Turning a Somersault to Land at the Feet of the Báb: The Spiritual Journey of Ross Woodman

CHRIS LOWRY

Abstract
Ross G. Woodman (1922-2014), known to Bahá'ís as a scholar and teacher, had a vivid dream of an encounter with the Báb in 1942. He circled around the question of what the dream called him to do, and to become, for the rest of his life. Woodman's spiritual journey was troubled and complex. He was preoccupied with questions of poetic faith and religious faith, revelation and knowledge. This essay explores the arc of the flying somersault in his dream of the Báb, which served as a template for the trajectory of his life. Woodman's life story offers insights into the question of "aesthetic" versus "ethical" engagement with the Faith, as well as the specific challenge facing academics or others whose professional life may seem to demand that they compartmentalize their faith.

Résumé
Ross G. Woodman (1922-2014), que les bahá'ís connaissent en tant qu'érudit et enseignant, a fait en 1942 un rêve saisissant dans lequel il rencontrait le Báb. Il a longuement réfléchi à ce que ce rêve l'appelait à réaliser, et à devenir, tout le reste de sa vie. Le cheminement spirituel de Woodman a été tourmenté et complexe. Les questions de foi poétique et de foi religieuse, de révélation et de connaissances le préoccupaient. Cet essai explore l'arc que décrit le saut périlleux au vol dans son rêve au sujet du Báb, arc qui a servi de modèle à la trajectoire de vie de Woodman. L'histoire de sa vie éclaire la question de l'engagement « esthétique » comparé à l'engagement « éthique » envers la Foi, ainsi que le défi particulier auquel font face les universitaires ou d'autres personnes dont la vie professionnelle peut sembler exiger qu'ils compartimentent leur foi.

Resumen
Ross G. Woodman (1922-2014) conocido a los Bahá'ís como un erudito y maestro tuvo un vívido sueño de un encuentro con el Báb en 1942. El giró alrededor de la pregunta de lo que el sueño lo llamó a hacer, y hacerse, para el resto de su vida. El viaje espiritual de Woodman fue problemático y complejo. El fue preocupado con la cuestión de poética y religiosa fe, revelación y conocimiento. Este artículo explora el arco de voltereta en su sueño de El Báb lo cual sirvió como una plantilla para la trayectoria de su vida. La historia de la vida de Woodman ofrece percepciones sobre la cuestión de involucramiento estético versus ético con la Fe, así como el reto específico que enfrentan los académicos u otros cuya vida profesional podría dar apariencia de una dicotomía con su fe.

How might we reconcile the ambiguous affinity between the poetic and the religious, and the potential tension between an aesthetic and an ethical engagement with the Bahá'í Faith? Can we imagine new ways of addressing

the challenges of a community learning to accommodate a range of ways of thinking, speaking and acting, and the individual's concomitant struggle to find a place in a community that may not know how to accommodate him or her? How might we better understand the challenge facing academics, or others whose professional life may seem to demand that they compartmentalize their faith? Ross Woodman's life provides a lens to explore these immediate and perennial questions.

This essay traces the spiritual journey of a dynamic, radiant person who lived in a constant state of being on the brink of an epiphany, with doubt and mental anguish never far from the surface. It draws on several sources, including unpublished essays, letters and notes, to shed light on Woodman's complex thought and life experience. It is an attempt to follow the arc of the flying somersault in his dream of the Báb, described below, which served as a marvellous and problematic template for the trajectory of his life. As Woodman himself often said to students and friends, quoting John Keats, "a man's life of any worth is a continual allegory."[1]

Ross Woodman was an English professor who specialized in the poetry of Blake, Coleridge, Shelley and the English Romantics. His pure artistry as a lecturer made him unforgettable, life changing. He was an influential art critic, a passionately original interpreter of Carl Jung through the lens of world literature and religious texts, and a Bahá'í scholar. Woodman, who died in March 2014 at the age of ninety-one, taught at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, for nearly fifty years. He studied and argued with Northrop Frye, Canada's most celebrated intellectual. He also lectured and wrote on contemporary art and artists, religion and imagination, and cinema. He was elected to the first National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada at the Canadian National Bahá'í Convention in 1948 in Montreal. Though only in his mid-twenties, he was featured as one of two speakers at a public meeting during that Convention, which attracted an audience of 500. According to scholar Jack McLean, Woodman did not become active as a Bahá'í educator until after his retirement from teaching English literature in 1989. He was particularly known for his symbolic interpretation of the Kitáb-i-Íqán, the Book of Certitude (McLean). In his later years he mentored younger Bahá'í scholars, developed curricula materials, and wrote the libretto for the magnificent *Oratorio to His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh*, which was performed at the Bahá'í World Congress in New York in 1992.

In all of his work Woodman demonstrates what Jungian analyst Thomas Elsner calls "a gift for allowing the

1 "A man's life of any worth is a continual allegory—and very few eyes can see the mystery of life—a life like the Scriptures, figurative" (John Keats, Letter to George and Georgina Keats [February 14-May 3, 1819], in John Keats, *Selected Letters*.

immediate power of the mythopoetic and aesthetic soul to live in close contact with the conceptually based exploration of meaning" (98). On the other hand, it can be argued that Woodman's brilliance is clouded by what psychotherapist and author Robert Aziz calls "Jungian romantic proclivities," a tendency to see reality in aesthetic or purely archetypal terms, rather than to face life's transformative or ethical challenges more directly. Although a close friend of Woodman for over four decades, Aziz was a fierce critic of the limitations of what he calls "archetypal reductionism" (Aziz, *Syndetic Paradigm*).

After decades of studying and teaching Romantic poetry, Woodman would make the extraordinary suggestion, consistent with Aziz's critique, that Romanticism is on the whole a record of a failed initiation, typified by Coleridge's Ancient Mariner as a failed shaman. He would argue that the shaman's purpose is to transform the elemental powers into a socially beneficent force. "It is precisely the Mariner's failure to transform them that constitutes the tragedy at the heart of Coleridge's rime as well as Coleridge's life" (Woodman, "Shaman, Poet, and Failed Initiate" 69).

I first met Ross Woodman in 1974, when he was one of my professors at Western University. My mother knew him through their mutual involvement with the art gallery in London, and she put the idea in my head to find him. We didn't know that he was a Bahá'í. He was a fascinating teacher whose specialty was the English Romantic poets. His intimate knowledge of the vast canon of English literature, a literature steeped in the Judeo-Christian traditions, flowed from his lively mind as from an inexhaustible spring. For Ross, and also for his wife Marion—a high school English literature teacher whose second calling led her to pursue a distinguished professional career as a Jungian analyst—poetry and art were vessels carrying spiritual insight, from which we could draw to nourish our soul making. His lectures, always delivered without notes, were a kind of performance art, mesmerizing and generative.

Woodman once said that he wished that he had worked from notes, because he lectured in an altered state, and afterwards had trouble remembering what he had said. Late in life, he described a lecture he gave on Shelley's *Mont Blanc*:

> Teaching the poem, I once inscribed an unbroken succession of letters around two walls on which stretched an enormous blackboard that served in part to encircle the lecture room.
>
> *theeverlastinguniverseofthingsflowsthroughthemind*
>
> I invited the students to imagine they were semi-contained within the opening line and a half of *Mont Blanc* as in a crucible as if they themselves were, like Shelley's narrator in *Alastor*, a

> "dark magician in his visioned cave" raking cinders "for life and power". . . . (Woodman, Letter to Yeo, 2001)

This invitation to imagine shows the kind of spell that Woodman could cast in his efforts to expand the horizons of the mind. He was demonstrating a way of being, asking his students to surrender to flow, to a stream of consciousness. Many students entrusted themselves to these moments with a willing suspension of disbelief. Woodman called it poetic faith—a way of knowing, a skill that could be learned.

To his students at the university, Woodman was a secular humanist who spoke of the divine only through the works of art that he taught, whose own religious beliefs were private and separate from his role as a professor. Those were the rules of the game, as he discovered to his bewilderment when, as a newly minted professor in the early 1950s, he started inviting groups of students to his home to talk to them about the Bahá'í revelation. In those years he was travelling in Canada and the United States and giving public talks about the Bahá'í Faith, and it seemed natural to him to do the same thing outside of class time. His colleagues took a dim view of what they saw as proselytizing. He almost lost his job over it, and vowed from then on to avoid speaking of the Bahá'í Faith with his students, both in and outside of class. He chose self-censorship as self-preservation, and the suspension of disbelief (Coleridge's idea of poetic faith) was a psychic defence against both professional ostracism and, most importantly, against what he understood to be the full implications of religious faith. It was a complex mental split that served him well professionally, but it came at a price.

Woodman discovered the Bahá'í religion unexpectedly in 1942 when, as a twenty-year-old student, he was courting a beautiful and aloof girl named Marian Metcalfe.[2] She accepted his invitation to go on a date on the condition that he attend a lecture with her, about something called Bahá'í. Although he wasn't interested in the meeting, he was very interested in the girl, and went with her to the Marlborough Hotel in Winnipeg. Roland Estall was the chair of this small meeting of about twelve Bahá'ís. The speaker was Helen Bishop, from Portland, Oregon. Woodman recounts, "She was speaking about someone called the Báb, and someone called Bahá'u'lláh, and how the founders of the world's major religions, Christ, Buddha, Muḥammad, were different lamps giving forth the same light" (Woodman, Personal interview). He was struck by the idea that all religions are one, and the Bahá'í message of world peace also resonated profoundly, as every day brought cruel news of the war.

2 Marian Metcalfe would become Woodman's first wife. His second wife was named Marion Boa.

> I listened rather intently, and when the lecture was finished Roland Estall asked if there were any questions. I immediately raised my hand and I think really, all I wanted to do was impress the lady I was with, by asking an intelligent question. I stood up to ask my question, and to my great amazement, and certainly to the amazement of all present, instead of asking a question, I said, "'Everything you have said is true." I was shocked. They were shocked. And since I was perhaps the only non-Bahá'í in the room, there was a great moment of celebration. This was the quickest conversion on record! The extraordinary thing about it was that I had not expected to say this, but as soon as it was said, I did in fact know it was true. It was instantaneous. What Blake describes as a pulsation of the artery. It went through my entire body, and I think, it went collectively through the body of the people in the room. (Woodman and Boyles "Interview")

Estall, who became a life-long friend, decided to give him a book to read—*The Dawn Breakers*. Woodman went home and began reading the book. He found it strange and fascinating. Reading about the Báb—martyred founder of the Bábí religion and forerunner of Bahá'u'lláh—and wondering what on earth he had gotten himself into, he fell asleep with the book open in his lap and had a most profound dream. He recounted it almost seventy years later in his book, *Revelation and Knowledge*:

> The Báb is in Winnipeg. He is staying on the fourth floor of the DuBarry Apartments where I once lived with my parents on the top third floor. [There were only three floors in the DuBarry apartments, but the Báb was on the fourth.] I am eager to see him. [I am enormously excited. I tell my father, the Báb is here!] My father offers to take me. [My brother Harold says he would like to come along. Harold sits in the back seat, I sit beside my father in the front seat. We drive to Wardlaw and Wellington Crescent, and I get out. My father says he will wait for me in the car, but I say, The Báb is here! My brother and I take a dumb waiter pulling on the ropes, with great effort.] When we arrive he too says he will wait. [But I say, the Báb is here!] I go alone to the apartment. I am let in. [There in front of me is the most gorgeous Persian carpet I have ever seen in my life. It is luminous. Not only is it luminous, it is in motion and it is singing. The pattern in the rug is conducting a dance, like the surface of a calm sea. There is a hum in the carpet, a murmuring like the sound of a breeze gently tossing waters.] I am told to remove my shoes. I see an empty chair at the other end of the room. I hesitate to step on the rug. When I do, the pattern

> divides, clearing a path, [parting like the Red Sea. I walk through to the other side, and there is a kitchen chair. I sit down and wait.] The Báb enters on my left. When he steps on the rug, it gathers and folds around him like an *aba*, or cloak. He turns and looks at me. [Our eyes meet, and instantly he is standing before me.] He takes a kitchen chair identical to the one I am on. He sits down facing me. Our knees are almost touching. I try to speak, but I cannot. The pressure is huge, I cannot get out a sound or a syllable. Struggling to make a sound, I rise in the air, turn a somersault, and land like a feather at his feet. Dissolving into air, I awake with a start: a streak of lightning, a distant thunder.[3] (3)

Woodman told these two stories—of the sudden conversion and the visionary dream—as encounters with the Bahá'í revelation via, respectively, the conscious intellect and the dreaming unconscious. He said that it made him a Bahá'í for life. That life, however, would be a journey largely outside of the community, for reasons that I will explore. He moved, in his mind and in his work, back and forth between the antipodes of, on the one hand, an imagination overflowing with the energies and presence of gods and demons, cherubim and seraphim—"all sorts of marvellous creatures," as he once told me—and on the other hand, the clear vision of Shelley when he writes that "the deep truth is imageless" (*Prometheus Unbound* 4.116). Through vast rivers of eloquent words he always returned to what Wordsworth called the Uncreated, that hidden place in the unconscious, "beyond and above consciousness" (Shelley, "Defence of Poetry" 489)

He saw the dream as a direct encounter with the divine, and he circled around the question of what the dream called him to do, and to become, for the rest of his life.

> My introduction in Winnipeg to the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh dealt with what He called "progressive revelation," which unveiled to me how religions are made. I instantly embraced it and had that night a powerful dream about it, which became the obscure focus of *Revelation and Knowledge.* Instead, that is, of focusing on the "religion-making process," I focused on the dream as a "soul-making process," which I found at work in Romanticism. I never quite succeeded in distinguishing between them in my future academic career so that when I was professionally as a livelihood lecturing on the Romantics, I was also, on another level, lecturing on the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, struggling better

3 This recounting of the dream is edited here to include details added when Woodman retold the dream in his interview with Ann Boyles, Association of Bahá'í Studies 31st Annual Conference, 2007. Segments from the interview are in square brackets.

> to understand the experience of revelation which my dream, like my reaction to the lecture in Winnipeg, enacted. I became, in truth, possessed by the experience as an experience of the "primary imagination," Coleridge's "living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM." (Woodman, "Whispering Silence")

Woodman distanced himself from the Bahá'í community in the 1950s, and while he did not participate in the community in southern Ontario where he lived, he continued to be intensely engaged with the Faith in his own way, and maintained contact with many Bahá'í friends such as Glen Eyford, Douglas Martin, Otto Rogers, Sandra Hutchison and Roland Estall.

On a long-delayed pilgrimage to Haifa in 1999, He reflected that the other pilgrims were wondering about him, puzzled that he had been a Bahá'í for fifty years yet this was his first pilgrimage. "Something just doesn't add up like why have we never heard of him before if he served on the first NSA,[4] if he knew Marjory Morten, Juliet Thompson, if he was a Bahá'í during the ministry of Shoghi Effendi" (Woodman, "Haifa Journal" n.p.).

It seems that in the 1950s some Bahá'ís in southern Ontario disapproved of his unconventional way of understanding and expressing Bahá'í teachings. As one Bahá'í who was close to Woodman explained, "he was fascinated by the Báb, naturally because of this dream—and this did not go over well with a couple of the Bahá'ís in [Woodman's] community. . . . He could not get along, he didn't fit in. Of course a whole bunch of us admired him very much, but he didn't fit in to whatever the . . . group were trying to do to present the Bahá'í Faith to the community. So he found his own faith, the Báb's faith, for all those years—in other words he aligned himself with the revolutionary vision of the Báb first and foremost" (Martin, Personal interview).

He lived with a sense of exile and failure for decades. In Haifa, thinking about his years outside the community, he wrote, "I felt all along—all these years—on the very edge of spiritual extinction—on the edge of an abyss. There were moments when I did fall into it" (Woodman, "Haifa Journal" n.p.). Losing his sense of identity as a Bahá'í, he doubted the ground he stood on, as he describes in a letter to his first wife Marian Yeo (née Metcalfe) in 1973:

> I have a terrible capacity to tell the truth, though it can very easily be interpreted as a pack of lies. But I never had the right to tell the truth the way I told it. The only way I know how to tell the truth is to make a fiction out of it. I accept

4 National Spiritual Assembly, the governing body of the Bahá'í community in a given nation.

> Bahá'í this way. It's God's way of telling the truth. It's his accommodating fiction. The deep truth is imageless and images of it are funny very fragile things which require exquisite care if they are to have any life at all. I experienced in those meetings of the Assembly and at the terrible Proclamation Committee such a smashing of images that there was only chaos at my feet and in my head. And there has been ever since (Woodman, Letter to Yeo, 1973).

This interesting use of the word "fiction" is clarified in his correspondence with Professor Glen Eyford. Commenting on *The Dawn Breakers*, Woodman suggests that Nabíl's narrative of the Bahá'í origin story is "in some sense fiction":

> By fiction I do not mean the opposite of truth. Rather I mean a certain kind of truth, which is the truth of an inner condition or psychic state arising from passionate commitment. By fiction I mean that the events presented or described are as much determined by inner factors as they are by outer factors. In the final analysis with fiction, the inner factors take precedence and largely determine the other events, or at least the meaning of those events. To put it simply, though it is a complex matter, the facts, the events, cease to be signs and become symbols.[5] (Woodman, Letter Eyford, June 1985)

After his retirement he continued to process his confusion about where he stood in terms of poetic faith and religious faith. Marian Yeo, who had brought him to the fateful meeting at the Marlborough Hotel in Winnipeg in 1942, challenged him in 2001 to admit that his dream of the Báb had led other Bahá'ís, including significant figures in the community in the 1950's such as Marjorie Morten and Juliet Thompson, to "deify" him (as Marian put it), which he had always seen as farcical, somewhat ridiculous. He spoke of them with great affection and amusement. Marian suggested to him that it was tragic, not merely comic, and this moved him to delve more deeply into it.

> Ever since you mentioned it I have been thinking about my "deification" by the Bahá'ís, which, as you read it, had rather catastrophic or tragic consequences not only for myself but for many others. . . .

5 Signs always have a clear meaning, often giving information or an instruction. Symbols also represent something, but you need some knowledge to understand what the symbol represents. Both refer to interpreting something that has been said indirectly. However, a sign is mainly an object, a thing, etc. that contains one meaning that is usually obligatory for the people of a community to abide by, whereas a symbol is usually cultural. A symbol can have several interpretations.

> The Bahá'ís thought that I was an angel and Marjory was sure I could levitate (if I really tried). . . . thank you for "transforming" what I have sometimes offered as comedy and even as farce (a tale good for a laugh) into tragedy (a tale that confronts the truth rather than deflects it). My entire Bahá'í life had not been Bahá'í at all. It only had the appearance (and appearance was special to me). I had been dealing with a personal conversion all along, which is not what Bahá'u'lláh was about. That had been a Christian thing, that some Bahá'ís like Juliet Thompson had clung to in adoring 'Abdu'l-Bahá as if he were Christ or his Second Coming (I got along fine with them). Bahá'u'lláh took "personal" salvation for granted as work already done some three dispensations ago. He Himself had moved on to redemption of the planet, the earth as one country. What happened to me that evening [in the Marlborough Hotel in 1942] reflected a vast collective, progressively evolving inheritance with a logic of its own that was called "progressive revelation". The completion of this dialectical process had now taken place in what Hegel called the realization of the Absolute Spirit and Helen Bishop called Bahá'u'lláh. Wow! And it took the Báb to open the Gate and usher us in. The completion of the human attempts to know itself was reflected in the shattered mirror of my own fanciful attempts. And informing those attempts—even my own broken ones—was the extra-human transcendence that is the infinite God. It was not all about me. . . .
>
> I had never gotten beyond the imaginal to the Notion, to the actual dialectic of the soul. I had never entered what Hegel called "spirit" or "thought" as the self-consciousness of "'spirit'." Of course, Romanticism was no help, that goes without saying. But what needs to be said was what you always knew: the university was my insane asylum in which I could act out my insanity in Blake, Shelley or Wordsworth, as if in my understanding of them I was sane. The university provided me with a container for my madness, some notion of divinity that I could only seemingly inhabit or it could seemingly inhabit me. It was all a delusion. Whatever sanity I had remaining to me lay in my recognition of the delusion I was in. (Woodman, Letter to Yeo, 2001)

In this ruthless self-criticism, Woodman seems to repudiate poetic faith, the ability to inhabit the archetypal world of mythos, story and image, through a willing suspension of disbelief, as "no help." Several years before, his friend Robert Aziz had suggested to him that the radical inner-world orientation of archetypal Romanticism might be merely a vehicle for aesthetic, rather than ethical, engagement

with unfolding reality. "The romantic path of transpersonal aesthetics," says Aziz, "is always far more pleasing than submitting oneself to the harsh realities of genuine personality differentiation. Yet, the seductive appeal of such a Romantic leap notwithstanding, it should be understood that escape into the archetypal aesthetic would further neither the analytical process nor the soul journey" (Aziz, *Syndetic Paradigm* 14–15). The suggestion that his immersion in the archetypal world could be blocking his capacity for transformation intrigued him. Aziz's insight was exciting, but at the same time deeply disturbing.

In the light of this criticism, the interpretation of his dream of the Báb that Douglas Martin offered him takes on a rosy tint. "Look," Martin told him, "this is the story of your life: You were a Bahá'í, in this very dramatic way, you recognized the Báb and responded to Him and so on, but from then on there was this huge somersault, and that was your academic life. And then you came crashing down to His feet, and all of a sudden you became very involved with the Bahá'í Faith itself." Woodman liked the sound of that and exclaimed, 'That's it! That's what happened'" (Martin, Personal interview). When Martin told Woodman how he interpreted his dream, as a narrative of his future in which he would fly for fifty years, a creature of air immersed in the archetypal world of mythos, to land at the feet of the Báb, he was offering a retrospective interpretation of the dream. Woodman agreed. (In my experience he tended to affirm statements in conversation that had a ring of imaginative truth to them, not as a final word but as a vivid constellation of meaning in the moment.)

Dreams, however, tend to depict the present condition of the dreamer against the backdrop of a potential developmental path. This dream has the hallmarks of such a transformational dream, meaning that it is a dream that announces a potential transformational shift of consciousness, the realization of which, it should be emphasized, will depend entirely on the work one does on oneself. A dream of the Báb, the Gate, Aziz suggests, could be opening such a transformational portal to Woodman. It could be an initiation dream (Aziz, Personal interview).

It could be argued that as Woodman continued to reflect on the meaning of the dream throughout his long life, he also found that he would not, or could not, transform himself in response to the Báb's silent invitation in the dream. He missed the initiatory invitation in 1942. In 1992 he would write a book that was an effort to make sense of the dream, and he would continue to revisit its unanswered questions until the very end.

Woodman believed, as he wrote of Coleridge, "that his life was a poem that God was struggling to write, the object of which was salvation," and that his writing, his entire *oeuvre*, was an ongoing endeavour to do what Coleridge said mystics must do: to separate delusions from intuitions ("Dying into Eternity" n.p.). If the dream was a

failed initiation, it was the highest form of failed initiation imaginable—relentlessly challenging, endlessly generative for him in his spiritual journey.

In the books that he wrote after he retired he explored this difficult and, in the secular humanist worldview of twentieth century academia, forbidden territory. Not only was religion off limits (Woodman's colleague Northrop Frye called himself an "underground agent" for the United Church of Canada) but the work of Carl Jung also remained, Woodman knew, on the lunatic fringe.

There was also something else hidden, "underground," within the creative process of Woodman's teaching. As he wrote to his friend, professor Glen Eyford:

> I was, at it were, giving my unconscious (Jung would call it the collective unconscious) into the keeping of whomever would or could receive it. You, for example. And listening to you lecture, I thought to myself "how splendidly Glen has carried my soul through the world!" Of course, you were carrying your own soul, but that is how I have lived**.** Those whom I taught became for me carriers of my soul. It is called projection or identification. I know my particular fate has put into my hands a rich storehouse of spiritual matter, of psychic phenomena. My cup is overflowing all the time. But I have had to overflow in a curiously underground way, as if my river does not flow above ground, as if it was an underground stream which, like Coleridge's sacred river Alph in *Kubla Khan*, is "flung up momently," and sinks again "in tumult to a lifeless ocean." I want to describe to you as graphically as I can what my underground teaching looks like. I will tell you how I teach the Romantics, specifically Blake, whom I spend half a year on each year, and lecture to an overflow class that is allowed to line the walls if there are no seats. For this is how in my underground passage (the classroom) I teach the Faith.

In Blake's epic, *Milton*, occurs one of the best descriptions I know of the 11th minute in which a new creation began. Here is the dawn of the new day in the soul of Mullá Husayn in the Báb's upper room:

> There is a Moment in each day that Satan cannot find
> Nor can his Watch Fiends find it, but the Industrious find
> This Moment & it multiply, & when it once is found
> It renovates every Moment of the Day if rightly placed.

Blake says this "Moment" is "less than the Pulsation of the Artery." He devotes an entire epic to that "Pulsation" in which all the events of history from Creation to the Last Judgement (6000 years, he calls it) are constellated in this single "Pulsation." Indeed, he

> argues, every "Pulsation", every beat of the human heart is that entire history brought to a single instant in which there is no past or present or future but only NOW (Woodman, Letter to Eyford, June 1985).

The letter then goes into great detail on the subject of what became, over the next twenty years, *Revelation and Knowledge*. He concludes, "You can see what my book on the apocalypse is all about and why it ends with Bahá'u'lláh. I'm going to finish it in retirement. The academic community will say 'I told you so. He was mad all the time!'" (Woodman, Letter to Eyford, June 1985).

Both of the books that he wrote late in life are bogged down by a writing style that is often impenetrable. Reading his work one sometimes feels, as Nabokov said of his father's writing (about the mysteries of butterfly evolution), that "every sentence is an opaquely glazed door with a sign to halt intruders. The author's goal, essentially, was to provide a minimum of words and a maximum of thought" (74). "Throughout my academic life," Woodman confessed at the age of eighty-eight, "I have depended upon students and scholars not knowing what, as a closeted Bahá'í, I was talking about by not, except inwardly to myself, talking about it. That time is now passed. I am out of the religious closet. The source of the presumed obscurity attributed to my writing style, comparable to a dance of seven veils, is now, as the eighth, partially unveiled" (Woodman, "Revelation and Art" n.p.). He requires the reader to leap into the deep and feverish realm of his mind where all his eclectic erudition flows together. He lives in a world of what he calls "esoteric legacies," particularly the radical psychology of Carl Jung from the twentieth century and the revolutionary thinking of the English Romantics from the turn of the eighteenth. The reader is rewarded, however, with, startling insights about the book's daunting subjects—divine revelation, creative imagination, and knowledge—percolating up through Woodman's poetry-saturated internal dialogue.

Poet and educator Sandra Hutchison agrees that the books are difficult. "I think Ross's writing was a kind of rendering of a waking vision, and you would have to know the language of the dream in order to understand it, and there was almost a sort of process of initiation into the vocabulary and the language and the paradigms that you had to go through if you were to understand what was being said" (Hutchison, Personal interview). On the other hand, Douglas Martin told me that "those of us who have read this book [*Revelation and Knowledge*] are so grateful to Ross. It's a wonderful final gift . . . to the Bahá'í community . . . he wanted Bahá'ís to think more—if they didn't, he didn't get upset, he just laughed that terrific laugh" (Martin, Personal interview).

Woodman believed, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, that art is the gift of the holy

spirit, that when one is painting at a canvas, it is as if one is worshipping in a temple. He was fond of quoting the painter Henri Matisse who, when asked if he believed in God, said, "Yes, when I am working." Woodman identified his own praxis as "the reading of a living work of art." His teaching and writing was always an extended hand, the artist reaching out to elevate the reader/viewer to participate in the "mind in creation" rather than being a mere observer, an admirer of the evidence of that mind. "My whole soul is suspended into its own distinctive form of imaginative activity, the reading of a living work of art becoming another form of it as a sign of its continuing life until, as Shakespeare describes his sonnets, "the last syllable of recorded time" (Woodman, "Revelation and Art" n.p.).

In an essay in *The Journal of Bahá'i Studies* (1991) he made a case for Bahá'u'lláh's influence on the New York School of abstract expressionist painting, based on the fact that the Bahá'í painter Mark Tobey was a close friend of Jackson Pollock and twenty-two years his senior, and as such was the unacknowledged founder of this important movement in modern art. Using the Romantic term "unapprehended inspiration," he suggests that Pollock, Lee Krasner, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, et. al., living in the "City of the Covenant"[6] where 'Abdu'l-Bahá first set foot in America in 1912, were influenced by a Bahá'í revelation they knew nothing about. His explanation of this convergence is grounded in depth psychology—"the great 20th c movement [which emerged from the work of Freud and Jung] to bring together the conscious and the unconscious is a secular version of Revelation. The meeting place is the dream" (Woodman, Letter to Eyford, May 1985).

In unpublished essays written after he completed *Revelation and Knowledg*e, Woodman takes on what he sees as a kind of last frontier, to work through a long-overdue distinction between soul and psyche. As he contemplates his approaching death he wants to clarify for himself, perhaps only for the present moment in a countless number of such epiphanies, "a dawning recognition of the difference between soul and psyche upon which knowledge as faith depends" (Woodman, "Revelation and Art" n.p.). Reflecting on Coleridge's idea that poetry requires the reader's "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment," and amplifying his newfound discovery that psyche and soul are *not* synonymous, Woodman suggests that "the suspension that belongs to art is a willing suspension between psyche and soul that allows us to explore the difference."

> "My 'willing suspension of disbelief' which, with reference to the arts, I, like so many others for whom the arts became a religion, had amply developed, deprived

6 New York City was honored by 'Abdu'l-Bahá with the title "City of the Covenant" on 19 June 1912, during His stay in that city.

> me of the necessary religious faith. Instead of placing the psyche in service of the soul, I realized in the midst of death that I had developed it at the cost of soul.
> . . . As a Romanticist I, turning from soul to psyche, was prepared to argue that psyche, as what Keats called "Soul-making," is a "grander scheme of salvation" than revealed religion because it "does not affront [my] reason and humanity." Like Keats, I was prepared by my poetic education to reject revealed religion as a belief system. (Woodman, "Dying into Eternity" n.p.)

In a long, late-night meditation on a mandala drawing by Bahá'í artist Sky Glabush, entitled *Have you heard of Bahá'u'lláh?* Woodman wonders about Glabush's question "in my own chosen free-association manner that, as chaos, skirts the madness chaos fearfully unveils. Revelation, sanity and madness are issues that haunt my reflections." As he immerses himself in the mandala through a long sleepless night, he says "it is as if the entire history of Persian miniatures were awakening from an immemorial Western sleep . . . I have never seen a drawing like it. Blake's world in a grain of sand is repeated here in a pencil's targeted tip. Details for a Sufi poem, "Language of Birds," in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's renovated Islamic wing are painted with the hairs from the bellies of squirrels" (Woodman, "Revelation and Art" n.p.).

In Woodman's view, "[a] mandala is, in its pictorial essence, a portrayal of the soul… Ideally conceived in a meditative state, the mandala embraces futurity in a timeless Now" (Woodman, "Revelation and Art" n.p.]). Jung, who in a period of profound "creative illness" painted in his Red Book mandalas from his dreams, said that "it represents the result of the joint labours of consciousness and the unconscious, and attains the likeness of the God-image in the form of the mandala, which is probably the simplest model of a concept of wholeness and one which spontaneously arises in the mind as a representation of the struggle and reconciliation of opposites" (335). Reaching toward the mystery he sees in Glabush's mandala, Woodman quotes Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn*: "[T]herefore ye soft pipes play on; / Not to the sensual ear, but more endear'd, / Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone" (lines 12–14). "As I hear it," says Woodman, "Glabush . . . is using his pencil to 'pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone'" (Woodman, "Revelation and Art" n.p.).

Sky Glabush explains what happened when Woodman first acquired the mandala drawing. "He put it right in his study. It was funny because he would bring people over and they would be like 'why did you put that awful thing in, you wrecked your whole collection with that piece. That piece totally alienates me. . . .' The piece is a good fulcrum from which to think about his relationship to the Faith. What he would say is that it is

not didactic. If you read what he wrote about it, it's the opposite of didactic. It's a question, a *sound*, it's faith posed as an unanswerable, ineffable question. I think he revelled in that" (Glabush, Personal interview).

As his body and mind began to fail him in his late eighties, and his cherished wife Marion settled deeper into dementia, he was preoccupied with the question of soul. "I had been shifting my attention from the *body terrestrial* to the *body celestial*, knowing that my *body terrestrial* was, like Marion's, moving steadily and irreversibly toward its death. . . . The *terrestrial* and the *celestial* had always been deeply entwined. But now they were pulling apart . . . *Revelation and Knowledge* did not finally resolve the matter of suspended disbelief . . . such were the pleasures gratifyingly provided by my enlightened commitment to the liberal arts that I did not wish to resolve my suspended state. . . . But I was not dying then. I am dying now. Death is a great leveller" (Woodman, "Dying into Eternity" n.p.).

Written in the year before Woodman died, "Whispering Silence" is a series of meditations on the mystery of the soul, accounts of the dead and the afterlife as he takes leave of his art collection and his home. It is his farewell text pointing clearly toward a door he expected to pass through, though he could never be sure, try as he might to think his way to certainty.

Woodman speaks of his tolerance for ambiguity and of his doubt, as a choice he had made, to stand with the poet. "I have tried to confront head on what finally differentiates the poet and the prophet, who appear in so many respects to be identical. . . . The difference between the prophet and the poet is the difference between . . . grace and nature, revelation and inspiration, miracle and magic. . . . The poet constructs a likeness of what the prophet reveals" (Woodman, "Whispering Silence" n.p.). "But this is the thing: divine revelation or what Plato called divine madness, the poet or the prophet. I really all these years opted for the poet because I couldn't deal with the kind of obedience and submission the prophet demands" (Woodman, Personal interview). Here we see Woodman in a confessional mode, admitting that he had not been willing to sacrifice his commitment to fiction, to enter into the transformation that was offered to him in his dream of the Báb.

In an interview with the artist Sky Glabush, I suggested that Woodman's doubt toward the end was like Kirkegaard's—that at the moment of deepest doubt, it is possible to have the most profound conversation with the divine. Glabush agreed:

> I think it's good now. I wish I could say that to him. Because a person who has that degree of questioning shows the kind of robust and healthy place that religion has. You are not taking anything away by asking questions, you are only enriching the conversation. No matter how much ambivalence, or questions, uncertainty about things

> he may have had, that record is important. It's more real than trying to write something emphatic when he didn't have an emphatic conviction. It's more real to write from the standpoint of doubt! That is actually more of an affirmative position. Because its real, and that's what I would say to him.

The "powers" that Woodman evokes in this next passage are the dead, the gods, and the living deity within him which he sought to amplify and to live, not just as a suspension of disbelief, but as *gnosis*. "The joy of the worm" is a reference to the end of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, and the worm is the poisonous asp that Cleopatra holds to her breast.

> After a rich spiritual and physical life filled with mental, though conflicting, stimulation, I can, I confess, take no more and I frankly fear for those who are now mentally setting out, as I set out, to find their way. Those creative minds that influenced me in ways I have attempted to describe were, like my mind, deeply disturbed by the gift of creativity, which can, as a warning, conduct to madness. If such a warning strikes, my hope is that you will heed it, though how you heed it can never be an easy choice. My desire is that you may in some small way profit from at least some of the choices I made and unmade to arrive at ninety with what is left, which in this book I bestow upon you. The beauty of [art] objects resides in the beauty of thought that, in the act of creation, informs them. "We are lived by powers we pretend to understand," declared W.H. Auden. Shamdasani used this quotation to sum up as best he could the life and work of Jung. To which I would add, understood or not, they, the powers, are there as what Wordsworth called the Uncreated. Should you become aware of their presence, beware of becoming possessed by them, or, if possessed, do your best to move beyond pretending. I wish you joy of the worm. (Woodman, "Whispering Silence" n.p.)

Woodman died on 19 March 2014, Naw-Rúz. He had told Sky Glabush that he wanted a Bahá'í burial, but it was not written down anywhere. Woodman's executor Joel Faflak agreed that this could be done, but not within twenty-four hours as is customary.[7] People were coming from overseas for the funeral, and the body needed to be embalmed. With the help of a Persian Bahá'í friend, Sky went ahead and prepared Ross's body—carefully bathing, wrapping him from head to foot in five pieces of silk, placing the burial ring on his hand. I attended Woodman's funeral, and when I saw his serene face encircled in pale silk, I, like

7 This is an Iranian custom that sometimes informs Bahá'í practice, although the Bahá'í Writings contain no provisions on the subject.

perhaps most of the mourners present, was initially taken aback, but of course could quickly accept its meaning in terms of the limited understanding I had of the Bahá'í Faith. The question of Woodman's faith hung in the air like the question mark in Glabush's mandala. I found myself thinking of a line from Yeats: "Like a long legged-fly upon the stream/His mind moves upon silence" (lines 9–10).

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Note: Ross Woodman's unpublished writings are quoted with permission of his literary executor, Joel Faflak. All personal interviews prior to 2022 were conducted for the feature documentary film *Rebel Angel*, which can be seen at rebelangel.ca.

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