

# Artist, Seeker and Seer

## A vocabulary and a perspective for the appreciation and creation of art inspired by the Bahá'í Writings

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*Isn't the true poet or painter a seer?*

J. D. Salinger

Our experience of art in this century lies in fragments, and the questions which yet another theory of aesthetics might provoke would not necessarily help us to reassemble these fragments. This paper, therefore, cannot presume to impose a self-styled unity on the jostling theories about art and criticism; indeed, it claims to be no more than another fragment itself. What it does hope to achieve, however, is to suggest a vocabulary and a perspective, inspired by the Bahá'í Writings, which would enable us to realize that unity is already there; it does not need to be supplied. What it will attempt is to broaden categorizing habits of mind in order to accept that unity as our birthright; there is no need to justify it. The intention of this paper is to use selected imagery and metaphor from the Bahá'í Writings in order to discover therein the guidelines for both the appreciation and the creation of art by Bahá'ís.

The keys of aesthetic response defined in this essay need not be limited to an appreciation of poetry only, or adopted as a pattern by which to write it, for the thoughts that follow are not intended as absolute definitions. The primary aim of this study is to suggest the interdependence of diverse points of view rather than the totality of any single vision. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "The spirit of unity exists in the divine words," and it is hoped that by turning to them in order to explore the subject of Bahá'í aesthetics, we will be drawn by that spirit to reflect upon "the enigmas, the inter-relationships, the rules that govern all."<sup>1</sup> From this vantage point of the language of Bahá'u'lláh, it will become clear that seeming contradictions in criticism and creativity have clear relationships, that random points such as historicity and symbolic poetry, logical proof and passionate expression lie along a linking line, that contemporary literature and critical language cannot provide an adequate standard by which either to measure the matchless nature of the Writings, or to praise them with a matchless tongue.

It is difficult for Bahá'ís, living in a climate of cynicism, to be unaffected by it. It is not fashionable to experience exaltation, yearn for excellence, speak of triumph. The lack of certainty in our society, the anxiety we feel in committing ourselves, the fear of appearing too convinced have such hold that we can well appreciate why a contemporary poet might write,

river of my heart  
wait for me finish my prayer  
and run maybe<sup>2</sup>

Similarly our reluctance to express wholehearted enthusiasm can be well understood when we read the deprecating tones employed by a contemporary critic:

A good deal of G... 's more recent poetry leaves one wondering where to put the blame.<sup>3</sup>

One of the characteristics of great art, however, has always been that it invites a totality of response unchecked by any "maybe" and that it stimulates a critical reaction unstigmatized by "the blame of the blamer." Indeed our response to great art bears a distinct kinship with that resonant relationship to which the soul is summoned by the words of Bahá'u'lláh. The full "Baha'i" response to the Blessed Beauty is the archetype of a sensitive and vital response to any form of beauty in the arts. It is this kinship which the present paper seeks to make clear. It is this relationship which would reveal the nature of our spiritual creativity as Bahá'ís. It is this unity, already inherent in spite of our habits of fragmentation, which will contain the diversity of our aesthetic theories, and offer space for our thinking and moving souls in the vast arena of this Cause.

Bahá'u'lláh knew where the poet's heart was running before He cautioned it to stop, He is the archetypal Poet and calls the rivers of our hearts "with such a calling" that we cannot but run towards the Ocean of His Cause:

with the whole enthusiasm of (our) hearts, with all the eagerness of (our) souls, the full fervour of (our) will, and the concentrated efforts of (our) entire being(s)....<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, one of the cardinal principles of approach to God given by Bahá'u'lláh is to be in any condition but spiritual lethargy or poetic death. We might find ourselves broken-hearted, burning with indignation, or bright-eyed with joy, but “approach Me not,” He cautions “with lifeless hearts ....”<sup>5</sup> Even doubt, if undefiled by worldly desires, can draw us closer to His courts, for every aspect of the human condition can be a mirror, a “hierophany”<sup>6</sup> and hence an artistic expression of the soul’s consuming search for its sun.

Poetics, according to George Whalley, asserts that “faithful self-abandonment is more valuable than cerebral consent,”<sup>7</sup> a fact that is aptly illustrated by a significant portion of contemporary art, which is so self-conscious of that assertion that it employs its cerebral powers to supervise its self-abandonment. But one of the ancient aesthetic, as well as spiritual, laws is that for an experience to be real, its “value” (mentioned above) is not economic but moral; a work of art is not a coin with which we can buy and sell portions of reality but is itself a portion of that divine fitness of things.

Most literary critics and writers on aesthetics contrive to pretend that no moral or religious issues should enter the realm of art; but it is not until we examine the implications of art in the sphere of moral value that we understand why art proceeds upon a knife edge....<sup>8</sup>

To walk the knife-edge in a condition of faithful self-abandonment may at first appear to be the goal of an imbecile, but then it has been those whose hearts did not wait for the “maybe” but ran, who have traditionally been the imbeciles, the poets and the seers, Salinger calls the artist a heavenly fool, a God-knower, and “a double-lensed burning glass.”<sup>9</sup> And speaking to the mirror-soul of man, the Author of *The Hidden Words* confides: “Cleanse thy heart with the burnish of the spirit, and hasten to the court of the Most High,”<sup>10</sup> In that state of translucence, the heart can recognize the relationship between dissimilarities, can reflect the patterns in which the blinding shapes and colours of human conscience revolve, and see a glimpse of certitude through doors of spiritual and aesthetic understanding,

Certitude seizes the soul with an entirety that leaves no other condition possible, except wonder. We find ourselves in those mute moments encircled by the City, an inmate of those pavilions, familiar with all. We see fell swoop, and astonishment contains us. This is the consummation devoutly wished by “the true artist-seer, the heavenly fool who does and can produce beauty.”<sup>11</sup> For it is this bird among human beings who would fly highest, who would “soar as long as Thine own overpowering sovereignty can endure,”<sup>12</sup> and scale the heights of understanding in order to arrive at the outer confines of his powerlessness, breathless and exultant.

Great art, therefore, is the expression of the soul’s glimpse of certitude in the double-lensed burning glass of an aesthetic structure commensurate with the patterns it perceives. To be great it must also seize us with an entirety that leaves no word untouched by wonder, no line untouched by light. Whether in dance, in song, in colour or rhythm, art conveys us to a place at once familiar and strange. It invites crimson astonishment to leap through our veins. It may tell of pain and anguish; it may exalt with the lilt of every breeze. But whether it comes as lamentation or love, laughter or loss, it is impelled by an urgency that tells of the soul’s flight and not the mind’s ease. It moves in triumph through the Kingdom of Names on the journey to a City beyond. It tells of the countries and dangers passed, of the follies and frailties witnessed, of the angels of fire and snow encountered along the way. It is about the journey of the poet’s soul, that bird among human beings.

In this essay I would like to suggest that a Bahá'í is one who, by the very nature of his perception, must begin to see like a poet. We are not all artists, and the degrees of our aesthetic response to the Writings, to each other and our lives are diverse; but by definition a “true” Bahá'í must be a seer also. Although we may be unequally gifted in the capacity to create artistic structures commensurate with what we perceive, we must have refined our powers of response to something akin to poetic appreciation or we would not even have recognized the summons of the Nightingale of God. This is an age when the poet is not the only seer we have on earth, but is the seer particularly endowed to sing of what he sees. The song of the Manifestation for this Day has already seized the soul of mankind, and the spiritual springtime stirred the seeds of humanity’s response to Him, which must, according to the law of Beauty, be infinitely varied. What remains, therefore, is for us to be seers of that Beauty striving to express what we have seen.

And so a Bahá'í aesthetic, like all other aspects of Bahá'í life, cannot be bound by formulae or methodology. It is a form of “seeing” that enables us to use those creative endeavours in the fields of art, music and literature to reflect the motions in the heart of the “true” believer: “of search, of earnest striving, of longing desire, of passionate devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy....”<sup>13</sup>

## Fearful Beauty

There are oceans of response that lie uncharted in our explorations of the Faith. We have so far, like cautious traders, only crossed those straits most clearly mapped for us. We have made some acquaintance with historical landmarks and so edge our way across those waters with a show of bravery, a toss of fluttering facts. We are familiar with the archipelago of methods and techniques among our contemporaries but may err if we too sedulously cling to their stepping-stones as we attempt to cross the wide waters of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Our desire to demonstrate its wonders to the land-locked minds of the many still on shore has inspired us to make sorties into the depths and trail back with our plunder of seaweed and shells, which, carefully labelled and identified, lie unimpressively among the heaps of fossilized information gathered by the museum-minded members of the human race.

But in terms of aesthetic response, we have hardly begun to cut loose from our moorings, feel the rise and swell, the terror and triumph of the Cause of God waiting to carry our frailties forth to discover new worlds. Inhibited by the climate of noncommitment and defensiveness in which our twilight generation lives and moves, we have yet to discover, to our perpetual delight, that art is one of the forms of expression waiting to serve this Cause, waiting to dance with us along the knife-edge in a condition of self-abandonment. And similarly we have yet to evolve from the current unease of being aesthetic tenants, so that we might claim our rightful heritage as seers, and watch the patterns of our lives unfold through the dazzling coloured mansions of our Lord. The river-running heart, unchecked and undespised, may yet cross its conditional subclauses and attain the goal.

The power of eloquence, the dancing beauty of utterance, the mysterious subtleties of image and sign, symbol and metaphor, that attend this Revelation are some of its most significant characteristics. The Word of God has always been the Fashioner, and the Creator of vibrant circles of culture in previous dispensations. But we have never before had such abundance, such Words that set us singing and dancing and threading our dark with the colours of day. Such throbbing powers have never before reached our arteries so unrestrained, unbound. How can we compromise our commitment to the Cause in the field of aesthetic response, therefore? How can we, like Judases, measure the majesty of this Revelation in the paltry coin of a decadent culture?

But intoxicated by the written beauty of the Revelation, perhaps we hardly know how to express our wonder. At one extreme we face the danger of inarticulation. Vision may become a veil across communication, and ecstasy can create a private and interior landscape, inaccessible to most and irrelevant to all. At the other extreme, we face anxiety for approbation, and need for approval of our contemporaries, that may compromise the magnitude of the Cause and cause us to utter imitation. Art gives us gleams of immortality, but imitation provides us with simulated flickers, or else so shrouds the mind with smoke screens that we must invent the gleam ourselves in order to make sense of things. As Bahá'ís we know, however, that the true believer or artist cannot peek coyly at the sun, nor play hide-and-seek among the clouds, but must strive to obtain a glimpse of the first streaks of the promised dawn. And dawn, in the field of aesthetic response to the Baha'i Faith, is any form that both contains the promise and the proof of beauty still unborn and quietly commands us to conform to that Baha'i striving, motivated by the driving urge to find a fit vessel in which to set sail on this light-filled and shoreless ocean of Bahá.

Bahá'u'lláh has stressed repeatedly that we will be unable to see Him unless we see with His eye, or to hear His melody unless we hearken with His ear. He has warned us not to weigh His words by the standards of men, nor to use the methods current among them to judge His Faith. Knowing this we have sometimes found ourselves speechless in singing His praise because we found our praise of Him needed translation to be understood by the world around us. What we forgot in the process was that our praise of Him told less of His grandeur than it did of our limitations, and that the need to translate from one form of limitation into another might indeed have been avoided had we thought that His creative Word supplied us with the very means we lacked in giving praise. In other words, we have not yet turned to the images of the Writings without reserve, or trusted their metaphors without a "maybe"; we have not wholly abandoned ourselves to His language that He might teach us how to make mention of Him.

But most of us make a sharp distinction between use of the creative Word and the employment of codes and languages current among us. We keep His Word for our private prayer and use our codes for public communication. And not infrequently we wield the blunt tools of the latter in order to make incisions of comprehension into the former. Often, too, in an attempt to reconcile the seeming contradictions in our lives, we think that if we put to use the methods and techniques with which we are familiar, in service to the Cause, they would somehow be absolved from stain and so attain acceptance in the courts of faith. In order to do this, however, we need to relinquish ourselves to the ebb and flow of the metaphors of Baha'u'llah. Our own methods and techniques, like driftwood, may be a means of floating for a while but can do little more lamentation. There is a need for us to be burned too by the flame that rages in His veins, or there will be no difference between our bold attempts and those well-meaning discourses that chill the heart; we will be in danger of beginning and ending in words and of

never even approaching the fire of the Revelation in between. We shall have conveyed the cup to our lips but not have allowed the wine to enter us, and so thirst will still consume us.

There are some standards of conventional response and certain traditional criteria in relation to aesthetic appreciation which we might first define and possibly reevaluate before we begin to appreciate the metaphorical wine offered to us by Bahá'u'lláh. Since the subject is too vast for the present exploratory study, I will restrict myself to two of these conventions and commit the outrage of conscious generalization in order to compare them with some of the principles I would suggest lie waiting for our discovery in the Writings.

### **The Two Conventions**

The first of these conventions concerns our need for and manipulation of power. The form which power takes in art and criticism has its roots in our tendency either to cite authority or flout it in order for our argument or aesthetic expression to be effective. In traditional expository writing, the conventional format requires a substantial groundwork of logic be laid for the establishment of precedent, the citation of authority. The convention in poetry also demands that a certain common foundation be acknowledged in the classics and literary giants of the past. This convention could either take the form of proof and evidence to support the thrust of the argument or substantiate the flight of poetic fantasy; or it could serve as a foil against which the orator demonstrates his rhetorical powers of disagreement, and the poet pushes aside previous laws in order to lay down his own. In either case, to cite authority or to lean upon it in order to leap away achieves two results. It proves the writer's competence to approach a subject, identifying his credentials to do so on the one hand, and on the other, places the reader on firm and common ground, providing him with the necessary landmarks by which to follow the ensuing argument.

The second convention in traditional expository writing is to furnish fresh evidence for the new argument one is advancing. In poetry this convention takes the form of the establishment of new, sometimes alarming, always provoking imagery which heaps upon the reader an accumulation of novelty in order to seduce him to accept the poet's vision. This persuasive convention, in its broadest sense, therefore, concerns the concept of control, and how the power of argument is manipulated by writers. It is different from the first convention, because it establishes evidence from the present, whereas the former makes use of the past. The logic of expository prose requires examples and evidence that are not only authoritative but also interpretative of the circumstances. The sheer weight and accumulative impression of such evidence therefore serves to justify a writer's opinion. If his examples are insignificant, he loses the sympathy of his reader; if his evidence is vague, he undermines the impact of his argument.

These two conventions have been the accepted formulae for most religious and scientific rhetoric for the last four centuries. They have provided the foil of traditional expectation against which the creative mind has tested its powers either to excel or to flout convention. The two criteria also depend upon each other: the exercise of power for its own sake in the form of citation of authority merely creates a pomposity in criticism and a certain dilettante posturing in art. Similarly, the exercise of virtuosity and interpretive extravagance, without the knowledge, however implicit, of precedence and previous authorization in an artistic or even scientific tradition, may appear to be the ramblings of a lunatic or the hypotheses of a charlatan. Indeed, it is based upon these criteria of authoritative precedence and accumulated evidence that some of the most acute thinkers of our century have been able to convince us of theories that have surely shaped our thinking for the future. These two established conventions have, at their finest, enabled us to build strongly upon the insights of visionaries and geniuses, and so we naturally turn to them when we approach the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

### **Reversals**

Bahá'u'lláh's own methods, however, and the patterns traced by His language tell us that His authority is of a different kind, His source of power independent of the conventions described. "We have not entered any school," He declares, "... nor read any of your dissertations. Incline your ears to the words of this unlettered One, ..." <sup>14</sup> He displaces the emphasis on established conventional authority and rank when He refers to Himself as "this Youth" and claims, "We perused not the books which men possess and We acquired not the learning current amongst them, ..." <sup>15</sup> He actually goes so far as to reverse the tradition entirely by disclaiming such credentials: "Indeed My heart ... hath been purged ... from the concepts of the learned and is sanctified from the utterances of the wise." <sup>16</sup> When He does provide the reader with recognizable landmarks as, for instance, in the *Lawh-i-Hikmat (Tablet of Wisdom)*, He stresses that "Had it not been for the love I cherish for thee, I would not have uttered a single word of what hath been mentioned." <sup>17</sup> For in this Tablet, the references to Socrates, Hippocrates and the like are offered in order to comply to His reader's request and have no bearing upon His claims. Besides He reminds us that when He utters "that which the Spirit hath instilled into My heart," <sup>18</sup> it is not because of His own wish to impress, but because this information presented itself to Him; "Thus do We set down in writing that which the eye perceiveth." <sup>19</sup> The

correlation between the books of Creation and Revelation are stressed by Him so that we realize true wisdom is not confined to book learning but can be apprehended through nature which is the Will of God “manifested in the world of being.”<sup>20</sup>

Similarly in relation to the convention of amassing evidence and accumulating quotations to support His statements, Bahá'u'lláh frequently evades this with a phrase that would suggest there is no need for such elaborations: ..We have no wish to mention anything further...<sup>21</sup> He writes, and again implies that such detail would at best cause fatigue and chill the heart; “To mention their names at this point, or to give thee a detailed account thereof, would lead to prolixity, and would depart from the main theme.”<sup>22</sup> And He concludes that at worst such details of proof would, for the small-minded, become an end in themselves, causing the heart to be clouded from the truth He is expounding, and thus providing material for more dispute and less clarity: “We are loathe to enlarge on this subject,” He states, speaking about the transcendent nature of the Word of God, “inasmuch as the unbelievers have inclined their ears towards Us in order to hear that which might enable them to cavil against God, ....”<sup>23</sup>

With a revolutionary sweep of His pen, He sets our minds in motion, tossing into the world already scattered by His breath the treasured traditions of the past so that they too might be combined and reunited in new forms commensurate with this age. We need to become unmoored from these conventions, therefore, in order that He can create fresh combinations for us from the traditional techniques of expository writing and aesthetic appreciation in the past.

Through that Word the realities of all created things were shaken, were divided, separated, scattered, combined and reunited, disclosing, in both the contingent world and the heavenly kingdom, entities of a new creation....<sup>24</sup>

It ill beseemeth thee to turn thy gaze unto former or more recent times. Make thou mention of this Day and magnify that which hath appeared therein.<sup>25</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh's reversals provide us with a fresh definition of precedence and authority and also elucidate a startling concept of the establishment of proof. Both power and control are transfigured by Him as He introduces us to a relationship with the two characteristics of this contingent world, space and time, which has only been dimly conceived before. If we study what happens as a result of these two reversals we may discover new principles at work that transform our approach to aesthetics and provide us with patterns, reflective of spiritual standards. These may indicate the direction in which we could be moving to define a Bahá'í theory of art.

The result of the first reversal is that the reader finds the solid ground of authority and convention swept away from beneath his feet. Instead of standing on firm historical evidence upon which he might construct his argument, he is tossed into a vast and limitless space in which he finds that the principal authority he has to cling to is found in the statements of the previous Prophets laid down as the established method of the relationship of God with man. This is a very different kind of “precedence” from what he has been accustomed to, for it stresses humanity's powerlessness in relation to its Source of being. Bahá'u'lláh frequently calls upon these Divine witnesses of the past to substantiate His words, but the effect is not to strengthen our private scaffolding of self-assurance. On the contrary, the authority of the Prophets of the past confines our utter dependence upon God and our total reliance upon His will. When He relates the chronicle of humanity's betrayal and failure to respond to this Will, we feel ourselves tumbling in the gulf of separation; when He illustrates God's method in the past and in the future, we feel ourselves striving to cross those spaces and experience precedence, merely strengthen this same theme: that mankind is powerless to establish any precedence that does not derive its motivating energies from proximity to and remoteness from the court of his Lord. Thus He transforms the first literary convention and establishes that the only way to begin an exposition of truth is not from a position of authority but from a recognition of powerlessness before God.

The result of the second reversal confounds our sense of measured time associated with the steady accumulation of proofs and examples. By the use of typology, Bahá'u'lláh invites us into an experience of the past, present and future, synchronized in a single step. In a single event we can discover a poignant historic moment, an event that can recur throughout our lives and the development of the Cause, as well as the spiritual archetype which tells of the soul's response to its Creator. The simultaneity of these three levels of time eliminates the necessity to amass facts or provide repeated proofs.

One brief example which will demonstrate this principle and alert us to the infinite variations it can take, might be found in the prayer revealed by Bahá'u'lláh for His son, Mírzá Mihdí, the Purest Branch:

Lauded be Thy name, O Lord my God! Thou seest me in this day shut up in my prison, and fallen into the hands of Thine adversaries, and beholdest my son lying in the dust before Thy face.<sup>26</sup>

At the immediate level, this lamentation takes us back to the tragic circumstances of the death and sacrifice of the Purest Branch which Shoghi Effendi chronicles with such tenderness in *God Passes By*.<sup>27</sup> At the second level, we also recognize elements in the story that seem resonant with meaning and that might be present many times in the personal life of an individual as well as in the development of religion. The sacrifice of a loved one may be the means of advancement, just as persecution may open the doors of recognition. But there is also a third level which connects our hearts to this prayer, for the story of sacrifice and sons is an ancient one and contains profound spiritual truths. We know, as we read, that “prisons” in the Writings at once symbolize this contingent world and also the ego of man; and we dimly sense that the “dust” reminds us of the condition of humility and servitude evinced by the earth itself, which addresses us saying, “...witness, how patient I am...”<sup>28</sup> Indeed as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá teaches us in His Tablet of Visitation, the highest station we may attain is to become “as dust in the pathway of Thy loved ones.”<sup>29</sup>

Although it would limit and diminish our response to the prayer to analyse it too rigidly, an awareness of the three-fold nature of time enables us to read Bahá’u’lláh’s words about His son with a strange feeling of awe. We find in a single sentence that we are only one step away from the poignancy of the past, the reverberating immediacy of the present and the principles we know must guide the future. “The learned and the wise have for long years striven and failed to attain the presence of the All-Glorious”<sup>30</sup> and yet Bahá’u’lláh permits us to catch the harmonies of “myriads of hidden mysteries”<sup>31</sup> in a single melody, if we could only hear with His ear.

These, then, are two of the ways in which Bahá’u’lláh’s most precious speech can teach us how to explore the Ocean of His Cause. He has given us keys by which to unlock time and space in the Kingdom of His Names. There are a myriad of others; and as we read His Writings, we discover an infinite variety of ways in which they can be used to open the locked gates of our contingent world, which suffers too readily from separateness. All keys which come from His hand have certain characteristics in common; however, their aim is not to focus our attention on themselves as techniques but on the majesty of the Revelation towards which they point. Unlike our own variety of “analysing and interpreting and circulating of complex dubieties,”<sup>32</sup> the keys of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation take our minds from the peripheral concerns—whether they be aesthetics, economics, or any other field of social activity—and recall us to the pivotal power of the Word of God. Using His keys rather than our own, we shall find ourselves drawing closer to each other, to a sense of shared joy in whatever each one discovers, and to a widening wonder in the Cause itself. If our methods create a gulf between our different temperaments, if they merely add to the veils with which our twilight civilization has so amply provided us, and if they obscure the glory of the Cause, then surely they cannot be His:

...for any movement animated by love moveth from the periphery to the centre, from space to the Day-Star of the universe. Perchance thou deemest this to be difficult, but I tell thee that such cannot be the case, for when the motivating and guiding power is the divine force of magnetism it is possible, by its aid, to traverse time and space easily and swiftly. Glory be upon the people of Bahá.<sup>33</sup>

### **The First Principle: The Extremities of Reunion and Separation**

In the *Lawh-i-Maqsúd*,<sup>34</sup> Bahá’u’lláh offers us some of the most significant guidelines concerning the standards of true art and the techniques of appreciation available to us as a result of His Revelation:

Every word of thy poetry is indeed like unto a mirror in which the evidences of the devotion and love thou cherishest for God and His chosen ones are reflected.... Its perusal hath truly proved highly impressive, for it was indicative of both the light of reunion and the fire of separation.<sup>35</sup>

By reminding us of the constant juxtaposition of remoteness and proximity which we experience in the very act of hearkening to “the delightful words of My honeyed tongue,”<sup>36</sup> Bahá’u’lláh not only redefines the meaning of “space” and provides us with the keys to transcend it, but also establishes for us significant prerequisites for art in this matchless Day. We write a journal in our hearts on this endless voyage towards Him. On this mirrored page we write a document of our discoveries and our despair; here can be found the traces of our wonder and our weakness in relation to our goal. To be an accurate journal, it must retain the mirrored nature of the heart and so must, like the heart, remain free of prejudices and the tarnish of a self-centred world. Clear and translucent it can record something perhaps of the journey that we make in this world and from first to last it must be faithful to the experiences of that heart. It will record our doubt as well as our delight; it will reflect our conflicts as well as our

confidence. It must, in the words of Bahá'u'lláh, tell of the light of reunion as well as the fire of separation. By these means space will be traversed and art can carry us towards eternity.

A rehearsal of anguish that tells only of the “metropolis of Satan”<sup>37</sup> and the illusions which it casts on the mind does not convey this balanced principle; neither does a travelogue about the City of Certitude with snap-shots of all the beauty spots. A work of art needs both light and fire so that we can learn to distinguish between them; it needs separation expressed so that reunion might be recognized. To concentrate on the one without the other would undermine the force of both. In a sense, the drama of human existence consists of the interplay between remoteness from and nearness to Beauty, Wisdom, Order and Love, and art derives its power from the tension and contrast in this interplay. It is therefore appropriate that the characteristics of an aesthetic appreciation of the Faith are similar to those which Bahá'u'lláh describes so poetically in *Prayers and Meditations*:

Thou hast Thyself, O my God, protected them ... from both extremities. But for the burning of their souls and the sighing of their hearts, they would be drowned in the midst of their tears, and but for the flood of their tears they would be burnt up by the fire of their hearts and the heat of their souls. Methinks they are like the angels which Thou hast created of snow and fire.<sup>38</sup>

There could be no more exquisite definition for a work of art that strives to reflect the spirit of the Bahá'í Revelation than this image. Like an angel of snow and fire, a work of art has a precarious nature, one that should not preen itself for immortality against the ravages of time and temperament. Like an angel it survives a space, crystallized within an aesthetic framework and yet blazing with its inner life; like an angel it bears witness too, suspended between extremities, of the consuming love affair between the soul and its Beloved, the mind and its Ideal; and like an angel, a work of art might enable the servants of Bahá'u'lláh to accomplish His designs with deeds of fire, and by so doing, might touch the ice-tipped azure of our highest excellence.

I would like to suggest that the concept of reunion and separation, then, is one of the central aesthetic principles for any work that presumes to reflect the spirit of the Bahá'í Revelation. This principle, characteristic of all high-striving art, combines the full force of extremes—of terror and anger, tenderness and love—within a framework vulnerable enough to reflect and be affected by what it contains, achieving thereby a seemingly miraculous balance, without which both life and art could not possess the imagination with awe or bring the soul toward certitude.

## **Balance**

Concerned for moderation and balance in the Faith, we do not often conceive of that steady station as one of “fire and snow,” for it is difficult to recognize the juxtaposition of the two extremities as a condition that protects us from them; rather we feel threatened by them both. Shoghi Effendi confirms that “very few people ... have attained perfect equilibrium in their minds or lives.”<sup>39</sup> And it is towards this goal that Bahá'ís strive with such sincerity and well-meaning, since we long to be able to reflect the high standards of a “balance in all things.”<sup>40</sup> It may perhaps help us to understand our own attempts and be less appalled by our consistent failures in achieving such an equilibrium if we consider the subtle difference between inert matter and active or organic material.

To achieve a balance between inert elements occupies that part of our minds given to thinking in psychological and intellectual weights and measures. To arrive at an “equilibrium” in organic or spiritual concerns admits the mind to be already dwelling in a condition of precarious change and flux. The former provides us with a technical analysis of human capacities based on experiential knowledge; the latter invites us to accommodate ourselves to the unknown factors of change and reaction implicit in human potential. We are so eager to arrive at a state of equilibrium in both practical and spiritual affairs, in our aesthetic endeavours as well as our community development, that we sometimes make the mistake of thinking of ourselves in static terms. We weigh the ego on one scale and the soul on the other; we measure achievement with the ruler of efficiency. But we are far from being created static. The Writings tell us that our condition is one of perpetual flux which is either progressive or retrogressive in relation to our spiritual goal. Balance for us, therefore, is not achieved on a pair of scales but within a crucible. Equilibrium has more in common with alchemy, as the imagery of the Writings testifies, than with metrology. In the crucible of the Cause we are tested for gold; within its bounds our inner elements are rearranged in new spiritual combinations. We are created even as we are being consumed. We are compelled to transcend our limitations at the same instant that we recognize our human frailty to do so. It is the ceaseless interaction between the two processes of progress and regress which produces that delicate harmony we call “spiritual life”; the angels of fire and snow are not crystallized in suspended animation but have attained a precarious equilibrium between both extremities, by being them.

Similarly, for a work of art to attain “moderation” in Bahá’í terms does not require that it should be preserved from “fire” and “snow” and present a bland temperature of “normality” to the reader. It is the precarious ambivalence between epiphany and betrayal that keeps our attentive spirits attuned to a work of art. In Aristotelian terms, this ambivalence resides in the combination of pity and terror; in the Christian tradition, it lies in the tension between innocence and corruption; in the imagery of the mystics of Islám, it can be found in the perpetual search for and loss of the beloved. Anything less than a structure capable of containing this ambivalence would be artificiality and not art. Balance requires that the “drowning” is commensurate with the “burning” in a work of art, or that the element of “vehement longing” expressing anguish at separation, counteracts the element of rhapsody celebrating reunion. The artist faces the challenge of achieving this balance, but he will fail if he attempts it by diminishing intensity. No one could be more intense than the angels, but their immortality is assured by means of living equilibrium and not static ponderation.

The aesthetic principle of reunion and separation, therefore, will be expressed within a work of art by means of an integration of these two opposing forces, which can take on myriad forms and reflect different levels. The criteria of greatness, rests upon achieving an exquisite balance. But for equilibrium to take place, both elements must be present. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s dictum for the “pairing of ... particles in the world”<sup>41</sup> also applies here, for in art too “the higher the degree, the more momentous is the union.”<sup>42</sup> Any form which eliminates the extremities cannot be said to be protected from them and cannot create an aesthetic whole. Such a form will not be able to take us on the journey towards our Ideal. It will not traverse space but merely photograph certain static conditions along the way.

### **The Second Principle: The Three Levels of Time**

Just as the first principle of reunion and separation—that living equilibrium between extremities—endows the imaginative powers with a flexibility and elasticity born of the very tension they seek to resolve, thus enabling the mind and spirit to “traverse the immensity of space,” so too the reversal initiated by Bahá’u’lláh in relation to the convention of proof gives a key to the artist with which he can unlock time. The three levels of time described earlier enable us to shift our temporal perspectives from an isolated historical event, to a series of typological episodes and finally to symbols that intersect with eternity and seem to escape temporality altogether. As a result of this second principle, time is no longer a slave to the laws of sequential logic but becomes a servant to the thrust of inner conviction that is so essential to the life of a work of art.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá states in *A Traveller’s Narrative* that it “is beyond the power of man, that he should be able by interference or objection to change the heart and conscience, or meddle with the convictions of anyone.”<sup>43</sup> He then draws a clear relationship between thought and reflection and the spiritual power of “God’s light”—“For in the realm of conscience naught but ... the pervading power of the King of Kings should rule.”<sup>44</sup> It would seem, therefore, that while force of argument and pressure of proof may arrest or suspend our outer actions and make us conform to theories externally imposed, the only power that can have a lasting effect upon “reflection or thought ... musings and imaginings”<sup>45</sup> is the piercing ray of spiritual truth. For our thoughts, once touched by this power are related to its source and so attain an immortality that no argument, however cogent, can achieve. Through this spiritual perspective, we transcend the petty pressures of our domestic sense of time and offer gestures in our art and argument that are enhanced by eternal symbols of patience and compassion.

If a work of art; therefore, call achieve a synchronization of significance of the three levels mentioned earlier, it enables the reader to transcend the barrier of time and readily enter into an appreciation of the work. These levels involve the reader initially at the immediate or historical level; secondly, they alert him to the patterns of similar experience that both attend life and also the work of art; finally they recall for him the archetypal relationships at work between the soul and its Ideal and thus take him from the immediate to the eternal. The last level is the spiritual dimension of any aesthetic work. The first creates that intimacy of communion in the artist’s voice that enables the reader or audience to feel that it is the inner voice of each that is sounding. The second level reflects the degree of craftsmanship of an artist and his discriminating eye that can recognize and convey patterns of evolving relationships within an aesthetic whole.

Most artistic endeavour in contemporary society takes us through from the first level of personal and specific vision to the second—that of a symbolic pattern within the work of art and the interpretation of life—and then back again to the first where we find uneasy and often suicidal postures of resolution. Most attempts at a Bahá’í aesthetic response leap from the personal level to the third metaphysical level, or else ignore the first and second levels entirely and try to find a home among vast amorphous archetypes, hoping by so doing to reach immortality. Some of our scholarly treatises, in an effort to find credence among those for whom history has nothing to do with eternity, try to make sense out of the mysteries of the Cause on the personal and symbolic levels alone, thereby producing a two dimensional vision which embraces neither humanity nor spiritual truth. But great art must be

vividly embedded in all three levels. Similar to his mastery over space, the artist's command over time presupposes an equilibrium that combines the historical instance, the typological patterns, and the abstract spiritual principle in perfect accord.

In order to grasp the full significance of Bahá'u'lláh's proof by perspective, using the three levels of time, we need to ponder His purpose and pause to question its difference from traditional typology. Bahá'u'lláh states that there are manifold truths "which must remain unuttered until the appointed time is come"<sup>46</sup> and then proceeds to remind us of the maxim: "Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it."<sup>47</sup>

### The Timely Word

By recalling time for us, Bahá'u'lláh stresses once more the vital bond that exists between speaker and hearer, observer and participator. The Writings often alert us to the need for sensitivity between the two, and describe for us the tragic consequences when this link is broken. But by commenting on this specific point in relation to words and language, Bahá'u'lláh revolutionizes our concept of aesthetics in general. For He implies that utterance will have no power, and may indeed cause damage, unless it responds to the capacities of its audience. He stresses that "in the words used there should lie hid the property of milk"<sup>48</sup> and 'Abdu'l-Bahá further elucidates this by stating that "the language should be moderate, tempered and infinitely courteous."<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh urges that rather than respond to misunderstanding with the language of dissent, discord and disdain it is preferable to remain silent. For proof, as we established earlier, does not need the weight of words or evidence to make itself felt, but rather the most fit connection between past, present and future levels of time. It is also illuminating that while Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl was praised by 'Abdu'l-Bahá for the brilliance of his proofs and the manner in which he lifted veils for the eyes of men, the Master warns against writing that is "totally biased and inspired by enmity,"<sup>50</sup> for prejudice of any kind "is enough proof that what he hath written is spurious."<sup>51</sup>

No art can achieve true greatness unless it is "timely" in terms of need, capacity and response, for Bahá'u'lláh indicates (*Lawh-i-Maqsúd*) that it is the reciprocity between speaker and listener, artist and audience, that will stimulate the fit word, the apt and fine expression. But it should be understood that the artist cannot pander to his audience's needs or speak with fidelity if he is divorced from his innermost convictions. To speak in isolation, however, and remain self-sealed in superiority above the unspoken, inward voices of the community around him would make the poet, like the ascetic, misguided and irrelevant to the purpose of this Day. On the contrary, his aim should be to speak with the tongue that whispers in the bones and arteries of his audience, in such a way that the isolated and speechless elements in a community find their voices in his harmony. Thus, instead of assuming the arrogance of one who sees what others cannot conceive, the artist, aiming at Baha'i ideals, becomes the clear song of the hidden bird in the heart of the multitude.

In order to achieve this, one of the motivating impulses in an aesthetic appreciation of the Faith must be compassion: such a stirring in the heart towards the humanity of others, grounded upon an awareness of one's own shortcomings, that the words *will* out and become the servants of the inarticulate soul. We are given a glimpse in this Dispensation of a creativity and potency for utterance in the world that is so pervasive, so ubiquitous that the poet is not one of the privileged few, but one of the few whose coherence enables the rest of us to recognize our privileges. The whole of creation is in motion with celebration:

By Thy glory! Every time I lift up mine eyes unto Thy Heaven, I call to mind Thy highness ... and every time I turn my gaze to Thine earth, I am made to recognize the evidences of Thy power ... and when I behold the sea, I find that it speaketh to me of Thy majesty.... And at whatever time I contemplate the mountains, I am led to discover the ensigns of Thy victory ... I am so inflamed in my love for Thee ... that I can hear from the whisper of the winds the sound of Thy glorification and praise and can recognize in the murmur of the waters, the voice that proclaimeth ... Thine attributes, and can apprehend from the rustling of the leaves the mysteries that have been irrevocably ordained by Thee in Thy realm.<sup>52</sup>

The burden of proof, therefore, achieved by the three levels of time rests on the poet's ability to take his audience with him through the transparent mirror of his art as though into an intimate country. The landscape shall seem deeply familiar, not merely because the artist's virtuosity has synchronized the three temporal perspectives, but because he has become privy to the secrets of the heart of man, and this knowledge, rising from the ashes of his own frail vulnerability and weakness, enables him to temper his voice and train his vision with compassionate tolerance. His message may be a sombre one but if it is timely, the journey shall be sweet with memories we may not have

known lay sleeping in us. The landmarks shall stir a cognizance concealed within our hearts. The discoveries he makes for us shall be our own.

This intimacy cannot be authentic unless the artist embraces his knowledge of the human condition with empathy so as to be able to perceive the journey towards perfection as easily from the viewpoint of another as from his own. His business, as a poet has succinctly said, is to love.” By means of this vulnerability towards others he shall establish that trust required for a reader to step hesitantly towards him and respond to his inner message. Far from offering negotiations to the reader, he will teach the heart’s river to run, by hurtling forward with his own heart first. If he merely aims his perceptions at us, or shoots his scorn, or infiltrates our minds with clever arguments, we may be dazzled by his skill in manipulating metaphor at the three levels of temporal meaning; we may be titillated by his symbolic shamans and provoked into admiration by his anarchic role; but his art will not find resonance in the globe of the heart nor knit itself to the fibres of the soul.

An artist not only unlocks time with the keys of wisdom and compassion in response to his audience’s capacity, but by so doing enables his audience to do their own unlocking. The Báb states with utter simplicity that God’s method in the past and in the future has never been, nor will it ever be, to use force and coercion. It is impossible to trust wholly that truth which has been thrust upon us by the sheer weight of verbal persuasion and emphasis of argument. The Voice that speaks closer to us than our life’s vein, the Voice that tells the artist how to articulate, would have us lean forward to learn. It would have us recognize the bond which connects the three perspectives referred to in this section and thus not only traverse space but also confound time.

One of the rare examples of this kind of Bahá’í literature is ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s *The Memorials of the Faithful*. What the Master achieves in this collection of historical portraits is unique in the tradition of biography. As we read the lives of these luminous ones we find ourselves, at the initial level of reading, in the past, considering the historical details of the exile of Bahá’u’lláh and the catalog of those who attended Him. This level, in effect, is the first one mentioned earlier and gives us the details of an immediate and single event, the life of a man or woman in the history of the Faith. It is not long, however, before this first unidimensional level extends beyond the single instance.

We are taken by surprise for the characteristics of the person being described seem so familiar to us, so intimately known that we cannot think of him or her as belonging to a set time in history. We recognize elements of this kind of faithfulness in friends around us, in ourselves, in all mankind. And finally, with this recognition of universality, we step out of the portrait gallery of typical human characteristics and discover ourselves at the third level of time, contemplating the eternal spiritual attributes that draw us close to God. We find ourselves amazed and treading through avenues of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s tender praise, where faith is a cypress tree of slender strength, where joy comes to us in cups tempered at the camphor fountain, where the soul who so recently sat with us at a meal or sold his socks in a market-place of ecstasy, swims incandescent now in an ocean of light.

Here surely is an art form that transcends time and space, and the quality of its evidence of faithfulness is so delicately conveyed, so intimately shared, that we become airborne, unburdened by the trivial details of a life, lifted by the breezes of assurance. For such a one who danced beside the howdah reciting verses in his joy found acceptance in the eyes of His Beloved, and such another who ran fleet across the desert in his longing, attained his heart’s desire, though his grave lies nameless in the sands. The mind within us may retain the name for future reference, but in the meantime, the heart finds confirmation here and refreshment, and the soul within us joins the song.

### **Mystic and Artist—The Circling Metaphor**

The challenge, faced by the artist to make this leap convincingly and in a manner which sustains us on the journey, is not unique to the subject of aesthetic response. This is the challenge faced by every Bahá’í who has set himself the task of walking the spiritual path with practical feet. It is the challenge faced by mankind in this age of maturity when we can no longer separate the “active” and “contemplative” facets of our lives. For by abrogating priestcraft in this Dispensation, Bahá’u’lláh is commanding us to make no more distinctions between “mysticism” and “practicality,” to recognize the oneness between vision and form, and to gather the powers of the imagination to serve the establishment of a spiritual kingdom.

There has been an uncertain kinship between art and mysticism for centuries, perhaps because of all practical forms, art came closest to a spiritual expression which was relatively far removed from the rigours of daily existence. There has also been a traditional dichotomy between aesthetics and religion, perhaps because both approached their goals under the tutelage of priests and aesthetes who may have been responsible for the divergence of methods. We have been stripped of priestcraft both as a profession and a mental attitude in this age, however, and are delivered from domination over our moral choices as well as our intellectual and aesthetic pursuits. Stepping out across the chequered dance-floor of our lives, we find the choreography of Bahá’u’lláh’s command is bringing the

motions of the mystic and the artist into fresh and startling combinations. According to the traditional dichotomy, fragments of perception drive the mystic to seek the whole; whereas the whole, according to the artist, cannot be apprehended except by fragments. According to Bahá'u'lláh, we are ourselves fragments, and we strive towards reunion as we recognize the relationships between the fragments of humanity around us. The perspective of the Faith, therefore, illumines for us the essential harmony between the paradox of art and mysticism by drawing attention to the implicit divine humour by which we ourselves become the poetry, and through our subtle interrelationships, become the symbol of that union we will forever strive to recreate.

Emerson wrote that imagination or insight is “a very high sort of seeing, which does not come by study, but by the intellect being where and what it sees.”<sup>54</sup> Aesthetics, then, is the expression not only of the “Son of Vision” but also of the “Son of Being,” according to *The Hidden Words* of Bahá'u'lláh. The fusion between the seer and the wonder he perceives in these words symbolizes the harmony between vision and form that is so vital to the Cause. The only factor that distinguishes between an aesthetic desire to be what we see and a traditionally mystical desire is perspective. While art strives to create metaphor that perfectly conveys a spiritual perception, mysticism recognizes all creation as a metaphor for spiritual conditions. Emerson goes on to state that the imagination shares “a path or circuit of things through forms, and so make(s) them translucid to others.”<sup>55</sup> In this concept too we can distinguish that the difference between the aesthetic path and a traditionally mystical one concerns communication. To succeed in this “translucid” communication is the highest aim of the artist: although a mystic may move along a similar circuit, it is to arrive at his goal rather than to make the journey accessible to others. Indeed the images met along this path are only of value to the mystic in so far as they enable him to reach his end. He is not driven by the need to communicate them; whereas for the artist, the circuit itself becomes a source of promise, a symbol of proximity to be shared with others.

What happens to us when art is separated from its spiritual goal and when the mystic is sealed away from the need to communicate is that the “high sort of seeing” which is our birthright becomes inaccessible to us. The artist becomes absorbed in the forms he encounters and uses them like talismans for their own sakes. The mystic appears to be occupied by thoughts and visions that have little or nothing to do with our everyday lives. We find ourselves deprived and unable to celebrate the praise of this matchless Day. We need a harmony between the path and the place we strive to “come upon,” and for this reason we might look more closely at the way we employ metaphor.

In a letter to an individual believer, the secretary of the Guardian writes on his behalf: “One might liken Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to a sphere; there are points poles apart, and in between the thoughts ... that unite them.”<sup>56</sup> This image not only expresses the need for balance between the apparently contradictory directives in the Cause; it also enables us to recognize that our aim should be one of perpetual motion back and forth from pole to pole and across all points if we are to convey the fullness of this sphere to any soul. The circuit along which we travel is the single path we might take on one of these journeys. The metaphors that tell us of the way, like thoughts and doctrines poles apart, do not convey the whole sphere by themselves. Yet without them we could not trace a sure path, nor make it “translucid” to another. In order to understand and convey the matchless nature of this sphere, therefore, we have to wed the powers of mystic and poet.

Using Evelyn Underhill's definition, a true Bahá'í artist would employ the rhythms, truths and beauties received from the phenomenal world to serve rather than to substitute the secrets of the transcendental world.<sup>57</sup> We are compelled to use metaphor in order to circle around the transcendental nature of spiritual experience. If we merely circled around metaphor for its own sake, absorbed by its resonance and meaning, we would lose the “intuition of the Real lying at the root of the visible world.”<sup>58</sup> If, on the other hand, we employed metaphor merely as a coin to pay tolls in order to keep moving along the spiritual circuit, we would quickly fall into cliché and imitation.

The number of points on a sphere are infinite and to claim them as our own we would need to have experienced the tension of opposing poles, mentioned earlier. That is the touchstone of true art for it bears witness to the phenomenal and transcendental worlds in a single breath and thus communicates “that peculiar vitality that strange power of ... poignant emotion, half torment and half joy”<sup>59</sup> which is the characteristic of the marriage between art and mysticism. We cannot arrive within the circle of this mysterious union unless, as Blake said, we exist and exult in immortal thoughts. We cannot opt for the symbol of a rose or a nightingale as if it were a chann to conjure with if we have not been compelled to reach through such a metaphor in order to span the sphere of the Cause.

Shoghi Effendi states that the believers “must eschew affectation and imitation, for every man of understanding will instantly detect their loathsome odour.”<sup>60</sup> Similarly if we find ourselves reading metaphors that seem self-absorbed and that shroud us from understanding, it is because they are a private code unconnected to the sphere of the Cause and spiral off at tangents from its surface.

The power of metaphorical language is such that poets are often spellbound by it and confuse the lesser spheres of metaphor with the greater sphere of truth. We focus on different points scattered across the single sphere of truth and often assume that since different writers and poets perceive different points with such equal emphasis, then they are offering us conflicting truths.

This has dominated the tone of criticism and academic analysis, and accounts for the various schools of thought in the creative arts. The false assumption in any form of conflict is that a particular interpretation or vision could be an attempt at totality. Whether it is a school of critical analysis, or a reaction against established aesthetic trends, or even a self-righteous statement during a discussion or consultation. It will succeed only in diminishing our sense of reality if it is not tempered by a recognition of its relative value in the face of absolute truth. If in our critical studies, as in our aesthetic expression, we were to employ the high standards that govern ideal consultation, we would then find our comments and creativity serve like points on the sphere to widen our appreciation of His whole and not our own. The use of metaphor, therefore, in anything that tends toward a Bahá'í aesthetic would seem to offer itself in a spirit of transparency. Perhaps it sounds strange to speak of the humility of metaphor until one realizes how often one is confronted by metaphorical arrogance. Whenever a writer's tone implies totality, it provokes in the reader the defensive need—surely outdated—to undermine and expose inadequacies of vision. Indeed, whenever critical appreciation employs the lance and parry techniques of an archaic tournament, it loses the gift of collaboration and disrupts the fluid interchange that is ideally possible between differing points on the sphere of truth. Artistic and critical humility, therefore, reflect the Bahá'í principles concerning the relativity of our grasp of reality, and the progressive nature of revelation; each argument and metaphor along the way serves the purpose of revealing more and more of the wonders of the Faith. Art and its appreciation become, in Emerson's phrase, "translucid." not only in respect to their own inward logic and beauty, but also because they enable the light of our understanding to move through them from circuit to circuit on this vast sphere of the Faith.

This does not mean that we should avoid all clashes and differences and smooth over every contradiction of opinion and expression in our desire for a bland, predigested kind of unity. In art, as in other forms of verbal communication, it can be that truth becomes apparent as a result of such clashes. But whereas traditional criticism looked for the clash in order to prove itself "true," it would seem that aesthetic appreciation and response to the Faith would look for the truth by seeking the points of connection in the clash. Metaphor, therefore, which leaps from the inspired pen of Bahá'u'lláh not only finds the thread of connection between dissimilar images, but through that very dissimilarity binds together the contrary impulses of the human mind by linking us to a common thread, thus recalling the Covenant. The irresistible force of this integration between the outer or aesthetic metaphor and the inner or spiritual one sets such a reverberation within us that we ourselves, in the act of reading, become in an instant both outer and inner expressions through the resonance of our response:

O King of Paris! Tell the priest to ring the bells no longer. By God, the True One! The Most Mighty Bell hath appeared in the form of Him Who is the Most Great Name, and the fingers of will of Thy Lord, the Most Exalted, the Most High, toll it out in the heaven of Immortality in His Name, the All-Glorious. Thus have the mighty verses of Thy Lord been again sent down unto thee, that thou mayest arise to remember God....<sup>61</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh is summoning us to cease the jangling mockery of our own paltry understanding in order to give ear to the universal tolling of this Revelation. At the same time He is setting two metaphorical bells into motion within us. For if the "mighty verses of God" do not ring and reverberate within the bell of our own spirits, our utterance, like that of the priests, will remain a jingle of the ego. Unconnected to that vital rope of commitment to the Covenant, and untouched by the fingers of "Him Who is the Most Great Name" the pealing powers within us remain inert and inarticulate. We need to have command over our craft, in order to perfect the instrument of language to our highest ability, but metaphor, like the bell, will not toll of its own accord. Rung by our hands alone, it will not tell of the majestic power of the Fingers of His Will. Seized by rapture to sing out His Name, however, our language may peal out across valley and mountains. We shall not pause to consider how fine we sound, for "every stone and every tree shouteth aloud: 'The Lord is come in His great glory!'"<sup>62</sup> In order to hear the universal shout, the priests within us shall surely leave their muffled ego-centred bells and come forth from their separate churches to join the sound.

The discriminating factor, therefore, in the employment of metaphor lies in our sense of purpose. If we are driven by a burning desire to celebrate His Name in such a way as to alert our contemporaries to His beauty, we will employ metaphor that speeds along the circuit in its longing to attain its goal. If we crave the recognition of our contemporaries in order that our celebration of His Name finds acclaim in the public arena we will be distracted by the audience and falter. This principle applies to every level of our Bahá'í lives. There is always a danger, whether

in the administrative or teaching work, of circling around the metaphor or method, instead of finding ourselves compelled, by love, to use the metaphor or method in order to circle around His Covenant. Bahá'u'lláh reminded us of the driving impulse of praise and worship that imparts spiritual life to our acts, as well as our aesthetic response when He asks the Concurrence of Divines: "Can any one of you race with the Divine Youth in the arena of wisdom and utterance, or soar with Him into the heaven of inner meaning and explanation?"<sup>63</sup> In one of the prayers He revealed for the period of the Fast, He confirms that greatness rests not in ourselves as much as in our ability and desire to circle around the great: "Proclaim, therefore, O my God, their greatness and the greatness of those who while living or after death have circled round them."<sup>64</sup>

## Conclusion

This essay has defined three distinct principles which seem indicative of a standard in the field of aesthetics commensurate with the nature and spirit of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh. The first concerns a reversal in our definitions of power and authority and introduces the mind to the inadequacy of its response to the Word of God, and the nature of its purpose in creation. Through an exploration of reunion and separation the poet can describe the whole gamut of human experience in relation to a spiritual goal as the imagery in the Bahá'í Writings suggests. He can traverse space in such a manner as to tell us of companions on the way who are the tears we shed. He can provide us with the brokenhearted fragments of our understanding that give us strength in our eternal quest. This principle is closely related to the concept of sacrifice and is reflected in a perpetual evolution of fresh forms that dissolve anew with each discovery of progress.

The second principle explored by this essay relates to the redefinition of time in aesthetic appreciation and introduces us to the three levels of immediate, symbolic and eternal representations of an historic event. Through this principle the artist is empowered to traverse time by seeing symbolic patterns that are both inventive and personal as well as archetypal, thus tossing us from our frail platform of history into the light years of the soul's response to God. This principle is closely related to the concept of service as it has been redefined by Bahá'u'lláh, for by its aid aesthetics becomes a mirror clear and undefiled that can reflect the gestures of the soul in all its infinite, prismatic forms of search, of adoration and of yearning for its Lord.

The third principle, which is a redefinition of the purpose and power of metaphor, affects the manner in which both principles mentioned above find expressive forms in our art and our aesthetic response to the Faith. This can be symbolized as metaphorical orbit and alerts us to the pull of gravity and point of emphasis in every work of art that must draw us round the wheeling power of the Covenant if we are to discover our place and purpose in the universe of the imagination.

These three principles are not intended to confine the mind to a rigid set of milestones on the road towards a Bahá'í aesthetic, for our motion forward must needs be multidimensional, more like an exploration of space than progress along a straight line. We cannot forget that the multitude of truths in His Revelation are more than "the garment of words"<sup>65</sup> can contain, so that such verities not only remain undescribed but "not even the remotest allusions"<sup>66</sup> can suffice to indicate them. Our orbital paths, in exploration of art and literature, music and drama can only stay sure if we remain submissive to His invisible command. We need to apply the same laws that govern our relationships with one another to our aesthetic expressions, and remain alert in order to avoid reflecting the strident and disintegrating nature of the world in which we live.

Since one of Bahá'u'lláh's primary injunctions is to see with our own eyes rather than with those of others, Baha'is might consider searching independently for principles and processes that are reflective of a true Bahá'í aesthetic. For while we know the golden age of Bahá'u'lláh's Dispensation will be long in growing, this should not prevent us from working towards a standard worthy of His Cause. We are acutely aware that its glowing colours may only fitfully be cast across the shadowed lives of our generation who are children of the half-light. We are also aware that in the whirlwind of this distracted hour all thought and perception is fragmented, scattered, tossed. But no matter how partial our vision or how broken our hearts, these fragments may yet cast myriad dancing lights held up against the glancing ray of His white Words. They may yet throw reflections that would show the lineaments of grace and beauty in His Face. The light of the Word of God is undiminished, though our minds remain opaque; like prisms we may separate its brilliance, but its blaze is still unbroken and, thus, "in a crystal it maketh fire to appear."<sup>67</sup> An aesthetic response to the Writings of this Revelation, therefore, if held high to greet the unclouded beams of brightness from His Face, can carry the seeker to the very heart of contentment and draw him ever nearer to his goal:

Even in fire, he seeth the face of the Beloved. He beholdeth in illusion the secret of reality, and readeth from the attributes the riddle of the Essence...with piercing sight he gazeth on the new creation; with lucid heart he graspeth subtle verities.<sup>68</sup>

## Notes

1. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. Compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, translated by Marzieh Gail, (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), p. 157.
2. Amir Gilboa, *The Light of Lost Suns: Selected Poems of Amir Gilboa*, translated by Shirley Kaufman. London: Menard Press, n.d.
3. Haim Chertok, review, *Jerusalem Post*, July 25, 1980.
4. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Translated by Shoghi Effendi, London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976, p. 321.
5. Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*. Translated by Shoghi Effendi, Wilmette. Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
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28. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 8.
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31. *Ibid.*, No. 16.
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37. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 177.
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39. Letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, (H.R.) July 5. 1947.
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42. *Ibid.*
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48. Bahá'u'lláh, "Words of Bahá'u'lláh," Compilation on writing, the Universal House of Justice, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre.
49. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "Words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá," Compilation on writing, the Universal House of Justice, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre.
50. *Ibid.*
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52. Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, (U.K. edition) pp. 207–208.
53. Emily Dickinson, “My business is to love,” from a letter to Dr. and Mrs. J.G. Holland, dated 1862.
54. Emerson, cited in *The Anxiety of Influence* (Levin, Cambridge, England: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 132.
55. Ibid.
56. Letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, (H.R.), July 5, 1947.
57. “As artists stand in a peculiar relation to the phenomenal world, receiving rhythms and discovering truths and beauties which are hidden from other men, so this true mystic stands in a peculiar relation to the transcendental world; there experiencing actual, but to us unimaginable tension and delight.” (Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*, [New York: Dutton, 1911], p. 75).
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid.
60. Universal House of Justice, letter to Persian believers, February 10, 1980.
61. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh*, (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1972), p. 17.
62. Ibid., p. 94.
63. Ibid., p. 76.
64. Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 84.