

# Autobiographical Poetry 1997: Pioneering Over Four Epochs

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After 30 years of writing occasional pieces of poetry(1962-1992), I have now written poetry 13 years much more extensively and intensively(1993-2005). The poetry here comes from just one year. It does not represent all the poetry I wrote that year. I hope, in the months and years ahead, to place all the poetry I wrote each year in the respective location at BARL.

## THE BEGINNINGS OF THE MODERN AGE

As the Revelation which flowed out from the souls of these twin manifestations pierced the atmosphere of the nineteenth century a new poetry began to find its way into the souls of other men. This Revelation gradually unfolded over a period of half a century. Bahá'u'lláh's creative energies witnessed an unbelievable expansion over some forty years. Poetry during these years went through a radical redefinition. It slowly became a large domain, containing multitudes, contradictions, a spaciousness, huge possibilities, hidden languages, unnamed strangeness and a newness that touched old words with difference and fresh diversity.

-Ron Price with thanks to Ed Folsom, "Introduction: Recruiting the American Past", A Profile of Twentieth Century American Poetry, editors, Jack Myers and David Wojahn, Southern Illinois UP, Carbondale, 1991, pp. 1-22.

And not just in the world of poetry.

Perhaps the process started in the mind and heart of Shaykh Ahmad in those years 1753-1793, those years of gestation before his journey, his years of anguish and expectation, his dream of Imam Hasan, his perfumed and honeyed tongue, an inward light, some revolutionizing Word about to begin its transmission transforming all of creation to its very depths and unveiling signs of universal discord. Perhaps in his irrepressible yearnings he could see that Hell itself was about to blaze and Paradise made visible to people's eyes. A new romance was in the air.<sup>1</sup>

Ron Price

8 January 1997

<sup>1</sup> Bahá'u'lláh refers to these images of Hell and Paradise in Prayers and Meditations, USA, 1969(1938), p. 296. The worlds of music and poetry, politics and the writing of history, industry, science, etc. saw a quickening, an increase in pace and change. At the same time, I am more than a little aware of the whole metaphor of change beginning with the Greeks as outlined by Robert Nisbet in his History and Social Change, 1969; and his critique of developmentalism in The Making of Modern Society, Wheatsheaf Books Ltd.,

Sussex, 1986. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's description of the role of religion in the origins of western civilization in His The Secret of Divine Civilization cannot be ignored here.

## RING LARDNER AND THE EVOLUTION OF A NEW ORDER

Ring Lardner\* was a popular humorist, the funny-man of the 1920s, an authentic commentator on American society in its frantic flowering. He was the chronicler of a moribund social order, of the diversions of a period bent grimly on pleasure. While he was chronicling the material successes of the wealthiest nation on earth, the Bahá'í Cause evolved into a distinctive and exclusive religion under the guidance of Shoghi Effendi. -Ron Price with thanks to Maxwell Geismar, *Writers in Crisis: The American Novel 1925-1940*, E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1971, pp.3-36; and Peter Smith, "Reality Magazine: Editorship and Ownership of an American Bahá'í Periodical", *From Iran East and West: Vol.2*, Kalimat Press, 1984, pp. 135-155.

You told of the complacency, Ring\*,  
that kept a generation, an age,  
from getting even close to the new light  
that had cast its first rays of Order  
over a western sky.  
You told of a vanity, of an incapacity  
to learn, even survive, as people jumped  
into chasms that over-confidence had hidden,  
into a narcissism that closed down  
the bigger picture, hid the light of that Order.  
You told us of the Jazz Age, its myths  
and beliefs, your anger and disillusionment,  
your hatred of aggressive American capitalism,  
its final covered wagon, camping ground  
and an outrageous individualism  
always covering the light.  
Such an emptiness in your portraits;  
no deeper answers found here,  
no historical perspective, spiritual stability.  
The whole scene was all too fast, too new,  
fleeing the Calvinist fires, on a merry-go-round.  
A cultic milieu of religious esotericism  
and inclusivism had given us a sense of being part  
of a forceful current of social change  
not some small religious collectivity, but slowly  
organizational exclusivity changed that ethos.  
You could say we became a religion back then,  
Ring, not just a spiritual attitude;  
we acquired a communal cohesion  
and distinctiveness, throwing off  
an extreme epistemological individualism

and any cult of personality  
as an undesirable heterodoxy.

Ron Price  
4 March 1996

#### STARS OF THE MOST GREAT GUIDANCE

All my beautiful safe world blew up....

-F. Scott Fitzgerald, Tender is the Night.

It is truly breathtaking to contemplate the devising (26 March to 22 April 1916) of the Divine Strategy for the redemption of the planet in the midst of the din and destruction of the old order.

-Amin Banani, Tablets of the Divine Plan, 1977, p.x.

After fifty-two slaughterous months  
that changed the world another kind  
of place emerged and with it a new poetry  
of war. All the poetry since then has been war  
poetry.\* It was about this time that a new Order  
was visibly emerging, its white buildings and its  
poetry of war for the spiritual conquest of the planet.  
Explosive tensions and energies, at hysterical intensities,  
formerly bottled up, were released and canalized into His  
Plan sending people all around the world which many saw  
as a wasteland and which others saw as a garden about to  
bloom at new thresholds, new anatomies, as millions sought  
to escape from self and others a framework for their self in a  
world where God was clearly dead but being born anew with  
stars of the most great guidance.\*\*

Ron Price  
3 June 1996

\*Francis Hope in A Profile of Twentieth Century American Poetry, Jack Myers and David Wojahn, editors, 1991, p.54.

\*\* 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablets of the Divine Plan, 1977, p.5.

#### HISTORY IN THE SHADOWS

As the world's great Depression was beginning to let up and as that apocalyptic second war was becoming a tangible reality in the late 1930s, in those few years between two kinds of hell, with humanity entering the outer fringes of the most perilous stage of its history, a stage we have not yet left, the Bahá'í community turned its energies toward worldwide expansion, its first organized international missionary campaign.

-Ron Price with appreciation to Loni Bransom-Lerche, "Development of Bahá'í Administration", Studies in Babi and Bahá'í History, Vol.1, editor Moojan Momen, Kalimat Press, 1982, p. 295; and Shoghi Effendi, "Message to 1936 Convention", Messages to America 1932-1946, Wilmette, 1947, p.6.

We had the pattern for our Order, our instrument ,

for Administration, in place, we in North America;  
we had the fear of God stirring in our soul due to  
that devastating crash and wondering when the next  
great shake-up was coming---when this vast Plan was  
sprung on us from his teeming brain from which sprang  
just about our whole conception of what it was all about,  
for so little was the little that we knew in that first century.  
This wondrous pearl, born from Twin resplendent seas,  
having swum in His ocean<sup>1</sup> of vision, of mystic intercourse,  
our brother who comforted us, though we did not comfort you,  
through your books, letters and translations we gained deeper  
understandings of the spiritual base of our embryonic order, while  
history's hunkered spectre brooded watchfully in shadows as  
millions died chrysalis-birth to an order the world still scarcely knows.<sup>2</sup>

Ron Price  
5 June 1996

<sup>1</sup>Abdu'l-Bahá was like an ocean in the sense that he could receive and give  
without any sign of disturbance, Priceless Pearl, 1969, p.21.

<sup>2</sup> In the dozen years 1933 to 1945 millions perished in Stalin's purges and in  
the battles of WWII: the greatest bloodletting in all of history.

#### PROSECUTED, AT LAST

...Prosecute uninterruptedly teaching campaign...in accordance with Divine  
Plan.

-Shoghi Effendi, "Message to 1937 Convention", Messages to America:  
1932-1946, Wilmette, 1947, p. 9.

I love this process by which each passing day is captured, not only its  
impressions, but also, at least by suggestion, its intellectual direction and  
content as well, less for the purpose of remembering...than for taking stock,  
reviewing, maintaining awareness, achieving perspective.

-Thomas Mann, 11 February 1934, in Thomas Mann: Diaries-1918-1939,  
Andre Deutsche, editor, London, 1983, p.vi.

While Hitler was getting very serious  
and Stalin was mowing them down;  
and Scott Fitzgerald was moving to  
Hollywood. Dorothy Parker was  
working hard for the Communist  
Party and the Screen Writers Guild.  
Ernest Hemingway was making a  
film about the Spanish Civil War;  
the New Deal was speeding through  
its second phase; physics was  
deciding the age of the earth and  
producing its immortal work--the  
international teaching plan was

prosecuted, at last, throughout the world.

Ron Price

4 October 1995

### PIONEERS COMING OUT

1 September 1962

This was the first day of my pioneering life, although I could take it back to about August 20th when I left Burlington to go to a Bahá'í camp at Kashabog in northern Ontario. I was eighteen and I was about to start my matriculation year at high school. The world was warming up to the Cuban Missile Crisis. -Ron Price, *Pioneering Over Three Epochs*, 1 September 1992.

When I started pioneering,  
wandering as I was  
between two worlds:  
one dead, the other  
having just been born,  
seeking my own identity,  
trying to give birth to myself,  
so tentative, so new, so fragile,  
so alone and by myself  
in a vast and spacious land:  
marginal, inferior, inadequate, mute,  
invisible, just-about-non-existent,  
dissolving, a nobody. That's how  
it was back then at the end  
of the Ten Year Crusade  
when I was 18.  
I felt like some quintessence of nothingness,  
some empty shell, cavity, social vacuity,  
humanly crippled, passive,  
like a water colour  
which does not exist,  
at the end of a conversation,  
an after-thought,  
with a tongue half in shadow  
and half like a frozen bone.  
I passed through groups  
like a breeze at room temperature,  
unobtrusively blank,  
could be a missing person  
noone missed, modest,  
in the picture somewhere,  
difficult to say where precisely,  
but you can find me if you look  
long enough. I'm that fellow  
you can hardly see, right there--see?  
PS Thirty years after pioneering, at the age of 48, my world had been

transformed so many times. I was a different man, different person.

So many had come out in these years:

women, blacks, ethnics, lesbians, gays

and another generation of pioneers.

I'd been crushed and blown

to the ends of the earth,

but a new man had been born,

a new gold of some worth,

a chalice of pure light

had made me drunk

from far up in the north

way down to places that stunk.

Part of a new race of men

slowly coming to birth;

it's gone on to great progress

in these first decades

at the end of this tenth stage of history.

We're mapping the cosmos

and the human brain

as knowledge expands

beyond what anyone can attain:

the fruit of these years

with the rain coming down,

in a dark heart of transition

with a whole world of new sound.

The journey's been swift;

the journey's been long,

on a tortuous road

with my paths yet to lift me

up and away to a world quite beyond,

to that sweet undiscovered country,

far away from this abyss.

Ron Price

1 September 1992/

16 June 1996

### QUITE A BIG YEAR: 1963

The pulsar's most vital function seems to be to serve as an empyreal enzyme inside the quasar, which in turn must ultimately...nourish the cell-plasm of the greatest celestial outburst ever dreamed: that of the whole exploding universe. Since the 1960s astronomy has developed so fast that thousands of quasars are known and ten million are estimated...all of life seems to have passed at some stage through the cauldron of the stars.

-Guy Murchie, *The Seven Mysteries of Life*, Houghton Mifflin, 1978, Boston, pp.396-402

We came from the stars by some vast and circuitous route of exploded stellar material, super-nova, some extraordinary sequence of events for atom-rich molecules. So the astrophysicists tell us and the molecular astronomers as they study star dust, ice crystals and tiny diamonds by the quadrillions in the 200 billion star families in this Milky Way. As if in some giant maternity ward stars are born, celestial swaddling stars, have growing pains and childhood diseases and in some exploding brilliance they shoot out whole worlds at 100,000 miles a second in crucibles of brewing life, mystic sanctums of the universe and exploding galaxies, a thousand supernovas blowing up in one great chain-reaction which were called quasars in 1963: the most astounding astronomical development since Galileo saw the moons of Jupiter.

Ron Price  
16 March 1996

#### 1963 WAS A COMPLEX YEAR

The Bahá'í community in 1963, when the apex of its administration was elected, had about half a million adherents. The deep conservatism of society just about everywhere was beginning to undergo a tremendous shift. The question and the issues in relation to this shift are immensely complex. The last several decades are, among other things, the story of this shift. This poem is written from a perspective looking back thirty-four years to London in 1963.

-Ron Price with thanks to Spencer Pearce and Don Piper, editors,  
Literature of Europe and America in the 1960s, Cambridge UP, NY, 1989.

The Beatles, the government and the flower children got it wrong back then in '63: it was a thousand times more complex than they ever imagined and right outside everyone's perspective—except for a few—as the tenth stage of history opened as if in some second generation Garden of Eden.

This grand design<sup>2</sup>, a million miles from the Profumo affair, obscenity issues<sup>3</sup> and confessional poetry, <sup>4</sup> was so much more

than Adam and Eve could ever be, a new beginning with new forces to deploy as history pursued its predestined course.

Ron Price

26 July 1997

1 The Beatles released their first LP in 1963: Please Please Me.

2 The Universal House of Justice refers to Shoghi Effendi's vision as 'the grand design' in its first letter 30 April 1963, in Wellspring of Guidance, Universal House of Justice, USA, 1969, p.1.

3 In the summer of 1963 a sex scandal dominated English news, the Profumo affair. In 1960 Lady Chatterley's Lover was established as 'not obscene'; in 1962 the Vassall case, involving obscenity and homosexuality, titillated English sensibilities.

4 The New Poetry was published in 1962 by Al Alvarez. It contained a strong confessional element.

#### THE WINDS SURE DO BLOW COLD AWAY OUT THERE\*

...we must applaud the good sense of the Christian princes, who viewed with a smile of contempt the last struggles of superstition and despair....so rapid, yet so gentle, was the fall of Paganism that only twenty-eight years after the death of Theodosius the faint and minute vestiges were no longer visible to the eye of the legislator.

-Edward Gibbon, Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Chatto and Windus, 1960, p.421.

The wind blew fiercely through those days  
while some obscure Light began to shine  
in the smallest corners of a vast and sprawling  
world: warm and quiet, hardly seen, opening  
up some kingdom of heaven to minds afflicted  
by calamity's firey scourge while worldly wise  
continued in doubt with their vain superiority.

Sages, a long list, rejected this new perfection,  
or overlooked in silence or contempt, what  
was then diffusing itself to the remotest and  
fairest regions of those dominions through the  
efforts of obstinate and perverse enthusiasts  
who persisted in their submission to a simple  
Truth and revelation which excited the wonder,  
the curiosity and devotion of that chosen few.

And even now, in this latter day, when winds  
blow cold over a larger land and calamity's  
unprecedented violence runs its scourging  
fires through new seasons of pacem et  
circenses<sup>1</sup>, a new force insinuates itself

in all the corners of this global politic and  
establishes its holy seat with supernal splendour.

Ron Price  
27 December 1996

\* line from a popular folk song in the 1960s, "Four Strong Winds".  
1 bread and circuses

#### 5 AM ON A RAINY NIGHT

Those who feel compelled at some time in their life to embark on  
autobiographical writing do so because they have no choice: they must do it.

-S. R. Suleiman, *Risking Who One Is: Encounters with Contemporary Art  
and Literature*, Harvard UP, London, 1994, p.212.

This poem was written on getting up on a rainy morning at 5 am in the last  
weeks of autumn in Perth Western Australia.

-Ron Price

The night is dark; the wind blows  
a driving rain onto the roof and eaves.  
I hear the trees, like generations of  
men tossed, lonely and alone, again  
and again until, at last, silence falls  
and the leaves and branches of lives  
are at peace again, still, tranquil,  
at ease, in a great quietness that  
descends on their bones and marrow.

This night world is often bathed in moonlight;  
even the stars seem to carry an easy glow.  
But tonight all is blackness, only the faintest  
street-lighted zone; only a cold, wet, darkness,  
one that I have often known. And so the  
world waits out this darkness; soon the rains  
will cease their pelting down. Shortly the trees  
won't blow in blackness. The sun will shine  
on a blue sky, tinted white, one we know as home.

Ron Price  
8 May 1996

#### A BEAUTY THAT ELUDES ME

I draw in on myself in acute joy, again to ransack the self for the  
dispensable. Today-ah, today, the clamorous will, hardest to relinquish.

-Roger White, "Letting Go", *Occasions of Grace*, George Ronald, 1992,  
p.60.

Another blazing beauty dazzling  
in the sun by the ocean,  
golden hair falling  
on athletic shoulders,  
perfect everywhere  
before my eyes.

Tell me this is not  
a gift from God,  
a gift of such intense loveliness  
yet cannot be touched,  
does not touch  
my concupiscible appetite  
on its long journey to  
the acme of mature contemplation,  
reminding me that  
walking humbly with my God  
in this universe  
presents me with endless signs,  
doors, symbols, tokens and means  
to access His flawless beauty,  
irradiated by blue-perfection  
and a brightness that fills existence  
with gleaming, radiant, burning, light.

Tell me, this aging man,  
flawed from head to toe,  
stomach distended, false teeth,  
balding, far, far, from such radiance  
and beauty, that this creature  
does not touch my soul.  
She fills my upturned branches rapturously  
with light and the roots of my tree  
gorge silently in her brown  
and solid soil, but alas  
it does not fatten nor appease the hunger.

For this creature of perfection  
has a beauty close to soul,  
could raise me to the music  
of my real existence-presence-

dearest ingot, gold. But, somehow,

that beauty eludes me,  
as love rages to subdue me,  
hazards all around me.  
I hear her say with head turned,

hair golden with trapped sunlight:  
ignore your dreams, forget the rainbow.

Ron Price  
28 December 1997

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