

Songs for the Phoenix

by Michael Fitzgerald. George Ronald, Oxford, England, 1994, 207 pages. Available at [George Ronald](#) reviewed by Anne Gordon Perry in *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, Vol. 7, no. 3 (1997)

Songs for the Phoenix is aptly named. What other creature besides the phoenix is so associated with affirmation and rebirth with suffering transmuted? Here, a voice is raised that is Fitzgerald, but yet all of us, calling us out of the ashes and into a splendid arena—"the dance to light / in history-making" (6), the "new world, rising" (52). Here, we find again and again a sense of hope for humanity to experience release from its shadowed cage, to come into a greater light. It is not just the intellectually or artistically élite, or even simply those who have suffered the most, who are called to this release; Fitzgerald sees the "perfect phoenix / flying the dance of everyone— / . . . singing the earth's song" (105). In this volume, a decade of poems point to the spirit in daily life. Here, one finds an unequivocal yes—not a naïve or halfhearted yes, but a full, credible, life-embracing yes. This yes does not imply a cessation of loneliness, of terror, of doubt, of savage blows; in fact, these aspects of life might well be the impetus that returns us to this yes. Fitzgerald, in a note to the reader, says:

I sing these songs from the vortex, from the placeless urge, from the drive to go on,

somehow to rise up amid the late century chaos, somehow to say "Yes!"— yes to the future within the present, yes, to Bahá, to singing, yes to the inexorable drive towards peace (v)

It is the "somehow" that invites us to reconsider our personal chaos, pain, and doubt, and to find the path that leads out of the vortex. Fitzgerald eloquently reminds us of this yes-ness repeatedly. In another poem, he affirms:

My life is to say "Yes!" to the inner territory and the outer journey. to die well, to live well, inside out. (37)

But Fitzgerald's work is not just reflective of his own thoughts and epiphanies. Good poets take us beyond their own experience and into our own. We can all choose to live well if we bring consciousness to our lives, and the poet's voice shows us that this intentionality is possible. "Inside out" seems to suggest an absorption with the internal (and eternal) being—something that all artists and persons concerned with the spirit heed, at least in moments. While addressing universal concerns, Fitzgerald's metaphors have particular relevance for Bahá'ís. "Living the color crimson" (54, 62) is one phrase that appears repeatedly; Bahá'ís associate the color crimson with Bahá'u'lláh. Crimson also reminds us of roses, blood, sacrifice, passion, royalty, richness. Living this color draws us into the experiential realm; here, we know through being and doing. Even "teaching the gray stones / crimson" (25) is possible in Fitzgerald's world, and perhaps it is the gray stones of our hearts to which he refers. "Roses are my chief concern" (51),

Fitzgerald tells us. Here, he is not talking about gardening but about a numinous realm that relates to the path of Bahá and draws upon the great poetic tradition of the East, with its symbolic references to “The [Divine] Beloved.” “Hope and despair intertwined / are the roses I live” (58), Fitzgerald says, reminding us that the lover’s journey partakes of the thorns as well as the velvet petals. “A tunnel to roses / is the story I am reporting” (178), he says in a poem describing the *raison d’être* of his creative process, “a single strand of hair / is the meaning—” (178). Again, for Bahá’ís, a strand of hair reminds us of the Prophet and the Prophet’s divinity and uniqueness. Art and religion are indelibly infused in Fitzgerald’s work. In his own words, he finds “art and religion embracing like fire and air” (51). Fitzgerald goes to the root of religion when he talks about “the perfume of Allah, Yahweh, Brahma” (45). He often speaks of the Great Revelators: Krishna, Buddha, Christ, Bahá’u’lláh, and others. Yet, he brings a post-modern sensibility to the quest for union; for example, he describes “searching for a new way to do Tao—” (190) and speaks of “Bahá’í-Buddhist-Christian” as “rivers, unending—” (189). He describes Bahá’u’lláh as a “Timel[e]ss Architect” (46), as well as the fulfillment of all past prophecies. “Unity-dancing is the way I have come to know Him” (46), Fitzgerald says, again emphasizing the experiential aspect of knowing. Of Bahá’u’lláh’s son, he writes often. In one place he implores: “O Scion of Spirit, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, / O Son of Bahá, / embrace us again, for we are weary—” (75). Other Bahá’í themes and aspects appear: “we lift our feet / on the temple-ground. / Chicago. Samoa. / Kampala. Sydney. / Home” (6). One poem describes how on pilgrimage to Israel the poet’s wounded heart bursts as he looks upon the Seat of the Universal House of Justice:

how history mends on these steps— what high hill shining lit by night— what consummate grace dreamed this dream— (127)

How many of us have such experiences but do not have the words to describe it. Religion is not Fitzgerald’s only theme, and he often pays homage to various thinkers, artists, and sports figures: Thoreau, Dostoyevsky, Rilke, Suzuki, Arthur Rubenstein, Rimbaud, Joyce, Gary Snyder, Thomas Merton, Sister Sania, Robert Lowell, Robert Hayden, Dizzy Gillespie, Dimaggio, and others. He celebrates figures in ordinary life, too: his father, working as a labor mediator, as well as those he meets during his own experience of being in a hospital, where he notes “the especially sick especially cherish hope” (9), and many others. In a poem entitled “Men,” Fitzgerald looks at gender and questions whether there is any feminine instinct left in his soul, or if it has been blotted out by “too much / fiery rhetoric, too many sold-out bedside stories” of “Ben Hur and Alexander when Ruth / would do very well” (ii). He calls for a greater balancing of male and female aspects and a respect for womankind. Fitzgerald is also concerned about the survival of the human race in the nuclear age. Part of this survival relates to developing new visions about the future, or in his words, “imagining new worlds to live—” (80). This can come from unexpected places, as vast changes occur:

The new unthinkable of one planet arrives on a leaf from Moscow. (104)

In Fitzgerald’s vision, the “reinvention of Eden” (92) relates to “the tug of the Mississippi toward Orion” (92), and he equates the sublime with ordinary experience (to “remake a

cup of tea into the worlds of God—”) (207). To this regard, the artist has an important role to play, as it is the artist who often most clearly sees the relationship between ordinary life and the sublime. In a poem entitled “The Uses of Art” Fitzgerald affirms:

What use art? A stretcher to wheel in the wounded— a monument of blossoms— a bit of lattice work on the temple—

each painting, a record of a psychic diver— each poem, an artefact—

life to be lived as a symphony, or maybe just some chamber music for the few—

each breath, a brush stroke— each day, a dance— (135)

With his pen, Michael Fitzgerald does dance. Whether he is speaking of a Japanese tea ceremony or “of the chase / for a sundown with the russet sky of Eden” (22), he brings us closer to a crimson life force and to divinity itself. He calls upon us not simply to meditate on but to be the phoenix, to know God as “Lover, Friend, Hero—” (128). For this reason, his poems have the capacity to endure and enrich us for a long time, for there will perpetually be a need for human transformation.