

# From the Editor's Desk

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## THE ANECDOTE OF THE JAR

Sometimes a work of art is sufficient unto itself—we see it, experience it, and understand it. We need not, or cannot, articulate exactly what the art, whether a painting, a symphony, a dance, or in this case, what might appear to some as a simple jar, has led us to know or feel or become.

Except the jar on our cover is not simple. It is fashioned by someone steeped in the knowledge of how much the potter's art can convey. The speaker in John Keats's poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn" describes his own philosophical musings as he ponders the designs on a piece of ancient Grecian pottery. We wonder if the ode is about the urn or if, in fact, the ode is the Dionysian scene frozen in time by the artist.

The final two lines are the most challenging part of this poem: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (49–50).<sup>1</sup> Is this Keats's observation or that of the persona he has created? Or, is he reading an inscription that the potter imprinted on the

urn? Ultimately, it doesn't matter, I suppose. The axiom is valid (at least in a Platonic sense) whether the idea originates with Keats or with the artist whose work inspired the young poet to pen these lines.

But the jar before us on the cover, fashioned by world-renowned potter Bernard Leach (1887–1979), is equally evocative in the subtlety of what it might say to us. Leach was born in Hong Kong, attended the Slade School of Fine Art and the London School of Art, studied ceramics in Japan under Urano Shigekichi, and later returned to England, where he established Leach Pottery, which promoted pottery as a combination of Western and Eastern arts and philosophies and became a place for apprenticeship for potters from all over the world. It is still open today.

Leach learned about the Bahá'í Faith from friend and renowned abstract expressionist painter Mark Tobey, and he officially joined the Faith in 1940. Though already far advanced in and famous for his synthesis of Eastern and Western influences, when he went on pilgrimage to the Bahá'í Shrines in Haifa in 1954 he decided to dedicate himself more ardently to uniting the East and West by returning to the Orient "to try more honestly to do my work there as a Bahá'í and as an artist" (21).<sup>2</sup>

So, why so much information about and attention to a jar? After all, the elegant beauty of Leach's pot speaks for

1 Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn." *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. D, Norton, 2005, p. 905–6.

2 Quoted in Robert Weinberg, *Spinning the Clay into Stars: Bernard Leach and the Bahá'í Faith*. George Ronald, 1999.

itself. Either you like it or you don't. And I suppose that's true of most art. I have chosen this as our cover piece for precisely that reason—because I think the same verity applies to the articles and poems in this issue. They require something of us. They have—individually and collectively—a capacity to uplift and educate us, but only if we are sufficiently attentive to what these scholars and poets are trying to convey.

I believe it is in this sense that these pieces become intermediaries between the world of thought and ourselves by translating personal insights from the metaphysical realm of pure forms into the physical medium of sensually perceptible words and images. It is an idea I find well expressed in another work about a pot, Wallace Stevens's poem "Anecdote of the Jar." In this piece, Stevens can be read as commenting on how profoundly our tangible expression of the ephemeral in art can organize and inform our view of reality:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,  
And round it was, upon a hill.  
It made the slovenly wilderness  
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,  
And sprawled around, no longer  
wild.  
The jar was round upon the  
ground  
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.  
The jar was gray and bare.

It did not give of bird or bush,  
Like nothing else in Tennessee.<sup>3</sup>

Here the persona—possibly the poet or possibly a character he has created—employs art to demonstrate that when we interact with nature, especially as artists, we may experience a sort of reciprocity, but only if we allow ourselves to employ those creative skills instilled within us as emanations from the Creator Himself.

It is my sincere feeling that the articles and poems we have selected for this issue have the following in common: they approach subjects with which we are familiar, but they do so from a specialized or creative perspective. By sharing with us the creative thought they have invested in crafting these pieces, the authors provide us with a new way of seeing, a lens through which we can re-examine our own thinking about several different subjects.

The first piece, "Themes in the Study of Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Aqdas: Emerging Approaches to Scholarship on Bahá'í Law" by Roshan Danesh, is both a review of what creative scholarship has thus far accomplished by way of studying the Most Holy Book of the Bahá'í Dispensation, Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Aqdas. Danesh has written on the Aqdas several times before, and for good reason. As a Bahá'í and a graduate of Harvard Law School,

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3 Stevens, "The Anecdote of the Jar." *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., Norton, 2005, p. 1260.

he is keenly interested in this repository of Bahá'í law, especially as it portends the administration of future society. Of equal importance to him, I suspect, is how, as the "Mother Book" of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, this foremost work gives birth to a vision of refinement and comportment that characterizes what it means to be a Bahá'í. His review of studies completed thus far is helpful in our own reflection about this challenging work, and his view of what themes and scholarly approaches future studies might undertake challenges us to invest our own considered speculation about the offspring to which this book will give birth.

The second piece is a thoroughly engaging poem, or list of poems—aphorisms by Egyptian-American Yahia Lababidi, the author of six critically acclaimed books of poetry and prose. We probably think of aphorisms as folk art, as the assemblage of wisdom derived from tribal peoples—the Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament, for example—but Lababidi's modern use of this form provides incredibly rich, if succinct, bits of wisdom. To me, they have the same sort of compressed surprise as good haiku.

The next piece, "The Active Force and That Which Is Its Recipient: A Bahá'í View of Creativity" by Rick Johnson, is one of the most thought-provoking and original articles we have published in quite some time. The subtitle is the core objective—the exploration of creativity and the pervasive nature of this concept in

Bahá'í thought—and the title hints at the underlying premise that Johnson explores as one extremely useful way of understanding how "the universe is coded to be creative." Integrated with his exploration into the roots of creativity are ample citations from both the Bahá'í texts and from a panoply of helpful scholarly resources that assist the reader in navigating this philosophical journey.

Following this article is a second poem, or sequence of poems, taken from *The Conference of the Birds* by famed Persian poet Faríd ud-Dín 'Attár (1145–1221), translated here by Sholeh Wolpé. Prefiguring Bahá'u'lláh's own *Seven Valleys*, this portion of the work contains the description by the hoopoe of the seven valleys that the thirty birds must traverse if they are to discover their leader—the mythical Simorgh, which in Persian actually means "thirty birds." In short, they come to realize that the majesty of the Beloved can be comprehended by seeing their own reflection after they have gone through the arduous tests that spiritual development necessarily requires of us. Needless to say, the parallel between the seven valleys in *The Conference of the Birds* and those in Bahá'u'lláh's work is very helpful to students of Bahá'u'lláh's extremely popular text, which was written for a judge who was a student of Súfí mystical philosophy.

The final article, by Elena Mustakova, "Becoming Hospitable and Uplifting Holding Environments for Humanity's Grievs: Depression and

the Bahá'í Community," is another examination for the journal of the affective disorder of depression, what has become such a pervasive problem in contemporary society for reasons all too apparent, as the social order seems to become increasingly dysfunctional with each successive tragedy we confront. But Mustakova's study is hopeful and uplifting in its examination of how "community" in general, and the Bahá'í concept of community building in particular, can help respond to the needs of those who are having to endure emotional pain, whether from grief, deprivation, or the sheer demands that daily survival requires of us in this period of transition and waywardness. Through research and practice in the field of psychology, Mustakova has developed a keen sense of how healing the inner self is an art as much as it is a science, and her discourse provides helpful insight into how we can become participants in creating a "holding environment" that fosters emotional and spiritual cohesiveness in and beyond our community.

Finally, I would like to conclude this introduction with an appeal to our readers/scholars to respond to what I feel has been lacking for quite some time in the way of submissions to the journal, as well as in books being published—creative studies of the authoritative texts, particularly the works of Bahá'u'lláh and Shoghi Effendi. For while there is great value in applying Bahá'í concepts and citing passages from the sacred texts in articles demonstrating the relation of

the Bahá'í Faith to particular fields of endeavor, I think we could all benefit from more studies dedicated to investigating the limitless supply of pearls of wisdom enshrined within the ocean of a Revelation to which we are privileged to have direct access and in which we have the freedom to swim about and bring to the surface and share what we have discovered.