

## Reviews/Critiques/Reseñas

### NOTES POSTMARKED THE MOUNTAIN OF GOD IN *CRYSTALLIZATIONS: 20 WORKS BY BAHÁ'Í ARTISTS*

**Author:** Roger White (1929–1993)

**Published by:** Bahá'í Studies Publications, Ottawa, 1996

With remarkable prescience, Roger White decided to publish two additional books of his recent poems only a few weeks prior to being informed by his doctor that the cancer which had taken its toll on his lungs was spreading and could not be contained. Thus, because of such foresight, we now have "Notes Postmarked the Mountain of God," and "The Language of There."<sup>1</sup>

I have chosen to write about the former poem because I believe it to be one of the outstanding achievements by this beloved and cherished poet. "Notes Postmarked the Mountain of God" is a long poem describing a pilgrimage to the Bahá'í holy sites in Israel, told through a series of each day's experiences from the moment of arrival to the day of departure. Of course, it is much more than that. It also represents that intangible sum of the poet's years of service at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, and therefore it captures more deeply not just one person's pilgrimage (confined as they usually are to nine crowded days) but also years of serious contemplation and meticulous observation.

It is, as well, a more personal interpretation of the poet's inner feelings as he struggles to come to terms with placing his Faith before everything else he encounters. It depicts a continuing battle of the wills, in which we, too, are daily called upon to be aware of and to acknowledge the many ways we unconsciously resist. His contention becomes our own. This quest for the inner spirit to manifest itself is one that we should all be able to relate to, but White in my opinion does it more effectively than any other contemporary poet.

Woven carefully and purposefully into this loom, yet not distracting or hindering its essential layout, is the incorporation of earlier poems. Though written and published in previous volumes, they fit so gracefully into the fabric that they add an extra dimension to its color and design. Notable among these are "The Trouble with Mountains" (101) and "A Metropolis of Owls" (109).

After each reading, I cannot help being carried back to my own pilgrimage and to the talks with Roger in Haifa and above the Sea of Galilee. The poem also brings memories flooding back of those early pre-Bahá'í days when we would meet on a summer Sunday afternoon under the elms on Centre Island in Toronto and read to each other our latest poems. Roger's efforts, even then, usually carried a fine sense of compartment, though he and I often broke into hysterical laughter at some of the nonsense we had written.

It did not seem to bother us that there were no outlets for our poetry and that the only publisher in Canada handling poetry in those days was Ryerson Press,

1. These were in limited editions and few copies available, so the Association for Bahá'í Studies holds the distinction of being the first to reproduce this most valuable work.

and then only if you were a prominent writer might you be accepted by that august establishment. Perhaps it was just as well that this did not trouble our young minds, for, like today, there were so few people who read poetry. Although it might be that some may turn to poetry as a form of consolation when their religious beliefs have failed them, Bahá'ís, however, should have more valid reasons. Is not *The Hidden Words* by Bahá'u'lláh literally an expression of sheer poetical beauty that contains all the necessary ingredients for uplifting the spirit?

It is my belief that in a world civilization we will celebrate and honor our poets, rekindling what was once considered a high art, for poetry has been with us through the centuries, even before the ancient bards sang their chants and the primitive scribes wrote them down so that they could be performed and embellished in the markets and village squares of the day. White's "Notes" are presented somewhat in this manner, a song of the soul to the places in the heart with which we have perhaps acquainted ourselves but have devoted so little time to comprehending. Such places carry an air of mystery and guilt; of hesitant encounters where one is reluctant to present one's self before such historical treasures because one feels unworthy; of the continual striving for that condition of unconscious obedience, which in every age is such a rare quality. The results are often so poignant, so painful and joyful, that one is brought back to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's remarks regarding pilgrimage, quoted in the epigraph to this poem:

Among those who visit[ed] . . . [some] were recalled to life. . . . But others, in truth, have simply passed through; they have only taken a tour. (93)

At the Shrine of the Báb, the mind takes in such unique details, that the pilgrim

longs to have his own heart break  
 . . . that he might rush forward,  
 ashes dribbling from his cupped hands . . . (96)

until finally

he slowly takes his leave  
 wondering what he may have left on the threshold  
 where the petals gave their lives. (96)

Perhaps this should be suggested reading for anyone about to make their first pilgrimage, it invokes such wonder—

barely able to withstand the beauty,  
 the acuity of vision, the intensive joy. (102)

and entering the splendor of Bahjí to Bahá'u'lláh's Tomb, he questions:

... What will be asked of him here? (114)

and:

Had he expected lightning to cleave him,  
choirs of angels to strike up ethereal hymns? (114)

So, the poet-pilgrim outside the Master's Shrine takes pen in hand to write:

Here, we are beyond the known and possible. (118)

until later, adjusting to a more temporal vein—

Can anything survive the unquenchable sun? (118)

contemplating with amusing wit—

Small wonder the Prophets were placed in this oven (119)

His poem holds a wealth of material, and most lines command such attention that it leaves one in a state of hesitation or suspense—

Entry gained, the pilgrim knows  
this is the breeding place of questions,  
this ideal model of the heart's own chambers,  
this humbling vault where,  
head on carpeted threshold,  
the suppliant hears whispered in his veins  
*Accept! Accept!* (127-28)

The final poem "Souvenir" relates to the pilgrim's departure from the holy land, where like John Donne's hound of heaven, the eternal question lingers—

Must I accept, he wonders, that my life is  
the sum of my questions, my answers?  
That I must make a higher will my own? (128)

This poem may easily be the author's reflection of his own farewell from the World Centre due to illness, his

expulsion from all he knows of Eden. (130)

back to that other world that awaits him. In the

world of contention and crises and clocks.

Already, deadlines tug at his sleeve  
and schedules jostle one another  
clamoring for his attention. (129)

How appreciative we should be of this artist who holds such a fine command of the English language, who embroiders his poems with such a delicate tapestry of ideas, that we are surprisingly overcome time and again by his understanding of the human condition. Fortunately for the future, his phrases will remain with us. He has given us this precious legacy, attempting to help us become more aware of our own spiritual failings, where no subject is entirely unsuitable—

He recognizes even the furniture as that of home. (95)

The pattern in the carpet provides  
occupation to his insatiable eyes (96)

All that one relinquishes of the past is not so  
consciously shed . . . (100)

or picturing—

'Akká as an aging courtesan . . . (100)

White so often illustrates to the reader that no matter how unusual our choices and sometimes concealed resentments may be, there is always a constant reminder in the prayers and writings of Bahá'u'lláh towards surrendering one's will to God, and his verses carry that distinction where the unveiling of truths must be practiced if we are to be true to ourselves.

These souvenirs Roger White has continued to enunciate, and he leaves it to readers to comprehend and apply what is essential for their own lives.

Bahá'u'lláh wrote:

I unfold the drooping wings of every broken bird and start it on its flight. (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 169)

and "Notes Postmarked the Mountain of God" gradually unfolds its pages to those quintessential lines:

*One unalterable answer:*  
*Accept! Accept!* (130)