Commentaries/Commentaries/Comentarios

AUTHOR'S RESPONSE TO COMMENTARIES ON "THE PURPOSE OF POETRY"

Commentators: David L. Erickson/Jack McLean

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I have read the criticisms of my article "The Purpose of Poetry" with attention and am glad to take the opportunity to respond. Some of the criticisms require acknowledgment, for they are accurate. Others are based on a revealing misreading of my paper and require careful analysis.

As a young poet I reached the point, at the age of nineteen, when I wished to relate my writing, which was mostly lyric poetry on the theme of nature, to my Bahá'í belief. Not being able to find any discussion of this subject in the Bahá'í journals and publications of the time, I decided to write an essay myself and did so a year later. Now, ten years later, this original, personal credo has been published. Due to the passage of time I am now aware of flaws in the piece that I did not see then. The paper was an attempt to make sense of the role of the poet within the Bahá'í community for myself. In spite of its faults, it has the clarity and conviction that a first statement of belief can contain, and I do not retreat from the principles it sets out.

Jack McLean comments on my rather disapproving attitude towards the poetry and art of the Old World Order. I think this is a reasonable criticism and feel that his reading list provides a helpful balance.

He suggests, however, that I believe there should be a radical disjunctive break between the poetry of non-Bahá'ís and the new poetry of Bahá'ís. After rereading my essay, I can see that such an interpretation is possible, but I wish to make it clear that this is neither what I said nor what I meant.

To some extent I would agree with McLean that there is an integrative thread binding together all great literature. However, I feel that if McLean is putting forward a picture of literature as a continuous and developing strand running unchanged through the upheavals and revolutions of religious history, then he may have his priorities reversed. It would be more accurate to describe religion as being continuous and developing, growing uninterrupted through the changing fads and fashions of human culture. We should, after all, bear in mind the Bahá'í concept of religion as the source of renewal and rejuvenation in this material world. As Bahá'u'lláh tells us:

. . . We have, at the bidding of the omnipotent Ordainer, breathed a new life into every human frame, and instilled into every word a fresh potency. All created things proclaim the evidences of this world-wide regeneration.

To clarify, I feel it may be necessary to point out that renewal does not mean the abandonment of the old in favor of the new. It means the breathing of a new spirit into the cultural inheritance of the age. To ignore the arts and sciences of our own age is simply intellectual laziness. We should be aware that Islamic scholars drew extensively from a variety of sources during the development of their own distinctive culture. The Caliph Al-Mustansir b'illah, for instance, had "the famous collections of Indian fables (the Hilopadesa), the Indian treatise on astronomy called the Siddhanta, several works of Aristotle, the Almagest of Claudius Ptolemy, the books of Euclid, as well as other ancient Greek, Byzantine, Persian, and Syrian productions, translated into the language of the Arabs."2 Nor was the poetry of the pagan Arabs abandoned. With the development of Islamic civilization "poetic values underwent a profound change; yet the change was a change within the established canon, revitalizing without destroying."3 Its themes became more noble; its intellectual strength was enhanced. Indeed, it was made new. This is the example set by the Dispensation directly preceding our own, an example that is worth emulating in our own age.

It is interesting, by the way, to note that C. S. Lewis believed that the real watershed in human thought occurred around a hundred years ago—he points out that while Homer (assuming no language problems) would understand Beowulf and the author of Beowulf would understand Paradise Lost, Milton would not know what to make of Joyce's Ulysses. This is a fascinating perception, suggesting as it does that literature has already made the leap into the new age and that we, as Bahá'ís, are part of a process which began without us as soon as the Manifestation was revealed. While we should bear this view of things in mind, we should also be aware of the dangers of unquestioningly imitating the ideas and practices current in the Old World Order, instead of internalizing the principles of our Faith and using them to interpret the surrounding culture.

McLean was also much offended by my comments on the foibles of many modern poets. Certainly I failed to make it clear that the poets mentioned are among those I most love and that the remarks upon their moral difficulties were meant with sympathy. What are the most sensitive individuals in this age to do, when they have no guide and no refuge? It is hardly surprising that many of them found it necessary to cope with the world through what we might consider dubious means.

^{1.} Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978) 84.

^{2.} Syed Ameer Ali, The Spirit of Islam (London: Methuen, n. d.) 370.

^{3.} A. J. Arberry, Aspects of Islamic Civilisation (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964) 256.

Chad Walsh, The Literary Legacy of C. S. Lewis (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979) 187.

As to the mention of male homosexuality among poets in the twentieth century, it should be pointed out that earlier in this century (in England) it was almost compulsory to be homosexual to be considered truly sensitive and intellectual. For example, look at the literary group of Auden, Isherwood, Spender, and Forster—these writers were among the best of their time and exerted a considerable influence over their peers. Homosexuality became, for many, an ideal to aspire to—the pressure felt by the (predominantly male) students at Oxford to accept this view of the world is dealt with in Emlyn Williams's autobiography *George* (New York: Random House, 1982). I do not think it unreasonable to call attention to the phenomenon as being one of the problems of the age. The mention of male homosexuality should be taken in this historical context. If there was a similar social pressure upon female writers and intellectuals to become lesbians, I should be interested to hear about it.

McLean suggests that I accused T. S. Eliot of purveying despair—I think this is a misreading. Eliot is the poet who has captured the spirit of our age. I quoted Eliot because he provided an exact statement of the problem facing modern non-Bahá'í poets, that is, the lack of significance in the surrounding world of ideas. To quote a poet as the personification of his own age is a compliment not a criticism.

I was amazed to find both McLean and Erickson "sensing" that my real interest lies in devotional poetry. This is simply not so—at least not in a restrictive sense. By "true religious poetry" I meant (to borrow McLean's quotation from Dylan Thomas) poems written "for the love of man and in praise of God." True religious poetry should explore the universe without and within according to the principles of thought established by the religion of the age. Principles such as the unfettered search after truth and seeing with one's own eyes and not through the eyes of others, to name but two. If used honestly, these principles are hardly likely to lead to the monotone dullness in poetry by Bahá'ís so feared by both McLean and Erickson. In fact, the fear that Bahá'ís speaking to Bahá'ís cannot help but be dull, sound-alike echoes of each other is rather an adolescent anxiety and shows a lack of trust in this religion's capacity to inspire the individual.

McLean says that to him the word *teaching* has implications of argument more appropriate to the essayist than the poet. This only goes to show how differently two Bahá'ís can see things—to me the word *teaching* implies the touching of hearts and awakening of minds. To put my suggestion about the use of poetry for teaching into perspective, may I ask if no one has ever given a book of Roger White's poetry to a seeker? I would agree that converting the reader—to set out with that intention—would no doubt strangle inspiration at birth. Nevertheless, poetry may teach indirectly, either by touching our emotions or by triggering a train of thought. C. S. Lewis's eventual conversion to Christianity had much to do with the experience of "joy" he often found in poetry and finally recognized in religion. For our poetry to retain the possibility of having this effect on the non-believing reader, it must remain accessible to those outside the Bahá'í community. How could I have been asking Bahá'í poets to remain accessible to non-Bahá'í readers and have been asking them to speak exclusively to their fellow believers at the same time?

I was startled by the interpretation of references to the Romantic Age's "boundless longing" and "unrequited desire" as an allusion to sexual frustration. So obvious a reference to spiritual yearning should not have been misunderstood.

Although David Erickson did not specifically ask for any response to his criticisms, I should like to reply to some of his comments. Erickson appears to be disturbed by my perception of the essential difference between the Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í worlds. In answer to this, I would like to direct his attention to Shoghi Effendi's statement drawing a clear distinction between the two:

The one is being rolled up, and is crashing in oppression, bloodshed, and ruin. The other opens up vistas of a justice, a unity, a peace, a culture, such as no age has ever seen. The former has spent its force, demonstrated its falsity and barrenness, lost irretrievably its opportunity, and is hurrying to its doom.⁵

For any of us to imagine that our own discipline or profession or cultural group will be exempt from this doom, will somehow proceed into the new age with its assumptions intact and unchallenged is merely self-deception.

Erickson further complains that "the article does not acknowledge the importance of the development of Romanticism in the arts . . ." (73). This criticism takes no account of the actual scope of my paper, which was written as a personal credo and which never claimed to be a comprehensive analysis of the poetry of the Western world. Apart from the constraints of time and space that naturally limited my article, I should point out that the subject of Romanticism, its importance, and its significance to Bahá'ís has been thoroughly dealt with in Christ and Bahá'u'lláh by George Townshend, in the chapter titled "The Dawn-Song of the Kingdom." I doubt if I could have added anything to Townshend's essay describing the "burst of lyrical greetings [which] welcomed the approaching coming of the Kingdom."

Erickson's criticism of my taking Wilde's epigram out of context is reasonable, although at the time I found it so exact a statement of an attitude which has become extreme in our own time that I found it irresistible. The equation of usefulness with all that is dull, boring, and material is one I find difficult to accept. After all, as Reginald Turvey has pointed out:

A perfectly functioning object must undoubtedly be beautiful and therefore beauty crowns many a mechanical creation when any conscious thought or intention of beauty was probably entirely absent in the mind of the inventor or engineer. . . .

Engineers and people of that kind today seem to regard Art as a thing apart from their creations, a thing for the dilettant [sic] to be occupied with when he feels like it. . . . so the majority of people prefer to disown any

^{5.} Shoghi Effendi, The Promised Day is Come (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980) 17.

^{6.} George Towshend, Christ and Bahá' u'lláh (Oxford: George Ronald, 1966) 60.

knowledge of Art or to regard it as a merely pretty accomplishment or adjunct of life, not as life itself.⁷

Erickson mentions (without questioning it) the convention of equating the perceptions of the imagination with lying. This convention, so casually accepted by critics of our time, deserves consideration. It is closely tied to the perception that art has nothing much to do with the realities of life. I prefer to take C. S. Lewis's view (after his conversion) that far from being "lies breathed through silver" myths are "God expressing Himself through the minds of poets, using such images as He found there. . . . "8

If we take this view, we can see that fairy tales, imagined stories, and poems are capable of containing a portion of the ultimate truth—"not in the sense of being a 'description' of God (that no finite mind would take in) but in the sense of being the way in which God chooses to (or can) appear to our faculties." The defence of art as a means of containing archetypal patterns of thought and values that are essential to human society (which defence Erickson uses) is incomplete without the understanding that art is in essence a reflection of absolute truth. For example, the archetypal theme of sacrifice is at its heart a reflection of the Manifestation's sacrifice for humanity.

Erickson also seems to believe that I argued for the exclusion of the human from poetry, in favor of the purely devotional. My essay should not, however, be read as favoring devotional poetry. It was, after all, an attempt to defend poetry against the indifference of the Bahá'í community and, therefore, focussed on the religious aspects of poetry. I feel that the exclusion of the visible realm is an implication that has been read into the paper by Erickson—perhaps having more to do with his own evident dislike and suspicion of devotional poetry than with anything actually said in my paper.

Erickson asserts, without explaining why, that there is really no need for the audience and the poet to understand each other. Does this mean that poetry, in his view, has no rational content of any importance? I cannot agree with that, as I believe that poetry is born out of the tension between the rational mind and the emotions. The creative mind does not belong wholly to one or the other; it is like a string humming taut between two poles.

As to "issues of right and wrong"—if Erickson interpreted this phrase to mean "questions of social and sexual behavior" then of course he is right—poetry has little to do with such things. But I was not referring to anything so trivial. I would agree with John Gardner that "art is essentially and primarily moral—that is, life-giving—moral in its process of creation and moral in what it says." ¹⁰ Perhaps Auden provides the best description of the relationship between poetry and moral purpose in his poem in praise of W. B. Yeats (with Blake's Tyger pacing beside him):

^{7.} Reginald Turvey, Life and Art, ed. Lowell Johnson (Oxford: George Ronald, 1986) 77.

^{8.} R. L. Green and W. Hooper, C. S. Lewis: A Biography (London: Collins, 1974) 118.

^{9.} Green and Hooper, C. S. Lewis 118.

^{10.} John Gardner, On Moral Fiction (New York: Basic Books, 1978) 15.

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse Make a vineyard of the curse, Sing of human unsuccess In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart Let the healing fountain start, In the prison of his days Teach the free man how to praise.¹¹

I have addressed the question of art and morality in far more detail in my paper "Moral Structure in the Arts," which was published in the proceedings of the 1988 Australian Bahá'í Studies Conference. I hope that the above comments will prove useful to both Mr. McLean and Mr. Erickson and that neither they nor anyone else will continue to think that my vision of the future includes Bahá'ís who are poets sitting around munching on rose petals and exchanging platitudes. I believe that this is neither likely nor desirable and that it is not likely can be seen by a comparison of the work of Bahá'ís writing poetry today. They are notable for their diversity—does John Hatcher sound anything like Roger White? Does Daniele Giancane sound like either of them? Among the less developed poets we may find some who sound like their university's creative writing class, but almost none who sound like each other.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this response. I hope that the discussion entered into here will have the effect of inspiring more poets and scholars in the Bahá'í community to come to terms with the relationship between their faith and their art—and to write essays on the subject.

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^{11.} W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*, ed. Michael Roberts, rev. Donald Hall (London: Faber and Faber, 1973) 236.