

THE PURPOSE OF POETRY

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I sympathize with Shirin Sabri's firmly directed desire to establish the foundation of the world of intellectual reality (of the mind, of the rational soul) through the arts—in particular poetry, and more particularly Bahá'í poetry—and through the Bahá'í Faith. Sabri uses a work by Karl R. Popper, *The Unended Quest*, to establish what appears to be the unifying conceptual premise and working model of her article. Implicit in Popper's "Three Worlds" model, which relates to his concept of reality, is the article's understanding of the purpose of poetry, poetry's effect on the listener, and the important role it can play in the development or the *process* of unity and thus in the organic building of Bahá'í communities. However, Bahá'ís and Bahá'í communities in North America may not be ready for the concentrated spiritual purpose and role that this article would assign to poetry as a vital art form.

I feel that the article perceives the human world in terms of "Bahá'í World" and "Non-Bahá'í World": the Bahá'í World is alive, growing, developing, changing, integrating all in one marvelous process because it possesses the reality of Bahá'u'lláh's universal Revelation and, therefore, has that unity (or degree thereof) that identifies all the Bahá'ís with one another and with Bahá'u'lláh. This World is, in a word, *creative*. The Non-Bahá'í World is precisely the opposite: it is disintegrating, disunited, stagnant, fragmented into personal subjective worlds, dead. This World is, in a word, *destructive*. The article's bifurcation of the world into two worlds expresses itself in its attitude towards both the Romantic period of art (mainly in Victorian England) and in philosophical responses to the perception of reality resulting from the twentieth-century development of the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics.

Romantic poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are characterized as being increasingly interested only in "self" and in making a religion or cult of self. This orientation carries into the twentieth century: poets, cut off from ancient traditions that fed their identity and role as poets, focus on self as matter for poetry, narrowing the universe into ever smaller discrete quanta and offering from their starving imaginations this emaciated fare to would-be readers. I agree with this scenario in relation to our own time but not in relation to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in England and Europe.

The article does not acknowledge the importance of the development of Romanticism in the arts, that all the potentials of knowledge and of being and beauty were released in the nineteenth century—humanity's watershed—and that this potential was released into being through the revelation of the reality of unity. Artists in all the major disciplines of art were influenced by the combined force of the twin Revelations of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.

The poets whom the author singles out—Oscar Wilde, Ezra Pound, Dylan Thomas, Sylvia Plath, Ann Sexton, Stevie Smith, T.S. Eliot—although placed in the context of increasing isolation, complexity, and focus on the self (the lower, dark, animal side of the self deprived of God or true religion), are characterized far too narrowly. The author does not really connect these artists, their lives and works, with their own times.

Oscar Wilde is a case in point. Stressing poets' isolation from society and their consequent obsessive plunge into the "self," into an inner, subjective world rather than identification with an "objective social world," Sabri concludes: "We see the results of it in the disillusioned words of Oscar Wilde, who said that 'the only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely. All art is quite useless'" (44).

This quotation from the preface to Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is only a part of the epigram that completes the preface. To understand this last epigram one needs to read the entire preface, which is really a short manual of arts criticism. In barely two pages Wilde relates the interpretative purpose of the critic to the *meaning* of both art and artist in the context of nineteenth-century Victorian society's double-faced rejection of itself in realism *and* romanticism. Here is the entire epigram:

We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely.

All art is quite useless.

The human imagination was central to Wilde's perception of the critic as interpreter and amplifier not only of works of art but of the collective life of society as well. Utility did not interest Wilde; utility to him had to do with what causes society to turn on an axis of routine and, thus, of dullness and boredom. Art, therefore, is useless because, being imaginative (using the convention of masks, illusion, or lying), it contains within itself the archetypal patterns, images, myths, values that inform and further the life of society, which imitates art.

It is not enough for poets, living in a time close to the beginning of a fresh divine outpouring and the early formation of a new religion, simply to mirror what they think are the spiritual or divine values of the Bahá'í Faith or to use the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb and 'Abdu'l-Bahá as direct material for their poetry. In my opinion, poetry written directly for the service of the Faith or for the Cause, using imagery and language directly from the Writings, is really not poetry. It is what I call politicizing and even turning the Bahá'í Faith into ideology, which is then pushed or thrust at people. Art is not born out of such a linear perception, out of Cyclopsian vision (by which is meant the blindness of optical sight and all the *informing* senses of matter to the human imagination that lies unawakened within). Art is born out of the interaction, out of the creative relationship, between the active and the receptive aspects of a human soul

that has recognized and related distinctively to the Word of God. The Word of God is the Source of true human sight, hearing, intellect, wakefulness, wisdom, love, knowledge, singleness, beauty, and justice. William Blake referred to Jesus as "Jesus, the Divine Imagination."

If we don't allow our individual imaginations to awaken in relation to the Word of God, we will then not allow ourselves to explore and to discover the wholeness of our true human nature and the new universe that awaits us in the world of eternity ("My eternity is My creation, I have created it for thee . . ." [Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, no. 64, part 1]). Should this turn out to be the case, I doubt that a truly "Bahá'í art" or a truly integrated World Art would ever develop. We must allow ourselves to *encounter* the Word of God in our selves, in and through our own being-reality, so that our experiences, feelings, changes, perceptions, attitudes will emerge. We are the earth, the clay that is being kneaded, shaped into the divine shape of oneness. The invisible no less than the visible is part of this process. Should we then deny the earth, the clay, in the visible realm?

The relationship between the poet and the Word of God is an imaginative relationship; it is what I call *mythopoeic*. It is out of this imaginative relationship (not only the poet's relationship with Bahá'u'lláh as the latest Manifestation of the Word of God but also the poet's relationship with the visible human world) that the stuff of a new race of human beings and a new universe comes into visibility. It is a bi-polar relationship: the poet is one pole in this relationship and the Word of God is the other pole, and sometimes this other pole is the human world. Poetry deals with this kind of polarity, whether it involves God, religion, faith, directly or indirectly or not at all. Sacred or devotional poetry, which is the kind that "The Purpose of Poetry" seems to favor, is fine, but it must never crowd out the mythopoeic relationship between (or the developing universe of) Bahá'u'lláh, the Divine Imagination, and humanity returning to its true identity and true home, no longer "fallen" into the sleep, the unconsciousness, the death of matter, its soul imprisoned within it in exile.

Furthermore, secular poetry in which God or the Manifestation of God is not mentioned explicitly, in which religion (or the Bahá'í Faith as such) is not alluded to, but in which other relationships between the poet and his or her world may require experience or feeling or exploration, is just as valid as devotional poetry. We think of Emily Dickinson's poetry as an example of both devotional *and* secular work, and of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Jesuit priest, who never forgot the human poet in everything he wrote: his desire, his suffering, his shortcomings, his doubt and his anguish, his loss and his joy and his *meaning*, his struggle with language to make it sing with picture images of unity, beauty, and the reality of the spiritual world. But Hopkins also never forgot the validity of individuality and of the relationship of the finite to the infinite.

The article suggests that a "Bahá'í cosmology" exists, but this is unlikely because it has not yet been projected from the human psyche as a result of a long gestation period of interaction between peoples (cultures and remnants of religions) and between them and the Bahá'í Revelation. There is something

more than just the given of the phenomenal world and the fact of religion that is needed for a literature or any art to flourish. "There must be," as C. S. Lewis puts it, "a marvelous that knows itself as myth."¹

The article's concern for that point of unity within one world structure and with it that common understanding and agreement between people is great and runs deep. Sabri hopes that poet and audience, sharing Bahá'í orientations, outlooks, and "values," will and should understand one another and that therefore tenor and vehicle should be understood by both. But, in fact, if this ever happened there would be no creative tension at all between poet and audience, nothing at all for the audience to reach into, to grasp, nothing to expand mind and heart in terms of imaginative insight, in terms of any imagination at all. Poetry has nothing whatsoever to do with "fundamental issues of right and wrong," and if this is what poets are concerned with in their poetry vis-à-vis an audience, "Bahá'í poetry" will never appeal to people in the greater world. It will suffocate, dull, bore, and appeal only to an insular, ingrown Bahá'í group. I disagree that metaphor requires that "poet and audience connect the same tenor and vehicle, or hopeless obscurity will be the result."

I see nothing wrong in a poet who is also a Bahá'í having a "personal umbrella," but it seems to me that the article perceives an ideal condition even among Bahá'ís in a Bahá'í community when it says that poet and audience "share a common understanding of the world" and don't need to feel isolated from the community when they are "reading from the same scriptures daily, have begun to learn a new language," for "[the poet] is an integrated part of the community, one of those who may claim to be 'at home' in the universe" (43). In the same sense, I don't feel that "pleasing an audience" is a necessary condition for the reception of poetry.

Poetry does not prove anything. It is not an argument or the presentation of a case for or against anything. It is a metaphor for the celebration of being and for the exploration of its mystery in human beings in the universe through the Word of God. Poetry is imaginative. A poem *is*, and the *knowing* of a poem is like tasting "apple in the mouth." Archibald MacLeish quotes the Chinese poet Lu Chi (died A.D. 303) in his *Fu* on literature and the poet's art:

We poets struggle with Non-being to force it to yield Being;
We knock upon silence for an answering music.

We enclose boundless space in a square foot of paper;
We pour out deluge from the inch space of the heart.²

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1. C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), 83.
 2. Archibald MacLeish, *Metaphor and Experience* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 8.