he writes:

*.....he feels*

*an unearned excruciating happiness*

*.....*

*Am I feeling this, or is it that*

*I feel I should feel it? an inner voice challenges …*

White is in the last years of his life. Perhaps writing this poem is a means of conversing with his soul, with the divine element within himself and life. For a Baha'i pilgrimage to the Holy Land, the world seat of the wondrous System he had been associated with since the second Seven Year Plan (1946-1953), where that System's heart pulsated, where the dust of its Founders reposed, where the processes disclosing its purposes, energizing its life and shaping its destiny all originated, contained "all the nuggets his heart" could hold. His poem was, as he himself admitted, "a bulwark against fanaticism" - as all art is. Of course, his poem was so much more: an effort to make clear to himself and thereby to others the temporal and eternal questions, as Ibsen would have put it. It was what the poem was to Albert Schweitzer "a poet talking to himself... to grasp his experience in words... the sound inside his head... the record of an inner song". White was suspicious of the motives of the poet. He had written of this before. I think he would have agreed with George Orwell, at least in so far as some writers are concerned, that "at the very bottom of a writer's motives there lies a mystery".

The trouble with most poems is that they are not interesting enough, not revealing enough to impart conviction, not surprising enough to keep a reader reading and wanting more. They do not give enough pleasure. For most people pleasure has moved from the print to the electronic media during the years since the first teaching plan began in 1937. Print does not have the pull it once had for millions. But in spite of this reality, millions more books are being read than ever before, if only because since the late 1930s, when that great teaching plan began, the population has gone from about two billion to six billion people. There are more people doing virtually everything.

I have written the above for the increasing numbers since 1980 who have come to enjoy Roger White's poetry. White's audience was still a small vanguard of people, far from that large readership which T.S. Eliot says arises when the poet is not really doing anything new, just giving his readers what they were used to. I have also written the above for those in the future who come across his work. White on occasion quoted the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. The last time he quoted him, before he passed away in 1993, White was writing about how works of art should "challenge us to change our lives". Rilke also wrote that "time passed in the difficult is never lost". Some of White's poetry many find difficult. But like Shakespeare there is a reward for those who make the effort, for those who want to try.

In the end, of course, we cannot all enjoy the same stuff - to each his own, as it is often said. I think reading the poetry of Roger White is an experience of reading great literature. C.S. Lewis once wrote that "in reading great literature... as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself and am never more myself than when I do".

Chapter 15

# WHITE'S HISTORY

A poet's life, any life, is a process of unfolding realization.....a responsibility for poetic values, poetry is a way not only of knowing but also of living in the world, straining towards feelings of consciousness in which what is outside is fused with what lies within the self. -Veronica Brady, South of My Days: A Biography of Judith Wright, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1998, Introduction.

J.B. Priestly once wrote that "the true Shakespearian way of life was to combine a scepticism about everything with a credulity about everything." What one might call this 'modern attitude' of having a theoretical uncertainty about even the surest of statements is, perhaps, "our greatest asset in adapting to our human situation." In approaching history White began with the assumption that man's social evolution was due to the periodic intervention in human affairs of the creative force of the universe by means of the Founders of the great religions. White had examined this assumption in the light of the new evidence for this phenomenon provided by the Baha'i Faith. This had been part of his investigation in the late forties and early fifties. White's approach to history was the same as his approach to religion. It was based on the scientific method. What White has to say in his poetic history, expressed over hundreds of poems in several volumes and chapbooks, can be verified, understood, only by individuals capable and willing to assume White's point of view. His views can only be understood and appreciated by those who have studied or are willing to study the history on which it is based. The element of historical subjectivity that resides in White's poetry is the same that resides in any other domain where the scientific method is applied. What White is saying in the field of religion is not so private, so mystic, so incommunicable as to be beyond scientific method. In exploring White's understanding of history I invite readers to study the historical configurations on which it is based. For, I would argue, it is virtually

impossible to appreciate that element of his poetry which deals with history without knowing something about that history.

White's poetry, like the poetry of W.B. Yeats, is so filled with the people and places he cared about, the beliefs and issues he was involved with as an active publicist of the Cause he had identified himself with, that the events of his life seem curiously inevitable, as we find ourselves accepting unreflectively one striking event in his life and his poetry after another. White and his poetry are part of the tissue, the very warp and weft, of the Cause in the history of its Heroic and Formative Ages. White's way of writing, of talking, sounded like the way historian of modern poetry David Perkins described Yeats and his poetry: "the actual thoughts of a man at a passionate moment of life.....compelled to speak directly from his personal self, writing of the actual men and women in the actual world and in his own life." With Yeats, White might have also written, as Yeats did in his epigraph to his volume of poetry Responsibilities in 1914, In dreams begin responsibility. White put words down on paper, but his moment in history, his society, his milieux speaks through him. One could argue, and White seems to, that once written, once spoken, the poem belongs to those who read it and authorial intention and poetic ambiguities can not be resolved, although they can be discussed. The literary interpretations of readers are seen as announcements of who they are and what they believe. Readers shape the poem and are shaped by it. Misinterpretation and distortion by readers are unavoidable, to some extent. At the core of poem after poem, though, is what Mark Turner calls "narrative imagining..... the fundamental instrument of thought." Narrative imagining relies on the readers' capacity to project one story onto another, to organize the story of a life, say, in terms of a journey. The mind of the reader relies on the story to interpret "the simplest quotidian acts to the most complex literary achievements." The mind of the poet relies on the story for a myriad purposes, often unknown to the reader. Perhaps White was trying, among other things, "to preach some kind of self-effacement to

his own self-assertive age." Perhaps humility was not natural to White, or to many of us. Perhaps it was, as he saw it, a mental need without which we would have difficulty seeing the world in its proper light.

In the beginning was the Story, the Word--and White leads us back to that Story and Word, into our Story, our Word: its sacred sites, its archtypes, its culture, its map, its truth and its engagement with moral law. Readers can tap into these eternal stories, find their relationship with them, their meaning, illuminate what endures in life, place the ephemeral in its proper perspective. White hounds us, tantalizes us, haunts us, with his rendition of the Baha'i Story. He is often obscure, does not give us a definite shape, leaves us with an urgency in our drive to interpret, an urgency which is often a symptom of our lack of knowing, perhaps even our insecurity. White reminds us of where we are going and why. He gives his readers a range of vehicles to take themselves and their lives seriously. One of the vehicles is history. In an age when stories come at us until they are filling our eyes to overflowing and coming out of our ears in excess from a print and electronic media, White's Story, his interpretation of the Baha'i Story has a particular and special significance. His recreation is memory and soul, so unlike the big television blockbusters which recreate history as spectacle, as body, which keep the eyes busy but leave the mind, in the end, amused and vacant. White's recreations help the Baha'i community define who and what it is. Remembering is a "fragile, heroic enterprise," says former poet laureate Robert Pinsky and poetry can teach us about this enterprise. White is in the front lines of this fragile and heroic enterprise.

The Western Dreaming opens, for the Greeks and the Hebrews, on the plains of Troy and in a garden laid out by the very hand of God. And now, after several thousand years, we exist at a vast distance from the psychic universe of these Greek and Hebrew writers. The Dreaming that White is dealing with in his poetry is yet another severe historical landscape charged with the ethereal brightness

of dramatic Persian mountainscapes, great expanses of naked rock, long green valleys and their rivers and deserts of searing heat, dust and inhospitable emptiness, stone and brick villages and some friendly and agreeable shores. White's poetic places of Dreaming also take readers on a journey to Israel, Europe and North America, at least some of the places and people there, where the history of the Baha'i Faith went through its first century. We have come closer to this Dreaming than we were, in recent times, to Eden and Troy. There is no anachronism here, no abstruse language, no arbitary and mythical eschatology. Here is a Dreaming which was part of Western history just recently, was lived in just the other day. The steel of White's genius strikes the flint of history and of our times and gives that Dreaming a fresh spark and vitality. White would have agreed with poet and literary critic Sir Philip Sydney who saw poetry as superior in some ways to both philosophy and history, to the essential abstractness of philosophy and the essential concreteness of history. Poetry is free to roam in a vast empire of passion and knowledge which the poet tries to bind together. Like Sydney, White saw poetry as the superior moral teacher. The poet could, by a fitting selection and organization of ideas and incident, achieve a reality more profound than that presented by quotidian experience.

However recent, the Baha'i Dreaming can slip into history beyond our meaning. It is we who must recover our Dreaming. We have to discover our Story, our Stories, and connect them to our everyday lives. White is helpful here. He takes dozens of the stories from the precursors(1743-1843) of the Babi and Baha'i Revelations right up into our own time in the last years of his life(1990-1992) before he was too sick to write--and puts his readers right in the picture. He holds the hands of his readers, sometimes gently, sometimes with an encouragement to 'come-up,' sometimes informing us that 'here is your hero,' 'here is your soul,' 'here is the work,' 'this is the spiritual point,'though he leaves his readers plenty of room to work it out themselves. All they can do is wait and work, follow the

path, try not to worry, have faith and Be, Be like some or many of the souls, the people, White has given us in his poetry.

White gives us a neighbourhood to journey in for our Dreaming. Sometimes the path is too hard to walk on; sometimes on the path our tentative moves will be welcomed and our sure moves rebuffed. But for each of us, the Dreaming is particular and we must work out our own narrative vehicles for gaining access to the general sacred order that White gives us on page after page of his poems. But the big Story, when it strikes, is a metaphysical cyclone because it is particular to the individual, interpreted in a singular context and it surges up within us. Some of the Story, the Dreaming, is erudite, some simple and everyday. White's poetry is, at times, a complex virtuosity and, at other times, the essence of simplicity like the Story he is conveying. White provides what Dr. Johnson described in his preface to his edition of Shakespeare, namely, a place for the mind to repose "on the stability of truth." After the endless products of the mass media, what Johnson might have called "the irregular combinations of fanciful invention...and that novelty of which the common satiety of life sends us all in quest," White creates for his readers "a golden world superior to the brazen world of reality," a world with a special kind of optimism, a world with:

*The hieroglyphics gouged in air*
*By an impatient fire-gloved hand*
*Are given as our library--*
*We, star-affrighted, gaze to land.*

All roads in White's poetic journey converge at one spot: the teachings of Baha'u'llah and His life. Baha'u'llah is not the hero, like Achilles in that Greek Dreaming, simple and splendid. He is the eternal mystery, the enigma, but His life takes place in a precise his-

torical time and place where the participants are real personages who were born, lived, suffered and died. They happened along once upon a time. This time the physical Story, the historical account contains a massive detail compared, say, with the account, the Dreaming, of the New Testament or The Iliad or Odyssey. White's stories seem to coalesce out of the primal mist, the clouds, the gold sparks of Babi-Baha'i history going back over two hundred years to, arguably, say, 1793 when Shaykh Ahmad left his home to prepare the way for the Promised One.

White helps us to carry our stories within us, into the world and out of it. In the end it is often, not so much that we read White's poems but, rather, that they read us. Sometimes, as George Steiner says of Franz Kafka's works, White's poems "find us blank." We turn away from his poems as we often turn away from the Revelation, from their potential for enchantment, for exuberance. We turn away from his invitation to explore our Dreaming. For in this world of confused alarms our sensory emporiums are so bombarded that the best that is written and thought eludes us as we settle for that which can not satisfy or appease the hunger.

White's poetry is, of course, more than Story. It is both praise and criticism of life, social analysis and psychological diagnosis. It is the expression, the result, of his search for unity. For many writers in the last decades of the twentieth century, this search for unity was constantly frustrated in its narrative, historical and subjective domains with the result that they often reduced history to autobiography and society to their own consciousness. Former and apparent blueprints for social change that many had found in religion or politics became increasingly delusory. As the expressions of social and political unity increased in the world so, too, did the expressions of fractured, divisive, violent and anarchous activity increase. When White started writing poetry the world's population had something less than three billion; when he finished nearly fifty years later, that population had become something less than six billion. To document the changes in that half century are not possible in the context of

this essay. But White's history, his view of the past, is inseparable from the world he lived in and the changes it went through.

White's poetry is an expression of what for him was "true historical sense," of his existence among countless events and of his definition of history's landmarks, points of reference and its perspectives. In writing his poetry, his history becomes ours if we want to share it with him. Among the multiciplicty and immensity of it all White finds and preserves coherence, wholeness and unity. This, too, is our task. For we, too, must mold our historical and personal consciousnesses, our historical unity. We must make our own story into history, our multiplicities into a oneness, our narrative into a portion of that "mass of billions of local stories" that is universal history. White offers to us a series of synthesizing mechanisms that help bring together history and our lives, the macro and the micro, as it is sometimes expressed today. White would have liked to achieve, as any poet would, what Johnson wrote in his life of the poet Gray: "Images which find a mirrour in every mind" and "sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo." Still, he left his mark. He gives us old knowledge, old history, rednered in new ways, the familiar made unfamiliar and the unfamiliar familiar, as one writer once put it.

Roger White is one of the finest wordsmith's to have written in English in the Baha'i community in recent epochs. If you love literature, history and the Baha'i Faith, I could do no better than suggest you patiently pursue poem after poem of what is an extensive opus and devour, as much as you can, White's delicious instances of wit, wisdom and sheer genius. Hagiographers may indulge the pleasing task of describing the religion they espouse as it descended from heaven arrayed in its native purity; a more melancholy and at the same time more joyous and intellectually satisfying duty falls upon the poet. The poet's task, certainly as White sees it, is to discover the inevitable mixture of humanity and ordinariness, vanity and weakness, heroism and virtue, which is associated with the subtle and complex system of action and conviction in the emerging world reli-

gion he was part of for nearly half a century. The given moment of history, to White, is something more than a mere circumstance. It is a moment he must seize as a moral, an aesthetic, fact. In seizing this fact, the reader is often required by White to do a little digging, exert some intellectual effort, exercise more than a little brain power and imagination. If the reader is not capable of giving something of himself he cannot get from White's poetry the best it has to give him. If that is the case he had better not read White's poetry, for there is no obligation to do so.

White seems to have some of that "inexhaustible ardour for insight" that the poet William Blake evinced and "his sensibilities so heightened that ordinary events were translated into extraordinary ones." The outward creation was certainly, from time to time anyway, a transparent shell through which White beheld the fiery secret of life and its burning ecstacy. It was a secret and an ecstacy that he had seen and experienced thanks to the teachings of the prophet-founder of the Baha'i Faith and His transforming influences. But it was a many-splendoured, many-sided, thing. White knew that:

*We court a miracle and see the candles fail,,*
*The petals rust. What do our hearts avail?*

*No sword of vengenace cleaves us as we stand,*
*Our supplication brings no answering shout.*
*An ant crawls by persistent as our doubt*
*And in the comprehsnding hush we understand*
*Our mediocrity and godliness:*

White would have agreed with Jane Austen when she wrote: "Real solemn history, I cannot be interested in. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences in every page; the men all so good for nothing and hardly any women at all." The record of the past has never been easy to render; in some basic ways the content of the social sciences in general is much more complex than the physical sciences and so the telling of history, in or out of poetic form, is a difficult task. It helps to know a great deal and it helps to have thought long and hard about it. So often it is in vain that with retrospective eye we can conclude a motive from the deed. For character is unstable, life at best only partly explainable and the individual only understandable to a degree. It is not surprising that for many, even the more informed, history still is what it was to Gibbon two and a half centuries ago: "little more that the register of the crimes, the follies and misfortunes of mankind."

History for White was also, as Gibbon put it much later in that grand work, "a record of the transactions of the past for the instruction of future ages." White knew what the American historian Charles Beard once wrote, that "the writing of history was an act of faith;" that the historian, the poet, indeed, all of us, must makes certain assumptions, wind our emotions around these assumptions and proceed through life. As far as possible we must ground these assumptions in truth, in fact, but inevitably there is an act of faith involved somewhere in the process. White knew that facts about the past "are no more history," as historian of biography Ira Nadel expressed it in a light and perceptive way, "than butter, eggs and pepper are an omelette." They must be whipped up and played in a special fashion.

For White the writing of poetry, and his particular take on history, is a 'dance of life,' as the Australian poet A.D. Hope once defined the art of poetry. Some pedestrian or not-so-pedestrian person in Baha'i history acquires a fresh, new, life with a compactness, an economy of language, a concern for things as they really happened, as the nineteenth century historian Leopold von Ranke would have

expressed the recording of history. White does what Karl Popper advocates in his The Poverty of Historicism. He consciously introduces "a preconceived point of view" into his history" and writes "that history which interests" him, but he does not twist the facts until they fit a framework of preconceived ideas, nor does he neglect the facts that do not fit in. Popper says that such an approach, that is the introducing of a preconceived point of view, should be seen as one that begins with a scientific hypothesis. Such a focus of historical interest, Popper emphasizes, is a historical interpretation. Of course, one should endeavour, as far as possible, to know the facts of history but, as Kant once argued, it is difficult if not impossible to know the facts, the reality, of things. The real use in knowing what happened in history lies in the interpretation of history's facts, its events. The recreation of a life is one of the most beautiful and difficult tasks a literary artist can perform.

White gains access to meaning by interpreting events, arranging patterns, making descriptions, by actively engaging in practical rationality. This is what is at the heart of hermeneutics and phenomenology, sub-disciplines in the social sciences that have grown up in the twentieth century and influenced philosophy and sociology among other fields. In the process he brings forth hidden meanings, messages, as it were, from the past and the reader engages in an endless chain of listening and some essential thinking. For hermeneutics and phenomenology are both science and art. They aim at the attainment of historically effective consciousness, at a dialogue with the past, with those who lived in that past and those who thought about that past. Understanding is the filter, the door, through which thought passes. White attempts to open that door. And, in the end, he achieves what the art critic and historian Herbert Read said that T.S. Eliot achieved in his poetic opus: an enlargement or intensification of the "very consciousness of the world in which we are vitally involved." White writes each historical poem from "an exclusive point of view," as Charles Baudelair once said that biographical work

must be written from, but also "from a point of view which opens the greatest number of horizons."

White attempts to create a narrative, a concept of the Baha'i narrative, which Baha'is can readily identify with. For without this identity time turns into an unsolvable conflict of voices of authority, an antimony. Understanding, to White, is bound and embedded in history and the meaning changes over time according to how it is received and read. Meaning can never be fixed. From his first chapbook in 1947 to his final published work in 1992, White gives his readers slice after slice of history, of his interpretation of a shared memory. It is useful for his readers to have read some of God Passes by, Nabil's Narrative or any one of a number of books that explore the history of the Baha'i Faith. A sensitive appreciation of so much of White's poetry depends on some background knowledge of the belief system, the points in time and place that White is coming from, that all Baha'is are coming from. With this background the reader can often gain an insight, an understanding, of Baha'i history and its teachings that many hours of patient reading of other volumes will not yield.

Matthew Arnold once wrote that the Greek dramatist Sophocles saw life whole, with its moral and emotional meaning inside it. The modern world, the modern condition, on the other hand acknowledges no publicly accepted moral and emotional Truth, only perspectives toward it. But like Sophocles, White believed in submission to divine law as the fundamental basis for both individual motivation and social cohesion. To put it another way, both writers strongly believed that religion should play a very large part in the way society should be organized. Both writers had "a delicate sense of the complexity of experience," a sense of the tension between public interaction and private life and a clarity of vision that came from the world of myth. "Myths were a living body of meaning," for both Sophocles and White, "that illuminated the essential processes of life." For each writer, of course, the mythic base is different. Sophocles was, arguably, the last major thinker, certainly the last

Greek dramatist of the fifth century BC, to see the "need for a law-a divine law-above the state and its holders of power." For both White, and Sophocles, this mythic base, this common world view or cosmology and its accompanying moral and spiritual system, provides the ethos, the overall dramatic context, the external standard, the very structure for something ennobling for the community, something that contributes to its well-being. Without this commonality, people live with incompatible ends and develop political systems in which the end justifies the means. As Ivanov contests in Koestler's Darkness at Noon: `The principle that the end justifies the means is and remains the only rule of political ethics.' Perhaps Ivanov puts the case a little too strongly but we get the drift and it appeals to our skepticism about partisan politics.

This is partly why White sought to draw his readers away from his personality. Indeed, he was downright embarrassed with the whole notion of drawing attention to himself. This was utterly alien to what he was trying to achieve as an artist, a poet. The voice that spoke in his art was not that of his limited personality, but rather of a soul who had identified himself with divine and eternal truth. Indeed, "the slightest whisperings of self," the whole pursuit of self-expression, was, for White, done in the context of the upturned mirror of his soul in which the light of the will of God and His teachings were reflected, at least that is how he envisaged the process. This process helped produce, over time, White's voice. What underlies White's success, indeed all success in poetry, is voice. It gives us confidence in what he says. It is poetry's decisive factor. It is continuous and accumulates as he writes and as you read.

Some things in life must be savoured slowly. White's poetic history is one of these. The first poem in White's first major book of poetry Martha begins with a conversational, a casual, tone as if the poet was speaking to this famous Baha'i teacher, as if he was writing her a letter:

*Have patience, Martha,*

White is informal but serious as he continues with thirty lines of graphic description which includes his depiction of Martha Root's inner mental state and her motivational matrix in the years after World War I when the apocalyptic images ineffaceably etched there-

*the poisoned air*
*the towers afire*
*the maimed trees*
*the human pyre*

sent her "hurtling in exquisite arc/across the blackening sky,". And so she did 'hurtle' for two decades between the wars before she died in Hawaii in 1939. Her life became:

*.....a solitary warning cry*
*against engulfing dark*
*and ultimate night.*

The darkness was so great during these inter-war years when millions perished in Stalin's and Hitler's fiery death camps that Martha's efforts, however heroic, are described by White as follows:

*Your eyes were dippers*
*used against the fire,*

Apparently insignificant, her efforts, he goes on:

*purchased brief respite*
*that on the ramparts might arise*
*the legioned guardians of light.*

These 'legioned guardians' began to arise in the teaching Plans that the Guardian initiated just two years before Martha died so that, by the 1960s, thousands would arise 'on the ramparts.' By the time White was to write this poem and by the time its first readers would enjoy his succinct and pithy summation of her life there were indeed "legioned guardians of light." White advised Martha, still addressing her in that colloquial and informal tone, to:

*Be patient:*
*we may yet ourselves become*
*God's gadabouts,*
*meteoric, expire*
*Martha-like,*
*in conflagrant holy urgency.*

And so in five lines, the last five of White's first poem in his first major book of poetry, White gives his readers a vision, a direction, for their own lives, linked as it is with the greatest Baha'i teacher of the Formative Age. He was not trying to renew "a decadent civilization," as Ezra Pound had tried to do and unsuccessfully as he admitted in his epic poem The Cantos, written over more than half a century. But there is no doubt that White was trying to play his part, by the time he wrote this poem in the late 1970s, as one among millions of his co-religionists, in the construction of the new world Order associated with the Faith he had joined some thirty years before. The part he played, par excellence, was the writing of a long

series of statements, a dialectic, a development, a form, which attempted to lead the mind to some conclusion, to some affective condition, a quality of personal being judged by the action it leads to. But the language he used, poetic language, was largely one of indirection and symbolism.

There is an authenticity here, something behind and beyond the text, the life of Martha as we know it in the extant biographies and histories, beyond and behind the representation or embodiment of Martha Root in the photos of her that are part of our history. White undertakes to reveal a Martha Root who is doing more than looking past the camera into the distance with an air of weighty seriousness, of farsightedness, a look which might strike some viewers as anachronistic or too detached. Indeed there is no visual image consistent with White's written portrait. There are many and whatever image one could find would produce radically different interpretations.

Even the face of Martha, usually characterized as photographs of faces are by its ability to convey the essence of an individual, her innermost nature and qualities, its seemingly direct portrayal of the individual, of Martha and her life, a vivid representation of the living being who was Martha Root, a truthful picture, a genuine likeness, not just how she looks but what she is, leaves us asking 'who is the Martha we look at and how may we know it'? Martha's public persona was, as White notes in the epilogue to this poem, as a dowdy girl, unattractive and unfashionably dressed, some might say plain. But, White says later in the poem, we "cease to care/whether virtue be photogenic."

There has been a strong belief in the West since the early years after the invention of photography, that the face and head are "the outward signs of inner character." The human face engrosses a large share of our thoughts, perhaps the largest share of all, and White dismisses this tendency which is part of our celebrity or image culture in its application to Martha Root. If Martha is to be trans-

formed into anything it will have little to do with the star or celebrity status of the western media industry. What he projects onto our consciousness is not a photograph, a visual image. If anything it is an idea, a thought, that he foregrounds, not the visual, in the complex configuration that goes to make up Martha Root, the hero. Martha does not fall from hero to star with its concomitant emphasis on the visual. White confirms her heroic status.

Indeed, it may be more accurate to say that White clarifies Root's mythic status. For there is an essential metaphorical nature to Baha'i history, as John Hatcher as describes in such a straightforward way in his book The Nature of Physical Reality. Myth has a multivalent function in this conception of history. "To limit an image" writes Eliade, "to the concrete terminology, the physical form, is to mutilate it." In this view of history--and the poetry White writes--based on this history, the reader must be creative, must think, must participate, must transcend the physical and move in a world of abstract thought. He or she must engage in what is often called 'the analogical process.' Martha, in a poem like this, "becomes a mirror that reflects insights," as Rollo May once wrote in discussing myth and its function and her experience gives us "structural undergirding to (our) beliefs." To put this another way, physical reality, in this case Martha Root, is a veil that is one remove from the spiritual reality she represents. And we must use our individual judgement and discernment to properly utilize this myth, this metaphor, this spiritual reality, to free us from blind adherence to dogma, to a physical reality and, thus, to participate wisely in the physical reality that is our daily life.

In a second poem, the next one in Another Song, A Letter to Keith, White continues with his colloquial, conversational idiom. We learn a great deal about this attractive Baha'i woman who made an outstanding contribution of service to the Cause and who was the West's first martyr. But this poem is no factual biography, no story of a life. It is a graphic recreation not an impartial account. White is a poet with a belief in a compelling vision, a principle, a dogma con-

taining a great emotional and spiritual potency at its source and in its history. White possesses a technical virtuosity and he plots meticulously as he encourages his readers to think for themselves. We see this in his clever and witty poem, his piece of dramatic invention, based on the life of Keith Ransom-Kehler.

The poem begins by placing the reader right at the heart of the issue White is exploring:

*Why did you do it, Keith,*
*And you a looker?*
*Not your usual religious dame*
*in need of a good dentist*
*and a fitted bra.*

In White's response to a letter criticizing his poem's "stereotypical thinking about religious women as rigidly pietistic," women "lacking in pulchritude who seek spiritual consolation as compensation." White says "no slight was intended to any woman." He continues in that same letter indicating that he sought "to place in the mouth of the narrator of the poem, a fictitious peer of Keith's, a man holding attitudes perhaps typical of his time and place, words of grudging and bewildered admiration for a townswoman of his acquaintance, whose heroic example of authentically-experienced faith forces him to reappraise those very prejudices against religious women which he unsuccessfully masks behind an uneasy, heavy-handed humour."

At the end of the poem Keith's sacrifice causes this anonymous narrator to reexamine his own life orientation:

*I'm bawling,*
*me a grown man,*

*three sons and a wife in the grave*

*and not what you call sentimental.*

White concludes his letter by saying that "we cannot lose hope that even the narrator of "A Letter to Keith" will grow to recognize the perniciousness of the philosophy that governs the world of semblances." White wrote, again in that same letter, that "I do not underestimate the power of slights of cause hurt." And I'm sure he did not, having had his share of slights in life, a share that I'm sure contributed in interesting and complex ways to his poetic opus. It is a rare event for readers to possess an interpretation of a poem given by this poet and had not a letter to the editor been critical of White and his poem in the first place this opinion, this defence of his poem and his intentions in writing it, would not exist. I can not think of another commentary on a poem as extensive as this, at least not in White's published works.

Perhaps some of White's skill resides in that strange ability, as William Blake expressed it,

*To see the world in a grain of sand*

*And heaven in a wild flower*

*Hold infinity in the palm of (his) hand*

*And eternity in an hour.*

Or as another poet, Browning, emphasized that

*.....a man's search should exceed his grasp*

*Or what's a heaven for.*

White's poetic pieces of history are based on the view that human phenomena must be interpreted. They don't just speak for themselves. Social reality has become, in recent decades, very complex. The analysis of this social reality by various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences has become interdisciplinary and has expanded at a dazzling rate. The critical literature is now burgeoning. It has become impossible to read it all, in any of the disciplines. As one of the twentieth century's great social analysts Joseph Schumpeter once put it, even before this late twentieth century burgeoning of analysis: to make a judgement about human affairs, even one of the smallest moment, would require much study, much examination. And I would add, more study than most of us are prepared, or desire, to invest. It simply takes too much time and the disciplined exercise of our rational faculty. And there are so many issues.

For White, "the poem comes before the form," as Herbert Read described the process, "in the sense that a form grows out" of his attempt to say something. His poem becomes its own universe with words "impressed like clay with the poet's invention," in a poetic tradition that began, Herbert Read outlines, with the imagists in 1908, the year 'Abdu'l-Baha was released from confinement in prison in Akka.

White recognizes the complexity, the interdependence and the mystery of reality I refer to above in the following poem, The Appointment. I have discussed this poem before in an earlier chapter, but it is worth quoting again because what we have here is some of White's philosophy of history:

*There is another kind of clock*
*its cogwheels fixed*
*in the unknowable convolutions*
*of God's mind,*

*perhaps our galaxies*
*its smallest jewels,*
*a clock that marks*
*some celestial piecing*
*of eternity,*
*one that runs silently,*
*invisibly,*
*forever,*
*fluidly forward or back,*
*cancelling our time,*
*its tick perpetual,*
*attuned to the omniscient*
*and eternal heart.*

The cornerstone of the Baha'i philosophy of history is a belief in progress through providential control of the historical process. At the heart of this philosophy is the concept of an ever-advancing civilization. There is none of the historical pessimism and the contemptus mundi of the old religions. White's poetry and his Faith extends to humankind an immense hope and confidence in the future, indeed, that there will be a blissful consummation to man's evolution. In this same poem, The Appointment, White quotes the words of 'Abdu'l-Baha: "From this temple, thousands of temples will arise." Progress is not only the law it is the prerogative of the divine ordering of history; or, as White adds near the end of the poem, the words of 'Abdu'l-Baha, "The Temple is already built!" The essential mystery of this divine ordering is echoed in the last two lines of the poem:

*what clock or calendar keeps Him*

*and Who He is.*

This teleological view of history, where "intervention/rises up to melt our mathematics/or intersect our schemes," or, in the poem The Pioneer, "The future is inestimably glorious," White expresses in poem after poem his view of man and his view of history. To White, man is a composite being with a higher and a lower nature, with an angelic and an animal side. Only through the exercise of his spiritual faculties can a harmonious and beneficial world be created. We see Siegfried Schopflocher's generosity, Fred Mortensen's permanent place in "Baha'i history," Salman, the courier's courage, the spiritual qualities of a host of others: Thomas Breakwell, Juliet Thompson, several martyrs, people spread throughout his hundreds of poems.

It is White's view that the revealed Word fundamentally affects the development of social and cultural reality. Indeed the Cause of all creation and the source of all attributes is the Primal Will which is manifested by the Manifestation of God. All aspects of civilization are the result of the expression of this Primal Will in the world of creation through the utterance of the Word, or Logos. This interaction is perpetual and continuous. The following poem illustrates my point. White makes the narrator of the poem, Lullaby, an old woman who is telling bedtime stories to children. She is telling the story of the day she saw them take Baha'u'llah in chains to the Siyah-Chal. It was years before and she had come

----------*as a young girl into the service of his wife*

----------

--------*he was led through the rabble of the streets.*

----------

*A strange sight indeed--like seeing a white rose*

*in a swarm of gnats. He walked in cream-like majesty*

She describes how she was about to throw a small pebble at him but, in shame and fear, she turned and fled and hid the pebble. Years later, as she is telling this story, she says:

*it was enough to have seen that face.*

*Perhaps I should have cast it, but my hand was stayed.*

*I took it as an omen.*

*----------*

*It grows, I think, more white each year*

*The silly amulet of an old fool, I suppose,*

*but when I am ill or sad it comforts me*

*----------*

*So there you have it; it was his eyes, you see.*

*It was as though they gazed beyond us to another world.*

Although this is a somewhat humble way of illustrating the whole notion of the evolution of civilization that is at the heart of White's view of history, in its simplicity it makes its point. The evolution, the progress, the development of civilization, one of the many complex issues in the social sciences and an issue that has found several major theoretical constructs to support various interpretations, answers or explanations is explained in the Baha'i teachings by religion or, more specifically, the Manifestation of God. Economics, conflict, reason, power, great men, all find their place in various systems of explanation. White places the source of development of society squarely on the person of the Manifestation of God; this is the cause

and all else is effect. By implication, then, "only those who are not interested in political power or worldly glory are worthy" of this Cause and its message. There are so many illustrations in White's poems which illustrate what I am saying here. I leave it to the readers to do their own exploration.

How does White express this interpretation of history in his poems? What are the various stresses and strains that point to this reality, this philosophy of history?

In a poem about Ruhiyyih Khanum White refers to "history's hunkered spectre/brooding watchfully in the shadows." This 'helpmate' drowns, in the last two lines of the poem, "in scarlet helplessness/at the marble column's foot." With Balyuzi "Pain had softened the aristocratic outline" and his "will pinned furiously to one awesome purpose." And again: "the panorama of the mountain/must not blind one to the pebble." White talks of "improvising our lives from movies and pulp fiction."

I could list many more takes on history, on society, on life and its meaning but, somehow, they do not carry the weight of several individual poems examined in full. I shall close this essay with a discussion of these several poems. For they each provide points of intensity at which the force of the emotions fuse the utterance, or at least attempt, to a glowing heat. For me, White provides poetry of this kind frequently. He is deeply concerned with our moral sensibility but not in any narrow evangelistic sense with its accompanying moral superiority. He comes at us and makes his greatest impress due to the intellectual-aesthetic content of his work more than its moral, its religious, appeal. "Intellectual assent in literature," wrote Lionel Trilling, "is not quite the same thing as agreement." Our pleasure often comes from White's intellectual cogency, his artistic and emotional power, even when we don't agree with him.

The poem, The Gift, is based on an experience Curtis Kelsey had in 1921 when 'Abdu'l-Baha called him into his room in Haifa and sitting opposite Him, 'Abdu'l-Baha just looked at Curtis for several

minutes in silence. Later in life when Curtis experienced difficulties that face would appear to him. White writes the following sonnet:

*With that face given to me had I need*
*Of other gift? With those eyes holding mine*
*The shrivelled earth lost power to incline*
*Me to its shimmering mirage, to heed*
*Its ashy course, its dimming stars' design--*
*In one long glance the light of sun was mine!*
*Embossed on all my days this best of gifts,*
*A compelling image me to virtue past my reach.*
*Thus comforted, upheld, the frail heart lifts*
*To meet the imprinted living goad again*
*And pluck sweet victory like the low-hung peach.*
*His countenance held heaven's very plan.*
*That message read, what other need I scan?*

The 'shimmering mirage,' the 'ashy course' of earth and the 'dimming stars' design' that White alludes to is a reflection of a view of life, expressed in the writings of Baha'u'llah, that 'the world is like a vapour in the desert which the thirsty dreameth to be water but when he comes upon it he finds it to be mere illusion.' This is not to say that we should not strive in this earthly life; indeed, as White points out in the first line of the sestet, the image of the face of 'Abdu'l-Baha rising in Curtis Kelsey's brain challenges him

*----------to virtue past (his) reach*

The torments and stimulants, the goads, of life must be met day after day and we must strive to "pluck sweet victory like the low-hung peach," however illusory life may be in an ultimate sense. And finally, the reader is brought face to face with the core of the meaning of the poem, a core beyond the dichotomy of meaning and illusion, in the poem's penultimate line: "His countenance held heaven's very plan." This was 'the gift' that is the title of the poem. Curtis had no need for any other gift after 'Abdu'l-Baha had given him the gift of 'his visage' whenever he was in need. History rests, as White says in so many different ways in his poems, on the interaction of a combination of several interrelated factors: the Manifestation of God and his Covenant, here expressed in the person of "Abdu'l-Baha, individual striving and a detachment from the results of striving, here expressed by the sense of the illusoriness of life.

One important part of White's view of history, White's view of some essential perspectives on the meaning of history and of our own individual histories, is found in the poem Distinction.

*With every breath to celebrate breath's source:*
*Was merely this the perspicuous distinction,*
*To be as choiceless candle hastening extinction,*
*Burning with single purpose its brief course*
*Mindful of the wick, the hand that set the flame,*
*The oxygen it drinks to speed its end,*
*Casting its light for stranger and for friend*
*Nor caring were one beautiful, another plain?*
*The faithless mind contrives a thousand ways*
*To fit distraction to our fleeting days*
*Yet sorrows for the unnamed thing we lose.*

*What use were lungs unless in every breath*

*Life's source be remembered? Were all else death?*

The purpose of our history, our life, White says is that "With every breath" we "celebrate breath's source," that we burn "with single purpose" and that we remember life's source with every breath in such a way that our days are not filled with distraction. He asks the question, perhaps rhetorically, whether we would consciously choose such a way of life, whether we would have it any other way. This is the route out of the misery and woe, the darkness and the coldness which fill this vale. This is part of that full participation in this earthly life that will, in time, bring about the Kingdom of God on earth. This full participation, this singleness of purpose is, for Baha'is, the building of a new society. The new man and the new society can not come about without personal effort. A spiritual rebirth must occur in the individual and a transformation of society in a new world Order. We all must become that"choiceless candle hastening extinction" as we work toward that rebirth and that transformation.

In some ways the centre of history is a spiritual path, a journey. The Journey, White describes can often feel like "folly" and "a dim/Dangerous progress over untracked land/Ambushed with bogs in which illusions mire." The whole poem describes the dangers, the problems, the inevitabilities of the journey. "Reason is soon victim and thendesire," he informs us, if we don't already know. In a powerful series of statements about the nature of the journey, as well as several other important 'journey poems,' White's poetry becomes part of a literature in the western intellectual tradition going back to Homer's Iliad and Odyssey among the Greeks and the wisdom literature of the prophets of the Old Testament. For the history of specific individuals and the history of a people both occupy the stage in White's history and his stage is a rich and engrossing one for the reader, if the reader will but give himself to White's poetry.

In the end, any poem's success depends on the reader participating in the emotional life of the person/people/persona/event in the poem. Given the little we know about White's personal history and given his own oft' expressed emphasis on his poetry as the only significant and useful basis for really knowing him, our appreciation of his work must lie squarely on his poetry--and, of course, on Baha'i history. This, ultimately, is the value of Roger White, the value to the intellectual and community life of Baha'is around the world both now and in the future. In this sense Roger White has played and will play an important part in keeping history alive and well in our hearts and minds.

Chapter 16

## A GALAXY OF CHARACTERS

The great bulk of the poetry of Roger White that was written and published came in the last fifteen years of his life. Indeed it was the culmination of a life's work in reading, writing about, teaching and serving in various capacities the religion he had joined in his late teens in southern Ontario. This poetry will remain at the outer limit of human achievement: aesthetically, cognitively and spiritually, as it came to be expressed in the last quarter of the twentieth century in the Baha'i community as it was just emerging from its century-and-a-half chrysalis of obscurity. Although at that outer limit, it is also an important part of the permanent record or revelation of the nature of reality, the history, in that quarter century. Much of the truth of life is knowable only through the various cultural attainments of the mind. If White had not come along, perhaps we would have learned the things he had to teach us from others. Perhaps we would not have. His poetry is a magnificent ornament for that unfailing occupation of our lives - the cultivation of our minds.

The galaxy of characters that White created, recreated, defined, gave birth to, analysed with a brilliant clarity, penetrating detail, a compression of facts - the Central Figures of the Baha'i Faith, Shoghi Effendi, Ruhiyyih Khanum, Martha Root, Keith Ransom-Kehler, Louis Gregory, Horace Holley, Marion Jack - are more than just clever instances of how meaning gets extended, refined and elaborated upon; they are expressions of how new modes of consciousness come into being. White gives us a vivid, a graphic impression of the multifariousness of life and the many layers of the human personality. In some ways White is an enigma, a person about whom we know only a very basic line of biography, a person who kept saying, time and again, to examine his poetry not his life, if we wanted to come to know him. But, if we do this, we find we have in our hands a person who was everyone, a vision that takes in everything, an art so infinite that it contains us and will go on enclosing those likely to come after us. His opus may have been a small one, apparently minuscule, compared to the collected works of

many other great writers in history, but it stands on its own as a significant body of poetry in the last quarter of the twentieth century. White's poetry provides what Herbert Read called "a teleological function", a connecting link between transcendental being and human consciousness. His poetry was also a connecting link, a transforming medium, that took the pain and the joy of life, his and others, and turned it into art. It is an art that is, for many, a sublime and moving testament to many of the significant personalities in Baha'i history.

Perhaps I am overstating the case. But once White's poetry floods your consciousness and you find he is reading you better than you are reading him, you begin to appreciate what you have in this subtle quotient, this wondrous sifter of the Revelation and the history, the philosophy and sociology of a religion that claims to be the emerging planetary system of the coming millennium. White possesses a strength of voice and an amazing clarity of emotional language. Spare and elegant, he gives himself to his audience in poem after poem. I find I am being read by a poet I cannot resist, who possesses what you might call a 'fatal attractiveness'. One must read White with a certain exertion, a certain strenuous exercise of energy but, knowing this, his poetry will read you even more. The reader has in White a poet who delights in other people, who has an active and incisive mind and a practicality he brings to bear on a range of personalities. I find him exquisitely tender. He deals with the problem that Somerset Maugham says faces the writer: "that vice can be painted in colours that glow, whereas virtue seems to bear a hue that is somewhat dun". He deals with this curious trait of the human condition by presenting his characters as 'rounded' in E.M. Forster's sense, with their mix of the good, the bad, the ugly and the beautiful all in one poem.

Most cerebral poetry functions at such a level as to lose its emotive power and I am sure there will be many who will give up on White, as they give up on Shakespeare or any other literature that does not come easily into the sensory and intellectual emporium.

Ideas have to be given what the poet John Milton called a "local habitation" - they have to be given shape and form before we take them into ourselves. White does this with an artistry that is sometimes gentle and subtle and sometimes graphically straight from the shoulder in carefully crafted images. His poetry requires that you take a little time and I think it is here that White loses many from the mass culture of the electronic media where stimulation is instantaneous, visual appreciation highly refined and busy, but a lively literary sense often dull and decaying.

After two decades of studying White's poetry I do not feel like Robert Bernard Martin who wrote of Gerald Manley Hopkins that understanding his poems was "far less difficult that getting to know the mysterious man who wrote them". Indeed, I do not feel I need to read a massive biography spread over, say, five hundred pages dutifully describing each stage of White's life in great detail and analysing why he did what he did at each stage of the game. Inevitably such biographies will appear, I am confident. For me, White's poetry provides a base line of understanding that is always there for me to read: to read myself, my religion, my society, my time and age. White flirts with ideas and values in an imaginative way that exercises my mind and my heart; or, as Daniel T. O'Hara writes of the kind of imaginative portraits that White gives his readers again and again, until they often lose their appreciation in his liberal effusions, these portraits are "written as part of a dialogue of the mind and the heart". White's interpretations are part of a process by which his disclosures give to his readers a new capacity for knowing themselves. His is the work of a historical, a sociological, a psychological imagination that revises the past and imagines a myriad alternatives. Indeed one could go so far as to say that White, along with several other writers in the twentieth century, has begun to create a critical language in which man will speak for a thousand years. I have come to see White as one of those midwives of an idea whose time has come. And what may that idea be? It is the oneness of humanity and its institutionalization in a world order. The past

cries to be recognized and the present to be transformed. White helps us with this recognition, this transformation.

For this writer, the eminence, the genius of White lies in the sheer diversity of people: heroes, heroines, saints, martyrs, pioneers, administrators, servants of various kinds to the work of the Cause, ordinary people both within and without this newest of the world's great religions. There are so many separate selves and, if this were not enough, White also deals with a very wide range of ideas from the landscape of history, society and the future. He does all this with a gentle wit that is more than just a verbal flourish. It is part of his poetic modus vivendi, modus operandi. His wit and humour preserve "the seriousness from sentimentality and overstatement, as the seriousness keeps the wit from flippancy".

But far and above these literary talents, White's greatest faculty is unquestionably his intellect. White does what 'Abdu'l-Baha says the intellect must do in this age if ideas and thoughts are to be the very soul of the world in a boundless sea that must boil up "until the waves rise and scatter their pearls and knowledge on the shore of life". White creates "new and wonderful configurations". He embellishes the world with "a fresh grace", "an ever-varying splendour" which derives from his power of thought. White, of course, is the first to admit that this gift, this "sensation of writing is that of any unmerited grace".

There are great poets in our time and in history who are not great thinkers and there are great poets of conceptual originality. Each critic would make their selection of poets to put in each of these categories. But there are very few poets in all of history who are both great thinkers and in the possession of a creative imagination that is highly original.

What White brings to life are, for the most part, not creatures solely of his imagination. He does not create Falstaffs and Hamlets, characters who in some ways are larger than life and live down the centuries in its imaginative literature. The individuals who inhabit

White's poetry are part of his experience, his historical memory and/or part of the historical record of the Baha'i Faith. The presentation of human character and personality remains always the supreme literary accomplishment whether in drama, in narrative or in poetry. White presents people with sufficient meaning that one gets to know them sometimes quite profoundly, as well or better than many in one's life. Through the interaction White creates with this history, this memory, the voices of his poetic narrative, the recreation and inauguration of personality, of character, in history - as well as the person he is in his verse - readers undergo slow transformations of their own. The deepest meaning of White's poetry lies here. "It is who we have gradually become in reading this verse," writes J.B. White in his book about the poetry of George Herbert, "that we can best call upon as our guide to understanding it". It was not without purpose that White was attracted to the poetry of Herbert.

Shoghi Effendi, in one of his oft-quoted statements, outlines the key to our success in teaching, 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 Baha'u'llah". White renders the characters in his poetry with an uncanny power of highlighting, mirroring, those eternal principles. The people in his poetry seem so real. Their reality never leaves you, at least in the case of some of the main characters and, if it does, a re-reading of a poem brings that reality right back. Each reader will have his or her favourites. This is because White's creations are real and because White gets on their insides. They strut and fret upon the stage of life and walk proudly too, but their brief candle, White ensures, colloquially, often in a quotidian way, will shine in quite varied ways for us in his poetry. They will be heard from some more, then, on this earth and in mysterious and unknown ways in the next.

White's compendium of characters are not unlike Geoffrey Chaucer's in his famous Canterbury Tales. A group of characters

who, as William Blake once wrote, exemplify "the eternal principles that exist in all ages" are described by someone who delights in other people, who has an active and incisive mind, who dwells only on essentials, whose feelings are sincere and intense, who is exquisitely tender but clearly wily and tough minded enough to survive the late twentieth century and its dark heart. Like Chaucer, White wrote most of his published poetry in the last years of his life, in fact, just about exactly six hundred years after that founding father of English poetry. The comparison is an interesting one, but I mention it here only in passing.

Like Chaucer's work, too, White requires some immersion on the part of his readers if they are to gain some deeper appreciation of his meaning. White is showing his readers what and even how to perceive, what to sense. He is trying to enlarge their world, their perception. The problem is often simply how to read a poem. Often the reader is left with a question, a puzzle, a mystery, because much of the poetry is what you might call part of "a quest narrative". He deals in metaphor and readers must fill in meaning for themselves. It does not jump off the page as it might off the television screen in some straight action or passion shot. The journey is described, the story told in what you might call a 'hidden way'. The tone is sometimes joyous and confident but the journey often possesses a proportionate amount of danger and frustration, qualities that give the goal of the journey meaning. For White's tale is not something "told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing". The following poem talks little of the joy and confidence, although the reward is clear in the last line:

*And they will warn you, children, as they stand*
*In wan ardour at the dense thicket's rim*
*That your pitch venture is folly, a dim*
*Dangerous progress over untracked land*

*Ambushed with bogs in which illusions mire,*
*Keen fang and talon glint from every tree*
*And murky bats career and lean wolves prey.*
*Reason is soon victim and then desire--*
*A sharp cry marks the kills no startled plea*
*Postpones. No one returns uncrazed, the cautious say,*
*And many perish. Who might guess*
*How few whose passion wins the sought caress.*
*Who counsel flight from Love's far lair are wise*
*But O! not they shall see the Lover's eyes.*

There is a wilderness, though, through which we must blaze a new and individual trail. Occasionally people try to mitigate the story of the pain by stressing the hopeful vision, the positive side of the journey but few, White warns, win "the sought caress". No easy wish-fulfilment here. Readers return again and again to White's varied charactizations and his depiction of life's journey because they find he gives them so much of the world they find to be fact. He is not creating a world of fantasy to escape into with one's novel at bedtime. He tells it how it is and he says it so well, with such articulateness, that his readers keep coming back to hear it said so eloquently.

White answers the needs of this first generation of Baha'is in the tenth stage of history, the first generation of pioneers under the aegis of the Universal House of Justice, the trustees of the global undertaking which was initiated by the Bab and Baha'u'llah in the nineteenth century. If White's poetry is to endure it must answer the needs of future generations as well. Those needs will vary but White is an international possession and his poetry, I would argue, will come to transcend the generations, nations and languages. I do

not think he can be confined to the decade and a half that he wrote and published in the third and fourth epochs of the Formative Age of the Baha'i Faith and their historical, social, political, economic, rational and poetic contexts. I do not think White can be reduced to a time and place. His influence on his readers is unique and it will continue into the future. The interpretations of the first quarter-century of what you might call the White industry are just the beginning. Wonder, gratitude, amazement at such a mind, and sometimes shock, are accurate responses to White's work. White writes to be read, occasionally at public readings but, for the most part, silently due to his subtlety and comprehensive and omnipresent creativeness, to use Coleridge's term.

White, of course, will mean different things to different people but he has ensured that whatever he means it is to be found in his poetry and not his biography. Unlike Shakespeare who seems to have had little influence on religion over the last four hundred years, except perhaps as part of a broad secularization that has swept Western civilization, White's influence on the thinking of millions of Baha'is even in the first generation of his readership has been significant. I like to think that White was and is popular, although he has not been part of 'popular culture' except in the broadest of terms. His poetry certainly lends itself to a popularizing, but the competition of the electronic media is pervasive, indeed overwhelming. For the moment he will remain on the cultural periphery of the mass society.

Much of our experience of culture, our reading of poetry or prose, our attendance at the theatre, indeed a significant part of our religion, is a search for ourself or a search for other selves. White gives us other selves and he gives us ourselves. This is one, perhaps the main, reason he is important to us. Whatever the social, spiritual and intellectual provocations that animated White in the years after the revolution in Iran, in that fifteen-year period when all his major poems were published - and there were many as the Baha'i Faith went through a period of significant growth and its spiritual and

administrative centre in Israel was embellished to an unprecedented degree - his writing, as he himself says, "appears to be rooted in the need to shut off the clamour of the external world.... to enjoy silence and solitude". In the process White enlarges our vision rather than sorting out the problems we face. He helps us accept and outgrow what Carl Jung calls the unsolvability of so many of our problems while we move to "a new level of consciousness".

In 1990 Geoffrey Nash suggested that our age with its fading systems of belief has given to "those bats of the night", the materialists, the dominance of the realms of thought and action. A grossly materialistic, utilitarian and atheistic world has the poet to keep alive in man, as Schiller once wrote, aims that are higher than the material. Nash, writing just as the Baha'i community was beginning to respond to the Universal House of Justice's call in 1979 for the development and fostering of the "intellectual.... life of the believers", decried the absence of an audience and the groundwork of shared values with those among whom the poet dwells. The poet, he argued, has had no mooring and has floated adrift in an amorphous and frightening ocean for more than a century. With Matthew Arnold, the poet was 'Still bent to make some port he knows not where'.

But even in 1980 Nash offered hope. He saw the poet, then, as an heir to the Romantic artists who sensed the dawning of a new age in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He saw the Baha'i poet as raising his house on a sure foundation, inspired by golden tapestries of the past. "The Word of God," Nash states, "has power to raise a score of fine poets from a hoard of illiterates who now know nothing of philosophy, nor a word from our poets." White is certainly a fine poet and in the last quarter-century a host of others have started walking beside him. Some have more talent than others and not everyone is a Roger White.

Two years after writing the above, Geoffrey Nash was to inform his readers that "Roger White is a significant poet whose style and

use of Baha'i subject matter heralds the development of Baha'i consciousness in world literature".

White, like Shakespeare, thinks in terms of the lone individual but, unlike Shakespeare, White also thinks in terms of community. The power of community will, in the end, triumph over everything that opposes it. It will be as natural to man as breathing, Alfred Adler once wrote. The new ideology will utilize community for the first time in history in a way that does not sound like the repeated sound of a single boot. For the real problem facing our human community is not so much to discover the norms for survival as it is to discover the true basis for a revolutionary myth that will be adequate for our age, that will integrate human behaviour into some group ethos and its patterns of interdependent privacies. What White is suggesting in so many of his poems is that "concerted action toward a single goal" must be taken. "Vague sentiments of good will, however genuine, will not suffice. Some explicit agreement on principles will be required for any coordinated progress."

Shakespeare's ambassador to that undiscovered country, death, was Hamlet. White draws on the enigmatic and wondrous poet, Emily Dickinson. But far beyond and above Dickinson, White has the writings of a powerful armoury of two Manifestations of God, their successors and now more than a century of extensive, legitimate and authoritative interpretation. Death, indeed so many of life's quintessential mysteries, is framed in a language that transcends history. In all of these things White is both entertainer and source of wisdom literature. White gives us pleasure and bewildering intelligence.

By 1963 the charismatic authority that resided in the person of Baha'u'llah was fully institutionalised in the Universal House of Justice, the elected body for all the Baha'is of the earth. 1963 also marked the beginning of the last stage, 'the end' of history. That the first decades, the first thirty years, 1963 to 1993, when these trustees of the global undertaking initiated by the Bab and

Baha'u'llah more than a century before put into action a series of plans for the achievement of that single goal - that these years should spawn such a poet as Roger White is, I think, no accident, no mark of chance, no movement of the wheel of fortune. As Shakespeare was to write in Hamlet "The play's the thing," White was to state again and again "The poem's the thing". For in his poems readers could find the most succinct expression of the realities of the newest of the world's great religions, the Baha'i Faith, over its first century and a half, 1844-1994.

Chapter 17

## WHITE'S FUTURE

Two hundred years before the death of Roger White in 1993, Shaykh Ahmad-i-Ahsa'i "arose to dedicate the remaining days of his life to the task" of preparing the way, as one of the two critical precursors of the Baha'i Revelation for "the advent of a new Manifestation." In the next several years he began to write a great deal about the metaphorical nature of the prophecies relating to the birth of a new and independent Revelation of God. Indeed there was a strong poetic strain in the Shaykh's writings: symbolism and metaphor abounded. Shaykh Ahmad was very unorthodox and many "professed themselves incapable of comprehending the meaning of his mysterious allusions". This poetic, symbolic strand has continued through the two precursors of the Babi Revelation, the Revelation of the two Manifestations of God and the writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha, all part of what one might call the poetic tradition in the Baha'i Era.

There has been, too, a series of poets beginning with Tahirih in the 1840s, to Na'im late in the nineteenth and early in the twentieth centuries, to George Townshend up to mid-twentieth century and later Robert Hayden, Roger White, Bahiyyih Nahkjavani, John Hatcher and Michael Fitzgerald, among others, who have made important contributions to the literature and commentary on the Bahá'i Faith in a poetic idiom. In some ways it could be said that the passing of Roger White in 1993 marks an end of two centuries of intense and significant poetic writing in a tradition centred on the appearance of two Manifestations of God in the nineteenth century. It is not the purpose of this book or this chapter to describe this long history, this tradition of poetic influence, of poetic writing. The experience of poetry begins anew with each generation. Since the first teaching plan, 1937-1944, poetry written by Baha'is has slowly become a part of world literature, first through Robert Hayden and later through Roger White, the subject of this study. The poetry of White is seen as a continuation and development, as part of "the decisive, the most significant, contemporary life of tradition", as

poetry critic F.R. Leavis once described the poetry of the present. White should be seen, too, as part of that rich treasure of human life which is now stored within the pale of a new and emerging world religion. White had much of the culture of this embryonic Force, this Movement, fermenting, crystallizing, in his head and it took him on a voyage over the deep of poetry with its delicacy and tenderness, with its inexhaustible resources, infinitely new and striking. The world had been exploding with ideas and inventions, knowledge and discoveries for a century and a half. The world White was writing for was a part of this burgeoning. By the end of the twentieth century it was teeming. White's timing was just right. If the world was filled with practical people who did not respond to poetry, who had an inveterate inaccessibility to ideas, who were impatient with them because they were unfamiliar, it mattered not. In the burgeoning billions now on the planet, there was a coterie for everything. White had his audience, an audience that his ideas could permeate and vivify in a literary epoch that was just beginning to reach to all the corners of the earth with audiences that were simply unimaginable in the past.

T.S. Eliot once defined tradition as "a way of feeling and acting which characterizes a group throughout generations; and that it must largely be, or that many elements of it must be, unconscious". Perhaps this is one way of summarizing the two-century-old tradition which White is a part of and that I have just outlined briefly here. There is little evidence that White was ambitious to be a part of this tradition. There is in White's poetry little evidence of that attitude expressed by British writer Martin Amis that writers who mean business need to be ambitious and think they are the best. Occasionally White makes some comment that bears directly or indirectly on this issue but, for the most part, the question of ambition and the desire for fame and success seems curiously or, perhaps, not surprisingly absent from his poetry. White's concern in his poetry is not ambition or even utility but, rather, truth which is, as Emerson put it, "its own testimony". Part of the necessity of this

focus is, as Hayden Carruth writes eloquently, that lying "has become a way of life, very nearly now the way of life, in our society. The average adult American of average intelligence believes almost nothing communicated to him in language, and the disbelief has become so ingrained that he or she does not even notice it". While I find what Carruth writes a little over the top there has developed a pervasive scepticism in our society with its roots in many places: advertising, religion and politics, among other sources. "Poetic truth", that which ought to be assented to, serves as a partial antidote. The difficulty with this emphasis on scepticism is that there is also an immense quantity of credulity in society as well: millions will believe just about anything. The issue is quite complex. Perhaps a good poem "enables us to notice and to judge … those aspects of experience which an intelligent, curious, compassionate, sensitive, alert person would deem worthy of attention". A good poem "earns our assent". Its truth must be discovered afresh at each reading.

The future of the poetry of Roger White is so intimately tied up with the future of the Baha'i Faith that to discuss the one is to discuss the other. As the world moves, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, through several stages of the necessary and inevitable political and religious unification of the planet, from a Baha'i perspective, having already experienced earlier units of political and social organization: family, band, chiefdom, tribe, city state and nation, it is useful to examine one man's poetry, apparently insignificant in the large scheme of things, during one part of the great turning point that has been the twentieth century. Although White's poetry has attained a certain fixity now that it has been written, published and has slipped into tradition's recent past, it has assumed the character of an atemporal object which has broken free from its historical moorings and is no longer closed in and restricted.

It is free to be interpreted in relation to the historical situations of future readers. I am sure the future will see new and sympathetic appreciations of White's work and its creative invention that is beyond explanation in terms of "influences". To ascertain the mas-

ter-current in the literature of an epoch, an age, and to distinguish it from the minor currents is one of the highest functions of a critic; perhaps it is presumptuous to even try. Arnold says the ability to do this requires "justness of spirit"; the Universal House of Justice referred to it as an adequacy of "Baha'i perspective" and "an etiquette of expression".

The future of the poetry of Roger White is also tied up with the search for fresh answers to the eternal questions, a search that has been a principal preoccupation of poetic minds at least from Wordsworth's time. An introspective voyageur, White offers more than stoical fortitude. He builds a substantial bridge between himself and the natural and human world about him. At the end of that bridge White offers a hope-bearing vision, a vision of a cosmic order, that is more than the legend that goes: 'where the rainbow touches earth there is a pot of gold'. White believes in the inevitability of an unimaginably glorious destiny awaiting humankind. The door to this destiny is to be unlocked by a Divine Plan, one that began unfolding in his lifetime and that he played a part in effecting its achievements; one that will continue unfolding in the centuries to come long after he has gone. It is a Plan that he cherished and that is presently the labour and love of millions around the globe.

The ship of White's poetry does not suffer shipwreck at the entrance to the harbour where the secular imagination so often fails to solve the enigmas and contradictions of life, where it lives in a state of tension between belief and disbelief. And so the pervasive melancholy and the aridity one finds in the poetry of the Romantics is succeeded in White's poetry by what Geoffrey Nash called that 'golden seam of joy' and what White himself referred to, among other things, as a 'green and wily succulence'. But one should mention, if one is to be honest, "despair's bleached skull" and "the heart's thin soil" and that solemn consciousness wherein joy grows and has its being. The enthusiastic critic of White's work must always hold out the possibility that over time his poetry will come

to be located in a predictable and allotted portion of a progressive set of anthologies, a portion which shrivels with the decades before disappearing altogether. For critics are not seers, prophets or soothsayers. They cannot tell what the future holds. The hopes which recent progress in the unfoldment of White's poetry has engendered may be blasted by any number of future events.

One of the features of White's verse that made him popular while he was alive was his capacity to generate light verse and to inspire laughter. In this way he was somewhat like the American master of light verse, poet Ogden Nash, who wrote prolifically from the 1920s to the 1960s. Nash, like White, distanced himself from any sort of earnest literary ambition. White, I am sure, would have been comfortable with the terms used by Nash to describe himself: a versifier, a trifler, a good bad poet rather than a bad good poet, a devotee of the minor idiocies of humanity. This aspect of White's idiom may not have the staying power as cultural idiosyncrasies and their associated bases for humour change.

The whole problem of "the trustworthiness of the tradition of interpretation" which comes up in any hermeneutical tradition is not present with respect to White's poetry because it is not present with respect to the ideological and religious framework within which his poetry is written, namely, the Baha'i Faith. This is not to say that our interpretations of White will not have their prejudices; in fact, our very prejudices may be our "best means of preserving the vitality and significance" of White's poetry in our hearts. If there has been any incomprehension of White's poetry in his lifetime, and there certainly was, I am confident he will emerge solidly into the light of a universal acclaim as the cause he was identified with virtually all his life grows into the glaring light of public recognition. More and more people will come to enjoy the poetic fashioning he made of his experience, a process which engaged him for over forty years. The pendulum may swing as the years go on, of course, from what I trust is a discriminating adulation of writers like myself, to indifference, but I think it unlikely that White will

receive the extremes of denigration that some poets get in the periods when their public reception swings into the negative. Samuel Johnson's words, from his preface to Shakespeare's plays, offer White a hopeful future: "While an author is yet living we estimate his powers by his worst performance, and when he is dead we rate them by his best." I think, too, that White will be read, in part, because his poems are a crucial index to the temperament and emotions, the experience of the last half of the twentieth century.

Literary critic Jonathan Holden offers a useful perspective that for me applies to White and his future. Holden sees a poem as a method of analysis not "the product of analysis". Holden sees the poem not as a vehicle for communicating some already discovered vision, some already fixed position, but rather as a means by which, through the act of writing, the poet might discover and clarify his predispositions and the precise connections between his feelings and troublesome facts." In this sense White points the way for us as we try to clarify our own feelings and thoughts, rather than act from positions where our minds are already made up. White's poetic form is more of a way of thinking about poetic form. It is more process than product, more operation than structure. White's poems 'discover' their form, develop their subject matter, their content, as they go along. That is what keeps his poems going. This approach keeps a certain openness present in the overall tenor of his poetry. It helps to keep his poetry alive and fresh for generations yet to come.

The individual and society have become, if they were not in the past, quite complex things. If they are to be written about in poetry they must be understood at a deep level by the poet. White possessed a critical perception and understanding and it is this, as Arnold wrote, which gives poetry its healthy relations with life. White possessed the genius of a great philosophic poet, not as one in mental repose as perhaps Wordsworth was, not as one who enshrined the world of imagination at the apex of creation as Stevens did, but as one who provided hundreds of lines of poetry which possessed a philosophical and imaginative perception with

humor and wit, entertainment and edification. And while he did all this he gave the Baha'is new music out of old stories. I am confident that these lines and these stories will appeal to generations, as Wordsworth's The Prelude among his other poems have done for the last two centuries. Like Wordsworth's poetry White's poetry, too, may well have its periods of popularity and periods of less public enthusiasm. White's philosophy is embedded like gems, like pearls, like a fine ore body, in context after context, in a great scheme not of his own making, as was Wordsworth's. With this philosophy he helps us clarify the complex and insoluble aspects of our lives. I see no reason why this should stop with his death.

I should say something, too, about what seems to me to be a complacent and uninformed view of modernist and contemporary poetry, that it is endlessly experimental or for others that it does not rhyme. If there has been a war in the last two centuries between rhymers and non-rhymers, as some superficial view might entertain, the non-rhymers have won hands down. The vast majority of poetry written since Wordsworth got going in the 1780s and 1790s has not been rhyming. Even some of the greatest of poets before that time, Shakespeare and Chaucer for example, are essentially non-rhymers. Others see the modern vogue in poetry as a superficial flouting of poetic convention, with coarse and indiscriminate hacking up of prose into lines, without punctuation or capitalization. White's poetry is experimental in a much deeper and non-trivial sense of that word and has nothing to do with experimental hacking of words into lines. White's future will draw on these deeper roots, far removed from any poetic superficiality.

I like to think that White's poetry will be, as Shelley once wrote in his Defence of Poetry, "a fountain forever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight, and after one generation and one age has exhausted all its divine effulgence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the unforeseen and unconceived delight". For as a poet White is partly historian, partly sociologist,

partly psychologist, partly story teller. He has a foot in so many camps, disciplines. In some ways he is an archeologist who digs until a portrait of the past is revealed to him and preserved for us.

I am not going to even try to begin to provide any examples here. I can only suggest readers pick up one of the half a dozen or more books of his poetry now available. His philosophic treasure-house has many rooms. White seems, to me anyway, a fine example of the person and the process Keats wrote about in a letter in 1818: "When man has arrived at a certain ripeness of intellect any one grand and spiritual passage serves him as a starting post towards all the two-and-thirty Palaces… The results would be a voyage of conception …. engender ethereal finger-paintings arising out of the most mundane experiences." And later in that same letter: "Greatness in art …. involves losing the sense of our personal identity in some object dearer to us than ourselves." Much of White's identity was unquestionably to be found in an object dearer to him than his life's vein: the Baha'i Faith. Its history was fresh and recorded in great detail under the light of modernity. White consequently had a great deal to write about, to sustain him, as a poet. It was a solid ground for the future. White's poetry possessed what Irish poet Galway Kinnell said was essential for "true and real poetry" - namely, that it "tends to be more ordinary and close at hand".

As long as new meanings continue to come from White for generations yet unborn, then his essence will not become exhausted and he will continue to be read. "The grand power of poetry," wrote Matthew Arnold, "is its interpretive power …. the power of so dealing with things as to awaken in us a wonderfully new and intimate sense of them, and of our relations with them." White does this for me and for many others. It is my belief that he will continue to put readers in contact with the essential nature of what the Baha'i Faith, its history and teachings mean, partly because he acknowledges in so many ways the process between the discomfort in our lives and the joy, partly because he deals with life's bewilderment and oppression and lightens the load, and partly because he brings us closer to

life's secrets and helps us to be in harmony with them. The result is a certain calm and satisfaction that, it seems to me anyway, we cannot find in quite the same way anywhere else.

After twenty-five years he appears to have the reputation of being both a difficult poet, a critic's poet, as well as a popular or a people's poet. But beyond his current reputation and the reactions of contemporary readers, through his poetry White "defeats the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions", as Shelley wrote nearly two centuries ago. White created anew the world of his Baha'i experience after it had been, to use Shelley's words again, "annihilated by recurrence, blunted by reiteration". We too must do the same. We must, like White, redeem time, rescue it, reclaim it, renew it, by ransom, by the payment of our lives. White helps us with this process in so many ways: in the reconciliation of truth and beauty; by giving his readers a satisfying sense of reality, of the real nature of things; by helping them reconcile themselves with their society and the phenomenal world around them. When you read a poem of White's his experience becomes your own. That may just be the core of White's poetic longevity.

But whether White's poetry follows a downhill trajectory toward oblivion or an upward one to some canonical, some classic status will depend on canon makers, publishers, editors, initiators, marketers, reviewers, teachers and, ultimately, consumers, the current interests and cultural needs of the reading public. For the moment White is marginal and only a slow but massive shift in the value orientation of society in its cultural capital will bring him from the margin. For, in the end, literary works that become classic or canonical do so "because the groups that have an investment in them are culturally the most influential". A classic is a work that stands the test of time, as Samuel Johnson once said, and the test is determined by those who control the literary establishment. In the end it is the interests and beliefs of this group that define the classic. Toward the end of the twentieth century this group became fractured and the

whole question of what constitutes the canon has been confronted and opened up to wider representation.

It is not so much the text that endures but the literary and cultural tradition behind the text. The literary and cultural tradition going back to the writings of Shaykh Ahmad in the 1790s, a literary and cultural tradition containing the immense body of Writings of two Manifestations of God and their successors, then, is the critical matrix within which White will survive, disappear into oblivion or remain forever on the remote and obscure margins of a contemporary culture. For literature and poetry are, in a sense, an organic society all of their own, an organic society supported by a whole social ideology. It is my belief that White will survive as an integral part of that larger literary and cultural tradition. Herbert Read comes close to telling us why White will survive. "Human nature," Read writes, describing men like White, "saw something get a shock" and there has been "a tremble ever since". We are in that tremble. This tremble we are in from White applies to a much greater extent from the Revelations at the heart of this new Faith. Another aspect of White's survival quotient is the light that shines within him and which Matthew Arnold said was so much more important than the pleasure a writer gives. It is that inner light which is a rare and treasured thing and which depends on some "children of light" sharing that light and on the Canaanite having left that land.

White's poetry will be, it seems to me, what Wallace Stevens called "the essential poem at the centre of things" for a minority. His work will enable future literary critics to establish a pattern of continuity between their cultures and the part of their heritage that was alive and well in the last half of the twentieth century. For White's work has a larger historical importance in addition to the delight it provides readers. The ultimate source of a poem is not only the individual poet but also the social situation, the historical process from which both he and it springs. Of course, White is not alone in this exercise of providing historical continuity. He will have

the company of a vast range of people from the creative and performing arts and the print and electronic media. Part of their role is and will be to preserve the past and its stories, its beliefs, to be handed on to the next generations for continuity and immortality, to keep holy, as Rilke says, "all that befalls us, even disappointment".

And, I might add, especially disappointment. I think this is especially important in an age like our own when "cultural memory is remarkably short" and "communications are disintegrating" so quickly.

There is no art more stubbornly associated with group identity than poetry. No art expresses the deepest feelings and emotions of a group more than poetry. No art provides that exceptional sensibility, that exceptional power over words, with greater strength than poetry. Of course in our time the electronic media in its various forms provide for many that sensibility and that power. The great majority of most groups, at least at this point in history, do not respond to the poet, whether he be a Shakespeare or a White, a Dickinson or a Hayden. "What matters," writes T.S. Eliot about the future influence of the poet, "is that there should always be at least a small audience for him in every generation." White certainly has a small audience in this generation; time will tell as far as future audiences are concerned. Inevitably, too, there will be varying reactions to White's work. There will be many vocabularies of encomium and oppprium that arise in reaction to White's poetry as the years go on.

Matthew Arnold's views in his "The Study of Poetry" help us gain a perspective on White for the future. Arnold says there are three sorts of "estimates" we make of a writer: the historic, the personal and the real. His contribution to the study, the understanding of the past; the contemporary relevance to the present, the time the poet is being read; and the poetry "as in itself it really is". Often the personal and the real get mixed up. White was the first twentieth-century poet I read who wrote about Baha'i themes and gave me pleasure, comprehension and a responsive feeling. Many of his

poems are so well anchored in my head now that the task of a just evaluation may not be a realistic expectation. For I write to a large extent out of gratitude. It may be too difficult for me to perform an unbiased evaluation; I may need a lifetime.

The work I am doing here may appear too effusive to some readers. I think the future will bring a balance to what some may see as my overly enthusiastic reaction. As critical accounts of White's work by highly and not so highly qualified students of poetry, as attempts at a definitive analysis of his poetry by critics with pens abler than mine, and as full, unembarrassed appreciations of his poetic virtues that do not repel more highbrow sensibilities become available in the years to come, the relevance of the words of the great analyst of literature, Randall Jarrell, will be seen to apply to White's poetry. "The most important thing that criticism can do for a poet," wrote Randall Jarrell, "is to establish that atmosphere of interested respect which gets his poems a reasonably good reading." Put another way, criticism ought to be experiential and pragmatic rather than theoretical. Such is the context, for the most part, of this work in the tradition of Samuel Johnson and William Hazlitt. I try to bring White nearer to his readers and his potential readers. For if he is nearer he can be put to greater use.

The situation of poetry, it has been argued by many, at the opening of this new millennium has many facets which are not encouraging to the poet. It is almost exclusively a non-commercial medium. It is not sustained by popular success; it makes no best seller lists, is rarely found in the electronic media and, for the most part, languishes as an academic specialization, in corners of the Internet and in coteries where the enthusiasms of performance poets keep the poetic spark alive. Given that poetry seems to be possessed of no laws, no standards, no necessary forms, it is now the form that everyone may attempt. Criticism is extensive but again confined, for the most part, to esoteric corners of academia. Anthologies and surveys abound to cater to what has become in the last century or two a boundless, formless domain of an ancient art. Publishing lists

expand, vanity presses multiply, and poetry bloats like the tentacles of a bureaucracy. Criticism is essential by its exercise of judgement and thus quality control or a Tower of Babel results with its inevitable anonymity from the sheer force of numbers. There are many descriptions of this perilous state, some encouraging, some with tragic overtones.

If one accepted all that I write here, one could conclude that White has already been lost, lost to just about everyone except a few, and these few are so negligible as to hardly matter. White, following this line of thought, not only does not have a future, he has already been lost, virtually. His days of fame and glory have gone not with Andy Warhol's fifteen minutes, but with fifteen years. I take a more optimistic view. I think there may be many different Whites to emerge in the decades and perhaps centuries ahead as a thriving critical industry on White expands in English and other languages. New kinds of poetry will provide new ways of reading White, ways that give his poetry new life. In the meantime I hope what I write will serve as a catalytic agent. The electronic media, still in their first century of popularity, I do not think will hold their sway over the minds and consciousness of human beings for the entire future of humankind. The life of print is healthy now and its future, I think, is filled with hope. White's function in the future for whoever his readership may be was described best and indirectly long ago by Sir Francis Bacon. "Read not to contradict and confute," wrote Bacon, "nor to believe and take for granted, nor to find talk and discourse, but to weigh and consider." White will give what he has already given to many: spiritual and intellectual food to weigh and consider.

The advice of Somerset Maugham with respect to novels, slightly altered in its application to poetry, is pertinent here to would-be readers of White's verse. Maugham encouraged readers to "learn the useful art of skipping". To skip without loss, though, is not easy. Some poems, I find, are absorbed easily. Others require two or more readings. Most of us read for pleasure, for enlightenment, for diver-

sion. When reading becomes a labour, most of us only read for a time. When White becomes too heavy going we need to read something else, come back to him later and, if we are to really grasp his work, keep coming back again and again. Do not let his books of poetry sit unread on your shelves for years. White is good on reruns, second, third and more visits. Some of his poetry is hard work; some of it is easy. Perhaps future editions of his poetry will be like that edition of some novels which Somerset Maugham's publisher asked him to introduce with an essay providing a context, a setting, a framework to take away some of the labour and provide more meaning. I like to think White's popularity has just begun, for he is a good poet who never goes too far in his poetry, never claims an expertise that is not his. He may write, for example, about the poor, the affluent, the land, greed and money but he does not offer his readers economic theory or the politics of poverty. He knows when to shut-up, when to be silent. I like to think that White's poetry does what Emerson said the best books do: "impress us with the conviction that one nature wrote and the same reads".

There are several Whites one can already imagine. There is the White with a message to give his times, an engaged social thinker and responder, immersed in his daily environment at the Baha'i World Centre just at the time when it and the global Baha'i community was emerging from obscurity. Here the critic has the primary role as interpreter and systematizer trying to figure out what White means and where and how he fits into the historical development of the Baha'i community. Then there is the caricature of White as humorous, comedian, or writer of obscurities. Does his humour dominate and make him the funny man, the funny poet? After readers have had their laugh, after they have been entertained, do they put White down complacent and self-satisfied? Are the complexities of some of White's later work, complexities which leave many of his potential readers in the Baha'i community puzzled and perplexed, quite conscious parts of his poetic? Are these complexities the visible outcroppings of some deeply laid poetic and

geo-political scheme that was itself in embryo, in its early stages, with a future connected with Baha'u'llah's "Wondrous Vision … the brightest emanation of His Mind?" What White writes he writes with and from a bias and everything he writes is conditioned by that bias. What he writes is part of his personality, his idiosyncrasies, his taking sides, his loading of the dice his way, his sense of the dramatic, his particular way of grabbing our attention. For he is an artist, a choreographer, a director and producer - and a poet all in one. He pleases and he informs. He is good at both.

I think White has developed an idiom that is at times so simple and childlike and at other times so complex and dense that his poetry possesses a style of such fundamental peculiarity and eccentricity that it will facilitate his absorption by later poets, readers and critics. White gives body to the soul of English, the language used internationally for dealing with the beliefs and attitudes of the religion claiming to be the emerging world religion on this planet. White has passed on to the Baha'i community of the twenty-first century a more highly developed, more refined, more precise idiom for dealing with its experience than it possessed before White wrote his poems. "That is the highest possible achievement," wrote T.S. Eliot in his essay on what one learns from Dante, "of the poet as poet". There is in this idiom an intimacy, a familiarity, that adds to his poetry's verisimilitude and gives his poetry much to recommend it to future epochs and a wide range of readers.

White enables ordinary men and women to see and hear more in the ordinary range of their experience. He enables them to experience a greater range of emotion and perception, to interpret greater depths of meaning than they otherwise would have seen or heard without his help. He is like an explorer beyond the frontiers of everyday consciousness. White helps them deal with the incomprehensible, the mystery of life. His poetry is only one element in that mystery which is the culture they live in and what he writes is dependent upon many of their culture's elements, elements which are beyond his control. But given the excellence and vigour of his

poetry it can affect the sensibility of the whole of the Baha'i community. Of course the language of that community is affected by many other elements in the wider culture. Eliot argues that the poet affects the many through his influence on the few. What matters, he goes on, is that there always be a few in each generation who will serve as the audience for the poet. What matters, too, is that the topics White has chosen are of enduring interest. We can never know enough people profoundly enough. It is one of our main routes to self knowledge. If White's poetry is to endure an enduring interest in what White writes about is fundamental. Given the topics and the community he deals with, White will be around as long as the Baha'i Faith is around. Given, too, that there exists in his poetry what Harold Bloom calls "a pleasurable difficulty", a kind of difficulty he equates with the sublime, the transcendent, this generation does not need to complete the excavation of White's poetic. White caters to this 'poetic sublime' to the larger created presence of the imagination; his work sustains close readings. Bloom says the first principle for how to read poems is "closely". White's future may lie in the creative exuberance of his packing of much into so little.

Just after White was born Edmund Wilson wrote about what he called "the dying technique of verse". He said that verse's role had grown increasingly narrow since the eighteenth century. Its territory had been usurped, he argued, by prose. Just before White passed away essayist Joseph Epstein updated Wilson's discussion of the death of poetry. He said poetry was now confined to universities, poetry's professionals: teachers and lecturers and their creative writing programs. Epstein is a brilliant polemicist and he continues to describe the decline in the cultural importance of poetry that concerned Wilson fifty years before. Poetry is certainly not part of the mainstream of artistic and intellectual life today. It is the occupation of a small and isolated group, for the most part an invisible cultural niche. Ironically this reality has slowly been taking place during a period of unprecedented expansion of the art of poetry: books, anthologies, prizes, public readings, published criticism, newsletters

and scholarly journals. Nevertheless poetry's overall position in the culture and the indifference shown by the mass media to it, as both Wilson and Epstein have noted, is depressing. There is too, paradoxically, so much poetry appearing in journals, on the internet and in the poetry subculture that no one can evaluate it, except perhaps the occasional critic. White's poetry needs to be seen against this background of analysis by Wilson and Epstein. If the rest of society has mostly forgotten about the value of poetry, an argument about the virtues of some dead Baha'i's poems may seem like an irrelevant concern for an archaic art form, or a debate in some seedy café about some obscure and tiresome social issue. That may be the perception, say, of a book like this on the part of your typical suburbanite in these opening years of this new millennium.

The poetry on the Internet deserves some attention because there is a growing subculture of poets there, thousands of them churning out their poetry: atomized, decentralized, interdisciplinary, computerized and anti-institutional, pluralistic, bohemian and middle class. There have never been so many people writing poetry, accessing it and spread out over dozens of websites as there is today. It is a veritable explosion. Perhaps White will come to be seen as one of the few great writers of our time who has helped to lead the way for that large body of secondary writers who, Eliot argues, are essential to the continuity of a literature but are not necessarily read by posterity. I do not know but, as a practising but non-professional futurologist, I think White has led the way with the great Gestalt that he made (that we all make) from himself and all that is not himself, a Gestalt given shape with what his natural reticence would allow.

How does one persuade justly sceptical readers, in terms they can understand and appreciate, that poetry still matters, White's or anybody else's? The difficulties of trying to engage an audience and of finding out what concerns the great mass of the public has become a major problem for the poet. The poet is marginal. He has been on the edge, largely irrelevant, for half a century, at least just about the

entire time White has been writing poetry. With the fragmentation of high culture, the arts are now isolated from each other and from the general audience, although there are evidences of an increasing cross-fertilization. This is especially true of poetry, even with poetry on the Internet. There is an audience there in their thousands, in the form of dozens of coteries, if you want to plug into them. The Net is so different from the traditional poetry reading. It is public and private all at once.

What will keep White and poets of his ilk from sitting in a remote periphery on an irrelevant appendage of society will be what the poet Marianne Moore said of the genuine poet. The genuine poet, she stated, is "a symbol of the power of Heaven". Such a poet "lodges a few poems where they will be hard to get rid of". Such a poet is part of the "felicitous phenomenon" that is literature. Their poetry will be brought to the public in new and fresh ways by people who take responsibility for bringing their art to the public, far beyond the stifling bureaucratic etiquette that enervates the public art of poetry today. The enjoyment of poetry can be a complex experience in which several forms of satisfaction are mingled, in different proportions for different readers. One way to keep poetry fresh is to memorize it; it gives you the feeling you have written it; it comes close to your psyche; it becomes like an old friend. There are special and critical insights that a poem that gives itself to memorization can yield. Possession-by-memory gives the reader the feeling that he or she wishes they had written the poem. The poem becomes a part of the reader. Readers come to acquire an intimate relationship with the poet. White's poems help us speak to ourselves more clearly and more fully and, as Bloom says, "to overhear that speaking"  He helps us find ourselves.

The White industry and the various critiques that arise from its several assembly lines and production plants are bound to be influenced by major trends and revolutions in intellectual and social thought. Already since 1960 there have been several trends which could influence the interpretation of what White has to say and why

he says it: psychoanalytic criticism, structuralism and post-structuralism, post-modernism, feminism, Marxist literary theory, post-colonial theory, cultural studies and the new historicism, among others. The influence of this efflorescence of literary theory on this evaluation of mine is largely peripheral. Perhaps this is because much of literary theory "seems to entail an indifference to, and even a hostility toward, 'literature'". Perhaps, too, the field of literary criticism and some of the interdisciplinary influences on it like those from anthropology, linguistics, sociology and psychology are simply too immense to adequately deal with in an introductory book of this nature on the poetry of Roger White.

Literary theory has to do with the way in which writers and readers interpret their world and the texts in it. No single mode of interpretation that literary critics draw on is satisfactory for my treatment of White. For the most part the world of literary theory is confined to academic cloisters with the general public either unable to engage in its specialized, its largely arcane and depressing language or uninterested in doing so. After forty years of what one writer calls the Age of Theory, literary theory does not appear to be delivering the hoped-for intellectual revolution; on the other hand it does not appear likely that this Age of Theory will float away. I see literary theory as a potentially constructive and integral part of literary criticism, although a great deal of it causes resistance from those in the very field it seeks to explore. It would take a separate essay to deal with the relevance of literary theory and related disciplines to White's poetry and its implications for this commentary.

Appreciation of poetry can be, and mostly is, quite independent of theory and criticism, but there are several features of the literary theory I draw on for my own personal literary architecture. First, mine is an individual synthesis, drawing as it does on many literary theorists. Daniel T. O'Hara says that literary theory and criticism are aimed at creating "the critical language in which men will speak for a thousand years" I like to think, although one can never know for sure, that my work will fit into this futuristic perspective. I call

the literary theory underpinning White's poetry and my analysis of it 'Baha'i literary theory and criticism'. It stands in contrast to Marxist literary theory and the other major literary theories with their associated disciplinary support systems that have arisen in the last half century, although it shares with them various specific features. It really requires, as I indicated above, a separate study and it is not my intention to deal with it fully here, but I will sketch its outline briefly because it seems to me that the future of the White industry will be involved in an elaboration of this theory in different directions.

It is teleological; it is based on a belief in progress through providential control of the historical process. It views human beings as essentially historically and socially determined in a complex interaction of genetics and environment. It sees man as a composite being whose nature is basically spiritual and capable of change. Primacy is given to 'becoming' over 'being', to relationships, to process, to diversity, to the relativity of truth as the basis for and essence of any unity and harmony in human life.

Baha'i literary theory possesses a vital and dynamic theoretical structure with a deep historical consciousness which assumes that all of reality is in a continuous state of flux. It is based, too, on an explicit and unequivocal dialectical method in which "a concept passes over into and is preserved and fulfilled by its opposite". Finally, the philosophical principle of unity, a "structure of mutual and reciprocal interdependence of diverse elements within a system", which transcends both simplicity and diversity, "implies the dynamic movement of history in the direction of increasing complexity and integration". These concepts are the domain where the ontological and normative principles at the base of the philosophy of history that this literary theory draws on or is based on are to be found. These are some of the coordinating principles behind my critical evaluation of White's poetry. As I indicated before, it is not my purpose here to explicate a detailed outline of Baha'i literary theory and some of the other literary theories behind which White's

work and my interpretation of it is based. The art of poetry is greater, I believe, than its interpreters; not even the greatest critics can pin down all its kinds of significance and value. In the end, all criticism is tentative, partial and oblique.

"A work of literature - a poem, for example," writes David Daiches, "is an immense complex of meaning which is nevertheless often simple and immediate in its impact, and it is impossible to account for its impact". Criticism and theory can help but, in the end, however useful and helpful they may be, there is a larger truth unexplored. As Baha'u'llah writes: "Myriads of mystic tongues find utterance in one speech, and myriads of hidden mysteries are revealed in a single melody; yet, alas, there is no ear to hear, nor heart to understand". Perhaps this is one of the meanings of this verse.

Beginning perhaps as far back as Columbus or Magellan sailing the ocean blue, the planetary nature of human civilization, its interdependence and interconnectedness, has been increasingly demonstrated. In the last century to century and a half this process, this planetization of humankind – or at least our awareness of it - has speeded up. This speeding-up process has taken place, has synchronised, at the same time as the emergence of a new world religion on this earth. The fundamental teaching of this new world religion, the Baha'i Faith, is that phenomenal reality is one: humankind is one, religion is one and God is one - the earth is indeed one country. White's poetry is part and parcel of the global orientation that is the Baha'i Faith. The teachings and history of the Baha'i Faith unquestionably inform the literary theory that lies at the base of this analysis of White.

The realization of humankind's oneness has become even more a part of human consciousness in the years since the 1950s when we began to venture into space and could literally see the spherical shape that is the earth. White's poetry comes at this time, as does the poetry of Robert Hayden and, if it were the intent of this book,

one could line up their poetry with significant developments in this increasing planetary consciousness. But that is not my intention here. Rather it is to note, as far as my own interpretive abilities permit, those elements of White's poetic and his alone that serve the cause, the development, of this political and religious unification in the years ahead within the context of the evolving Baha'i institutions, the nucleus and pattern of a world order currently expressed through the instrument of Baha'i administration. Part of the reason I focus on White to the exclusion of other poets and writers who have influenced this planetary consciousness is that White's poetry helped me understand my own life, my own experience. "Is there a better test of poetry?" wrote Ezra Pound in his tribute to Thomas Hardy's poetry. As I have already indicated, this study is an expression of my gratitude to White for the understanding, the power of understanding, his poetry has contributed to the life I have lived.

When White was writing his first poems, the first poems that were clearly influenced by the Baha'i teachings, a process had begun that Shoghi Effendi called 'the Kingdom of God on earth'. It had been initiated with the completion of the Baha'i House of Worship in Chicago in 1953 when the community numbered approximately two hundred thousand. The expectation of many of the Baha'is in the 1950s and 1960s was that this number would vastly increase in the years immediately ahead. Although the process of 'entry by troops' could be said to have begun as early as the 1950s and although the numbers did increase in the next forty years to several million, it is obvious in retrospect that expectations for many were too high. For some, disappointment was inevitable, so tied were hopes to a vast increase in numbers.

The poetry of White reminds me of the Aeschylan drama which emerged in the years immediately after the birth of Greek democracy in 462 BC. The drama of Aeschylus, particularly the Orestia (458 BC), deals with a new understanding of personality, of law, of society, of political institutions, of a transition from chaos to order.

"Athena has to instruct them with a new song". White's poetry emerged in the years immediately after the birth of the democratic theocracy that is the Baha'i Faith in its fully institutionalized charisma in 1963. His poem The Artefact is one which, since I cannot write five or six pages about its theme, I will simply say it is full of the deepest, most touching and profound wisdom vis-à-vis this newly emerging democratic theocracy. I will try to convey something of White's sensitive, poignant and perceptive understanding by quoting a few lines and commenting. He refers to the many years of revelation and authoritative interpretation, 1844 to 1963, in what is for me a deeply moving metaphor:

*Long she lay there and we grew accustomed*
*to the crystal concentrate of beauty*
*as the eye to any artefact, placed, marvelled at, forgotten …*

*He continues, noting that -*

*……..some stopped to amaze*

*And those that did were -*

*grateful that grace be so contained*
*as to pose no threat.*

Certainly this was the case in the first two decades after the election of the Universal House of Justice. Even now, some four decades after that first election, the beginning of the democratic theocracy that is the Baha'i Faith, there is a grace associated with this global institu-

tion. The "exquisite power" also associated with these new, embryonic institutions, and the "intolerable beauty" which may one day "disregulate the city's ordered ways" White describes in oh so gentle, oh so touching metaphor.

*"Many," White writes in the second stanza -*

*……."did not see*
*beneath the glacial shield the girl's mild bosom*
*swell with breath, or tears well in her eyes.*
*None asked what exquisite power she might wield.*

I do not think I can capture in prose what White has hinted at in strangely allusive, strongly indirect, poetic metaphor. The poem is an immortal masterpiece. If I murmur something about its possible meaning, history will inevitably smile at my effort to convey its significance and lay me in the corner beside those cultivated people from Oxford and Cambridge who thought Shakespeare a Hollywood scenario-writer. I sense, as I try to interpret White, that these are the earliest days of the imputation of meaning to his poems. The White industry will yield much more sophistication and depth in the years ahead than my simple efforts can offer.

As the voices of the sixties, and what the Universal House of Justice called the dark heart of the age of transition, became more shrill and the noises of society got louder, White offered many cautionary remarks:

*Let us not stroke too swiftly toward*
*the green opposite shore*

*where death rehearses. We have tried*
*these pearl-promising waves*
*before and might guess the danger.*

These "pearl-promising waves" were, it could be argued, the unrealistic hopes of many in the Baha'i community in the ninth (1953-1963) and early years of the tenth (1963 to, say, 1979) stages of history. White wrote this poem, arguably, about 1980. An aggressive or even an enthusiastic proselytism alienates people and the Baha'is, for the most part, have avoided such an overt approach to increasing the size of their community, in spite of the fact that growth in the West has remained, in most places, discouragingly meagre. The complex exercise of achieving intimacy and harmony in their relationships, their marriages and in their small groups, in their private and personal worlds, often resulted in frustration and failure, often as much for members of their communities as for the secular society they were part of.

White describes this process metaphorically in the same poem, The Other Shore, in imagery that is graphic, tender and so apt:

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

Of course not every Baha'i is going to agree with my particular interpretation of this poem or the general tenor of my remarks,

such is the nature, the fruit, of individual interpretation. In reading Roger White's poems we all must deal with metaphor in our own way, for it is a device in which we all must fill in the meaning if we are to unlock the significance of the passage. To miss the metaphorical significance is to miss the meaning. Metaphor is a safeguard against literalism and dogmatism. It helps explain the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, the abstract in terms of the concrete and, in this case, the progress of the cause and our own dear lives in terms of swimming, waves and the beach. If readers of this essay do not find my interpretation of the metaphor helpful, they can and should find their own personal meaning. This is part of the challenge of White. His poetic presence now is continuous and inescapable. His poetry, having become part of the landscape of Baha'i experience in the third and fourth epochs, will breathe new life into many epochs to come. White will be with us for some time to come.

Goethe said there were two classes of great poets. The first, containing Shakespeare and Homer, were universal in their outreach and did not bring their own individuality, their own selves, into their poetry. The second category constantly exposed some trace of individuality, some of the spirit of the poet, some of his character. Perhaps White is here too. There is no question, for me, that White belongs primarily to the former category. I give you here in this book my White. It is your task to find yours.

White appeals to us in that same poem, The Other Shore, not to be too hasty, to get our perspectives, our settings on social reality as accurate as we can, to pursue a 'moderate freedom' and, in our eagerness and innocence, our enthusiasms and excitements, not to expect too much too soon:

*we, young, too soon said*
*Land! Land! and, plunging, did not see*

*his torn pinion, his bloodied head.*

*Ease us, wise love, toward this wet danger.*

Our convictions, our zeal, our desire to get things right, indeed our very sense of wonder is but a starting point. White emphasizes that -

*It is not enough to marvel: the sea asks more.*

*It does not casually strew enticing shells*

*.....*

*There is calculation in its murmur,*

*frothed treachery laps its shore.*

So many millions are not yet going to respond to our teaching efforts or, as White puts it in the same poem in a fascinating turn of phrase -

*.....the dead -*

*who did not heed the hoarse and reeling gulls -*

*know that in our darkest incoherence*

*the ocean spoke …*

So much of our effort seems to be an experience of the "darkest incoherence". But in that incoherence the ocean does speak, through our humble efforts and in the context of the greatest metaphorical exercise on the planet, the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. Some, a few, do respond. In time millions, nay billions, will come under the shelter of this protecting wing. White concludes his

poem with several lines about the few among humanity's billions who became enthusiastic believers in the decades he was able to observe the teaching campaigns: 1950-1990. He writes, in lines that are among my favourites in the entire White oeuvre:

Let the dreaming, lovely drowned
who loll and bob in bubbled wonder
tell us why, returning,
weeping without sound,
we stand, wistful and incredulous,
along the shore.

Among the hundreds of thousands, nay millions, who come across this new Faith, and who have joined it in the last several decades, so many "stand wistful, incredulous along the shore" while it is the few who "loll and bob in bubbled wonder".

In another poem this same understanding of what often appears as the slowness of the process, the need for a cautious, quiet attitude prevails as White encourages us, points us, toward wisdom. The poem For the Children, Watching closes with the following seven lines:

*It were wiser to stand in Magian silence,*
*reverent before the admonishing blackness,*
*and read in its long dark reign*
*the gathering of an astounding dawn.*
*Let us watch the sky, children,*

*incautious with hope,*

*jubilant with wisdom.*

Here jubilation is associated with hope and wisdom, not with an evangelising religiosity, a narrow ecclesiasticism, festive activities of various kinds or some media event with its necessary hype and often genuine enthusiasm. Wisdom and jubilation, conjoined by White here, are critical to his vision of the years ahead and the times we live in at this turn of the millennium, this "gathering of an astounding dawn". White is writing about that "solemn consciousness" that the Universal House of Justice said must be evoked as "the wellspring of the most exquisite celebratory joy". For celebration "does not mean merely festive activities". It is primarily a spiritual celebration ... occasion(s) for deep reflection". White comes at this subject in an indirect way through his poetry. But the point is clear. The fact that White expresses the question, the problem, the issue, metaphorically forces his readers to think, to work out the meaning for themselves. White provides no quick fix.

As "the plague" spreads "invisibly", as we "lean innocently to scoop our marbles" perhaps we need to be more "reverent before the admonishing blackness". Perhaps we need to base our jubilation in wisdom and hope's private optimism that is, for society, a public resource and, as Lionel Tiger defined it, "a heightened form of gregariousness", a gregariousness that for White often requires that we "stand in Magian silence".

White deals with this whole question of the spiritual journey and the progress of the Cause in poem after poem. It seems to me one can often learn more about the Bahá'i Faith in so many of White's poems than in many a learned commentary. I will cite one more example here, part of the poem The Journey. White begins by placing the believers in the role of children and he writes:

*And they will warn you, children, as they stand*

*In wan ardour at the dense thicket's rim*

*That your pitch venture is folly …*

I think most of the people I have known in my life would regard the exercise I have embarked on as a Baha'i as "folly", as an unrealistic utopianism. But as Teillard de Chardin once wrote, speaking of realism, it is the utopians "who make scientific sense". White continues by saying that others, and sometimes we ourselves, see what we are doing as:

*Dangerous progress over untracked land*

*Ambushed with bogs in which illusions mire,*

*Keen fang and talon glint from every tree*

*And murky bats career and lean wolves prey.*

Certainly the Baha'i pioneer - and we are all pioneers in different ways - experiences this as the long decades become his journey. "Reason is soon victim and then desire", and White goes on succinctly summarizing two of the tests that many believers experience. I will leave the rest of this poem to the reader to play with intellectually. The poem is nothing less than brilliant, from my point of view. For, indeed, the journey is long and "murky bats career and lean wolves prey". As Shakespeare left behind over the decades and centuries many hundreds, nay, thousands of interpretations, so too will the poems of Roger White bestrew the minds of believers with many, many views. What White will be the one you find? Here is more of mine from that poem The Journey:

*Who counsel flight from Love's far lair are wise*
*But O! not they shall see the Lover's eyes.*

*So ... reward there is, but there is a price and "many perish".*

White knows, then, that jubilation is not an ever present emotion. Indeed, often -

*Sparse nourishment the slow years give.*

Hope beyond this life, a perspective of transcendence, is important to White, to the survival ethic and the process and program of building the new world order. While we are all trying to build a society worth living in we must remember that this "sparse nourishment" is a sign that -

*Tells timeless feast hereafter.*

This transcendentalism, this strong conviction regarding the immortality of the soul, is accompanied in White by the ordinary, the everyday and he would urge us to be -

*glad of the predictable wonder*
*of our ordinary lives,*
*unscripted and flawed and plausible.*

He would urge us too, as he does in the last line of that same poem, to appreciate as fully as we can -

*the incalculably priceless booty of our human joy.*

But not to allow our joy and our knowledge to give us -

*A taint of preening calculation(which)*
*makes of our knowledge knowingness, (and)*
*carries us too soon from innocence*
*and exaltation*

because he knows that we so often:

*.....give offence*
*with our borrowed and embellished*
*choreography of reverence ...*
*.....*
*We, deft practitioners*
*of protocols of piety*
*are stranded on uncertainty*
*.....*
*joylessly*
*and empty-handed. .*

It is important to keep in mind, when reading a poem, White's or anyone else's, that "the recipient must abdicate for the moment - must surrender his independent and outstanding personality, to identify himself with the form presented by the poet". Only in this

way can the reader penetrate to the heart of the mystery that is the poem.

Only then can White's attempts to reconcile, rather than resolve, the contradictions of life have any tangible results in the readers' minds and hearts.

Those who have served in the Baha'i community in the years from the 1950s to the 1990s, the period during which White produced his poetry, have watched the unobtrusively developing system of Baha'u'llah spread over the face of the earth and, more recently, embellish its world spiritual and administrative centre with an arc of great beauty on Mount Carmel. The emphasis, for the most part, has been on establishing small groups at the local level and spreading the teachings as widely as possible. Such an exercise has militated against the emergence of large concentrations of Baha'is in any one place. In the fifteen years in which White's poetic output has been most extensive, 1977 to 1992, the Baha'i community continued its rise from the shadows of an obscurity in which it had been enveloped for over a century.

"The process whereby its unsuspected benefits were to be manifested to the eyes of men," Shoghi Effendi once wrote in analysing the growth of the Cause, "was slow, painfully slow, and was characterized .... by a number of crises which at times threatened to arrest its unfoldment and blast all the hopes which its progress had engendered." White expressed this same theme in several ways. In Notes on Erosion he wrote:

*Neglect will foster, and dismay*
*but fertilize its thrusting growth.*

*Indeed, the potential of the Bahá'i Faith is immense; it -*

*thrives in the desert*
*where the resolute verbena*
*unarrestably insinuates itself*
*through the socket of despair's bleached skull.*

However difficult the circumstances, the growing influence of the Baha'i community and its astonishingly creative Founder will -

*astonish Death*
*with (its) fierce festoons,*
*with (its) green and wily succulence.*

Down the road we are all about to travel we will find, as White emphasizes in a poem which likens our experience to Noah on the arc -

*the lean provision of devotion, of nefarious mutiny,*
*the wild and mounting waters, the weeks and*
*months of never-ending dark. A deluge, folks,*
*is not a lark.*

White knew quite well that there "is a tide both in public and private affairs, which awaits both men and nations', as Shakespeare wrote, which is not some cataclysmic overnight event but rather some process which we are in the midst of and it may well take some time before the tide has reached its high-water mark, if it has not already done so.

White is, as Geoffrey Nash once described him in a pithy phrase, a deceptively insinuating quotient. White has us laughing and with our guard down he tells us we are heading for hell on earth. He does it with what might be called "an etiquette of expression worthy of the approaching maturity of the human race", as the Universal House of Justice described, in its discussion of the characteristics of a judicious exercise of speech. As the decades in the last half of the twentieth century slipped by the social and political landscape did get hotter or at least continued the high temperatures already experienced since World War 1. The tempest the Guardian had described so vividly back in 1941 clearly continued into the twenty-first century. As the Universal House of Justice had informed us back in 1967, we had entered "the dark heart of this age of transition" and it was getting darker with the century's end. White's interpretive schema was not wide of the mark.

Even the affluent minority of the planet were finding their hedonistic materialism paradigm and its success orientation as a recipe for happiness was breaking down, first in the 1920s, as F. Scott Fitzgerald showed us in his classic novel The Great Gatsby, then in the sixties when most of the hippies who came from affluent homes rejected affluence as a raison d'etre for living and yet again in recent decades as the world seems to be swept daily into a deeper maelstrom.

White gently describes the struggle we have ahead. He does it with an honesty, a subtlety and a tongue-in-cheek humour - at least, that's how I read him. In one of his many, what I call, 'arc poems', with a timing that is perfect for the last generation of antediluvians that we may be, we who have placed a heavy investment in beauty and given the vision at the centre of this Faith a physical apotheosis, White puts phrase after phrase in the mouth of someone who, so the story goes, built an instrument for saving humanity and life on earth from total extinction – Noah:

*Noah will say this journey is definitely not*
*for the timid and the overwrought;*
*not for the vainly pious,*
*the pusillanimous of spirit,*
*the bloodless prig.*

*Now that the ark is built:*

*.....This much is plain:*
*not for those wary and in despair of love,*
*this ardent voyage on the unvariable storm-lashed brig,*
*the unreasonable rain,*
*the long wait for the salient dove*
*to bring the living twig.*

The darkest hours before the dawn have indeed arrived, as White prognosticated in his metaphorical poetics, written for the most part in the third and forth epochs of the formative age of the Bahá'i Faith, with his gentle humour and his often simple and sweet language brimming over with light. But there was in his idiom a solemn consciousness, a poetic experience that allowed him, like the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, to tap into "a dark river flowing inside him to which he could lower the bucket daily". For poetry is not so much a criticism of life, as T.S. Eliot once wrote, as it is "a look at life from the abyss, the bottom. Few can do so for long. They don't know where the depths are or they don't know quite what to say: or they are afraid". But White knew, at least he had the centring wisdom of over a century of infallible guidance and the interpretations of history, society and the future in the endless letters and messages

from thirty years of a fully institutionalized and unquestionably legitimate charisma in the Universal House of Justice. He had the example of thirty-six years of writing from someone whose masterly grasp of the rich vocabulary and subtle nuances of English supported a power of unerring perception.

And so White looked deep into the heart of the Revelation and at more than a century of experience of the religion that was born from it by the time he had become a Baha'i in 1947. He gave us what he saw and what he thought but, in the end, we are only getting one man's views. They are not the expression of an authoritative exegesis; there is nothing infallible about his narrative style; however insightful his power of definition and however meticulous his attention to the meaning of words, all we can enjoy is the fruit of individual interpretation as it heightens our horizons and intensifies our vision. They may satisfy and transcend the need of the moment and serve for the future as well as the present; they may become part of a grand design, carved as they are in the abiding stone of language but, in the last analysis, readers of White are caught up in an individual "creativity, characterized by an intensity of awareness and a heightened consciousness". White is attempting what Plato wrote about "discovering truth by reminiscence". He is moulding and remoulding his world through his consciousness. He is not seeking authority; he is seeking meaning within a structure of willing and wishing, a structure that he has been a part of for over forty years, a structure that is the structure of freedom for this age. In the process he gives us, at least some of us, what Wordsworth once gave his readers:

*....that which moves with light and life informed,*

*Actual, divine, true.*

.....

*In presence of sublime and lovely forms.*

*With the adverse principles of pain and joy….*

*By love,…*

*…….....all grandeur comes,*

*All truth and beauty, from pervading love;*

*That gone, we are as dust.*

White is pointing his readers toward joy, toward wisdom, to many things. Among the many points on the horizon he urges us toward is a cautious conservatism, a moderation. Shoghi Effendi had, years before, pointed us toward a moderation in his summary of the reasons for the failure of the Babi community nearly a century before. Shoghi Effendi writes in the epilogue to The Dawnbreakers that the moderation the Bab "had exhorted (his followers) to observe was forgotten in the first flush of enthusiasm that seized the early missionaries of His Faith, which behaviour was in no small measure responsible for the failure of the hopes He had so fondly cherished".

For White the focus is on the inner life - "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 Baha'u'llah". The success of our teaching plans, White would argue, rests on this inner life far beyond any set of new and noble principles, any staunchness of faith, any exaltation of enthusiasm, any force of numbers. White expresses this idea of Shoghi Effendi in a multitude of ways. In Emily's Song he writes:

*Had heaven held sure solace*

*To hasten there were wise*

*But I, grown timid, cautious,*

*Search for ambush, man's and sky's.*

*One day I'll meet fate's boldest stare*

*And ask its harsh command*

*My apron full of gentian and*

*Lone daisy in my hand.*

It was White's view that few rise to great heights of service and achievement on the spiritual path. Unlike servants of the calibre of Martha Root -

*.....We, mincing few*

*Tenants of a grey plain, whose nervous eye*

*Is peeled for tinselled honour will not trace,*

*Gasping, your pell-mell plunge from pride to grace.*

Those few who take the plunge enjoy a spiritual banquet but, for the many -

*The sour brew, the perishable flower*

*From which the mind weaves garlands, the vain meat*

*Of will that does not nourish.....*

White concludes this apparently pessimistic or, as the voice of experience might call it, realistic poem with a plea for help from heaven's great souls -

*.....From your pantheon*

*Unseat us from our thin feast to speed the dawn.*

Baha'u'llah's vision of the 'Most Great Peace' evoked no response from the rulers of the nineteenth century or, indeed, from the vast majority of people who came in touch with it in His lifetime. This is not to say there was no response, for when Baha'u'llah passed away in 1892 He had, it is estimated, some 50,000 followers. The Faith He founded passed through its first century with its unity firmly intact. That was, arguably, this new Faith's greatest achievement. A global community has taken form inspired by and possessing a certitude that the human race can eventually work together as one people. But the Baha'is know - and White puts it so well – that -

*Love offers first the suppliant at its gate*

*faith's bricks and planks and rusted nails that wound.*

*To fragile shelter built of love's spare plan,*

*gold-laden, comes royal lover's caravan.*

There is always a golden seam of joy, of hope, and sometimes of sheer ecstasy in the rag-and-bone shop that is daily life in White's land, or 'Whiteland' as some might call the spiritual and intellectual landscape he has created in his poetry. But White would have us head into the future with our eyes wide open and conscious that as we -

*.....ride the journey out*

*And count truth's ribs, bemused that faith*

*So multiplies (our) doubt.*

White has seen - and he hopes we too see – that, within the religious and non-religious circles we move in, our -

*.....preening calculation*
*makes of our knowledge knowingness,*
*carries us too soon from innocence*
*and exaltation. Do we give offence*
*with our borrowed and embellished*
*choreography of reverence?*

White selects many special themes and topics for our edification: marriage, martyrs, faith, inter alia. Perhaps in some future volume I may write several essays around some of his selected themes, if others do not do so before me. In the meantime we are warned by White that there are -

*.....a thousand ways*
*To fit distraction to our fleeting days …*

that there are "few whose passion wins the sought caress", that "Though privately there swarmed/Martyrs in our dreams, publicly we warmed/To tenets socially approved, and fled rebirth". In the end, though, ours is not the role to judge but rather to accept, to be easily pleased with others in the community. If we do not, the troops that come slowly into our community in the next few decades may find that we have developed too critical a faculty with our intellects and use our knowledge to judge and not understand. For knowledge needs to be about love as well as understanding.

Some of White's aphorisms and poetic injunctions may be useful, if they are familiar, if they are ingrained on our emotional equipment.

White was only too aware that his poetry was not for everyone, although some of it comes as close as one could possibly expect of poetry in a culture heavily dosed on the products of mass media and its entertainments. Although there are more people reading poetry and buying books of poetry in these early years of the twenty-first century, there are millions who never get near a book of poetry and probably never will. One poetry critic recently argued the case for advertising and sociology being the new forms of poetry, the former for the mass and the latter for an elite. This kind of argument alters the whole paradigm for poetry. Either way, White will not make it into any mass market, not yet anyway.

I have met many Baha'is who just could not get onto White's wavelength. They are not able to get the tuning-fork of their minds onto White's pitch. I am not sure how much one can will that tuning, but when the frequencies do meet the effect is uniquely White's. I always find it slightly sad when I come across others in the Baha'i culture I am a part of, and of which White was a major linguistic recorder only recently, who cannot read him. This is often due to the densely woven web of his text in many of his poems. But he is nowhere near as dense and impermeable as John Ashbery who, like White, raided the spoken language of his culture. White, unlike Ashbery, is not suspicious of thought and does not leave most of his readers unable to make out what he is talking about.

I find White's place in the poetic tradition of the West is not unlike Ashbery's. I am speaking here in the broadest of senses because Ashbery has attained a popularity that White has never achieved among the poetry cognoscenti. They are both what you might call ruminative poets like Wallace Stevens and T.S. Eliot going all the way back to Walt Whitman and Emerson. All these poets tend to turn a few subjects over and over; they all tend to aloneness and to the world of self as "solitary singers". Our world

now is a post-White landscape, a post-Ashbery landscape. Like Ashbery criticism which defines the meaning and status of what it is to be 'American', White criticism defines the meaning and status of what it means to be a Baha'i. For both White and Ashbery their central concern, among others, was the self-world relationship. This comparison is, for me, useful since Ashbery and White were contemporaries, in the last half of the twentieth century and, despite their differences or perhaps because of them, my view of White is sharpened.

Before I close I would like to draw to your attention two simple stanzas selected from one of many possible poems, in this case 'in homage to Emily Dickinson'. They are symptomatic of the aphoristic nature of much of White's verse. For poetry, far more effectively than any other art form, conveys the immediacy of thought. And White is pithy, often with memorable lines - an effective communicator, to use modern parlance.

*I struggled with temptation,*
*Denial was the cost.*
*Finally I conquered*
*Though heavy was my loss*

*Across his soul's scarred battlefield*
*Where all his pride was slain*
*The legions of his enemy*
*Prepare to strike again.*

One of the factors that I think gives White a contribution to play in the future is the sheer number of very fine poems that he has brought to this and succeeding generations. His reputation does not

rest – as, say, in the case of Eliot - on a few outstanding poems which, with some persistence, can be read in an evening. Rather, the sheer number of individual poems he gives us will guarantee readers the experience of finding a poem they did not know was there in his collected works. Like, say, the works of Hardy, Yeats or Stevens who offer more individually appealing lyrics than our minds can take in, it is difficult to know all of White's poems. He turned out a great deal of material in his last fifteen years in slim and not-so-slim volumes.

On the other hand, it is fatally easy to decide that one 'knows' the few poems that one does, has heard them before and cannot be surprised again. No matter how much White you know or, in some cases, have even committed to memory - some of your favourite pieces - there will always be a poem there on the next page that you know only slightly and delight to read again as if for the first time.

White would have made a good poet laureate, an office that took on its modern form in 1843 when William Wordsworth was appointed, although the office itself went back to 1668. It was an office in England that was reserved for the greatest poet of the day as a mark of public recognition of that poet's pre-eminence. It was the highest office that a professional poet could aspire to. Indeed, if a poet had achieved distinction, it was reasonable for contemporary commentators to speak of him as 'laureated', even if he had not been formally granted a public laureateship with its accompanying stipend. In 1843 there were "no specific obligations laid upon the holder", although that is certainly not the case today. White was often called, therefore, the 'unofficial poet laureate' of the Baha'i community, an apt term given the long and variegated history of poet laureates for some four centuries and the great distinction that White achieved in his poetry in the last two decades of his life.

White liked the poetry of T.S. Eliot. Part of White's enjoyment of Eliot was an affinity for both his life and his work, although I would have to engage with the White archives if I wanted to substantiate

that claim. Lyndall Gordon wrote of Eliot's adult life that it could "be seen as a series of adventures from the citadel of his self in search of some great defining experience". Perhaps for Eliot this defining experience was a commitment to the Anglican form of Christianity. White found his 'defining experience' in a new emerging religion in his late teens and he spent his life defining, studying and understanding it as deeply as he could. Like Eliot, White often shuddered from his contact with the world and withdrew to his citadel "where he could labour to record, as precisely as possible, his strange encounters". I am not sure White would have liked the word "shuddered". but my own study of his poetry suggests, like our own dear selves, he had enough of such moments to help give his poetry the depth it attained.

Of course in some ways, important and basic ways, it is difficult to know how White will be considered in the future because it is difficult to know where we are at in history. Matthew Arnold thinks that the century ending in 430 BC was the time when poetry made "the noblest, most successful effort she has ever made". Toynbee, perhaps the twentieth century's greatest megahistorian, saw 431 BC as the beginning of the decline of Graeco-Roman civilization, the long decline of some thousand years. Inevitably, this is all arguable. But Toynbee liked to think of himself as much a minor poet as a historian; he liked to see the historical process as one divinely inspired current, an expression of unity in the love of God.

There has been a theme, pursued for many a long year in the Writings of the Baha'i Faith and its interpreters in the twentieth century, that we are witnessing the dark heart of an age. Mixed with this view is the belief we are in the springtime of a new age, a cultural and intellectual quickening the like of which has never been seen. One could certainly interpret that century 530 to 430 BC as one which witnessed a similar quickening, a similar birth. The fifth century BC has been viewed as the birthplace, the birth time of our western civilization. There is no doubt that these years were a climacteric of history.

It is not my intention here to examine this complex and fascinating historical and poetic hypothesis, to compare and contrast climacterics. But it may be that down the track of time historians of the future may look back on this period of history as a period that witnessed the birth-pangs of a new civilization. And in our time White, in the last decades of the twentieth century, was there with his new poetic, a poetic that was highly accessible to the embryonic new religion he had joined in the first years of its second century. In that slough of despond which was part of this birth process, something new was being born across the face of the earth and one of its critical harbingers was the poet Roger White. Like Fugita who made 'Abdu'l-Baha laugh, White made the Baha'is laugh and while they were laughing, while he was making them glad, he slipped in some of the finest poetry of our age. Like the religion he espoused which was becoming for an embryonic global civilization "a source of joy so abundant" that it was to run all "over upon the material world" and transfigure it, White's essential note, among so many of his essential notes, was joy.

And finally, with respect to White's poetry, I can only repeat the words of Ezra Pound in relation to T.S. Eliot, with that same sense of urgency that Pound voiced at the beginning of Eliot's poetic output: READ HIM. For White is a poet of the future and that future is now. His poetry begins in a new myth and ends in that myth and, if White's poetry survives into the future, it will be because of that myth and its powerful metaphor embedded in history. White was just one light in a long tradition of poetic lights shining upon this history and radiating new meanings to his contemporaries. He was a voluminous poet, an inventor on a large scale, especially during the last two decades of his life. His was a marvellous poetic gift and had he lived into old age I am confident he would have gone on concocting poem after poem. But what he did produce, I am confident too, will be enough to last into the future.

Such a book as this is not relatively but absolutely inadequate to a body of poetry as great as White's, both in quality and quantity. It

can be, at best, as Randall Jarrell said of his study of Robert Frost's poetry, "only a kind of breathless signboard". But if, as Matthew Arnold once wrote, humankind discovers that more and more it has to "turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us",then what I have written here may find a useful place in the burgeoning literature of this endangered species.