

The Literature of Interpretation
Notes on the English Writings of Shoghi Effendi

By Glenford E. Mitchell

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It is the duty... of the interpreter and teacher of Holy Scripture, the defender of the true faith and the opponent of error, both to teach what is right and to refute what is wrong, and in the performance of this task to conciliate the hostile, to rouse the careless, and to tell the ignorant both what is occurring at present and what is probable in the future. But once that his hearers are friendly, attentive, and ready to learn, whether he has found them so, or has himself made them so, the remaining objects are to be carried out in whatever way the case requires. If the hearers need teaching, the matter treated of must be made fully known by means of narrative. On the other hand, to clear up points that are doubtful requires reasoning and the exhibition of proof. If, however, the hearers require to be roused rather than instructed, in order that they may be diligent to do what they already know, and to bring their feelings into harmony with the truths they admit, greater vigour of speech is needed.

—St. Augustine
On Christian Doctrine

Shoghi Effendi, the great-grandson of Bahá'u'lláh, was an interpreter of Holy Scripture. For thirty-six years, from 1921 to 1957, he labored at his divine task, producing in the end a wealth of interpretive literature whose implications for our time and for the far future demand serious study. In a field that had only been speculated about in the past, Shoghi Effendi, by the very nature of his calling, perfected a new literary form. His is the kind of literature of which Saint Augustine, one of the outstanding ancient Christian thinkers, might have dreamed in penning his *On Christian Doctrine*. While it is not being suggested that we go back to the fifth-century universe of Augustine in order to find meaning in the works of this twentieth-century interpreter, it is instructive and not merely a matter of curiosity that the Augustinian ideal, as partially stated in the epigraph, was never truly realized until the passing of Bahá'u'lláh in 1892 and the subsequent assumption of the office of Interpreter by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who, in turn, acting in accordance with the divine authority explicitly conferred upon Him by Bahá'u'lláh, appointed Shoghi Effendi to succeed Him. It is largely the fact of appointment that lends a hitherto unknown dimension to the matter of interpretation and places a unique stamp on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's and Shoghi Effendi's works as interpreters of Scripture.

That the prevailing Christian concept and practice of interpretation, which Augustine helped to shape, differs in essential details from the Bahá'í experience since the passing of Bahá'u'lláh also deserves notice. But the compass of this article is not equal to the task. The intention here is to introduce the reader to the writings of Shoghi Effendi; and, as it serves the purpose of literary review to ascertain, the motivations of the author, some attention to Shoghi Effendi's major function as interpreter is unavoidable. If, therefore, Augustine is invoked, it is principally because retrospection may offer dimension where comparisons are impossible. The

question of the authenticity and method of interpretation with which he wrestled at the morning time of Christianity has only now been conclusively answered in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh fifteen centuries later and in a way that the facts of Christ's ministry and the realities of Augustine's time could not have prepared his vision to perceive.

Yet we can appreciate how significant was his yearning and with what remarkable resourcefulness he discerned and defined the need for authentication of scriptural meaning. Augustine, as Christian exegete, provides an irresistible contrast in concept and method which sharpens one's perception of the unequalled significance of Shoghi Effendi's accomplishments. Since Bahá'u'lláh, it must be pointed out at the outset, guarantees unerring authority to the interpreter of Bahá'í Scriptures, it is not necessary in this age to relegate this indispensable exercise to the dialectical dispositions of theologians.

The Matrix of Exegesis

Bahá'u'lláh, Who declared Himself to be the Spokesman of God for our time, identifies unity as the central purpose of His Revelation, and relates this to the consummate purpose of God for man. *“The time foreordained unto the peoples and kindreds of the earth is now come,”* He proclaims, *“The promises of God, as recorded in the Holy Scriptures, have all been fulfilled. Out of Zion hath gone forth the Law of God, and Jerusalem, and the hills and land thereof, are filled with the glory of His Revelation. Happy is the man that pondereth in his heart that which hath been revealed in the Books of God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.”*¹ *“The purpose underlying all creation,”* He confidently asserts *“is the revelation of this most sublime, this most holy Day, the Day known as the Day of God, in His Books and Scriptures—the Day which all the Prophets, and the Chosen Ones, and the holy ones, have wished to witness.”*² *“O ye children of men,”* He thus addresses mankind, *“the fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race... This is the straight path, the fixed and immovable foundation. Whatsoever is raised on this foundation, the changes and chances of the world can never impair its strength, nor will the revolution of countless centuries undermine its structure.”*³

The unity of mankind envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh calls for the establishment of a World Order based on the laws and principles which He Himself has left enshrined in His recorded Writings produced over a period of forty years. The Báb, Himself the author of an independent Revelation and the Forerunner of Bahá'u'lláh, alludes to the glorious prospects of the system to be conceived by His Successor. He states, in the third chapter of the Persian Bayán, *“Well is it*

¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1952), pp. 12-13.

² Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969), p. 65.

³ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1955), pp. 202-03.

*with him who fixeth his gaze upon the Order of Bahá'u'lláh and rendereth thanks unto his Lord! For He will assuredly be made manifest. God hath indeed irrevocably ordained it in the Bayán.”*⁴

Of this central purpose of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation Shoghi Effendi writes:

For Bahá'u'lláh, we should readily recognize, has not only imbued mankind with a new and regenerating Spirit. He has not merely enunciated certain universal principles, or propounded a particular philosophy, however potent, sound and universal these may be. In addition to these He, as well as 'Abdu'l-Bahá after Him, has, unlike the Dispensations of the past, clearly and specifically laid down a set of Laws, established definite institutions, and provided for the essentials of a Divine Economy. These are destined to be a pattern for future society, a supreme instrument for the establishment of the Most Great Peace, and the one agency for the unification of the world, and the proclamation of the reign of righteousness and justice upon the earth.⁵

The Houses of Justice, institutions of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order which He summons the people of every city, hamlet, or village, in every country to elect according to principles enunciated by Him, are to function under the direction and protection of a supreme legislative institution, The Universal House of Justice. *“It is incumbent upon the Trustees of the House of Justice,”* He asserts, *“to take counsel together regarding those things which have not outwardly been revealed in the Book, and to enforce that which is agreeable to them.”* His assurance is that *“God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth, and He, verily, is the Provider, the Omniscient.”*⁶ This supreme institution, no less than the local and national Houses of Justice (now known as Local and National Spiritual Assemblies), is to reach its decisions through a process of consultation in which divine guidance is vouchsafed by God. Although all these institutions are assured divine guidance, The Universal House of Justice is especially *“freed from all error.”*⁷

The establishment and evolution of these unique institutions are part of a grand design which is linked to another unique provision, namely, the establishment of the institution of the Center of the Covenant in the person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the eldest son of Bahá'u'lláh. In His Kitáb-i-'Ahd (Book of the Covenant), Bahá'u'lláh declares: *“It is incumbent upon the Aghsán, the Afnán and My kindred to turn, one and all, their faces towards the Most Mighty Branch. Consider that which We have revealed in Our Most Holy Book [Kitáb-i-Aqdas]: “When the ocean of My presence hath ebbed and the Book of My Revelation is ended, turn your faces toward Him Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root.” The object of this sacred verse is none other except the Most Mighty Branch [‘Abdu'l-Bahá]. Thus have We graciously revealed unto you our potent Will, and I am verily the Gracious, the All-Powerful.”*⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, moreover, proclaims in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, *“When the Mystic Dove will have winged its flight from its*

⁴ The Báb, quoted *ibid.*, pp. 146-47.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, quoted *ibid.*, p. 23.

⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1944), p. 14.

⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 134.

*Sanctuary of Praise and sought its far-off goal, its hidden habitation, refer ye whatsoever ye understand not in the Book to Him Who hath branched from this mighty Stock.”*⁹

Furthermore, in the Surih-i-Ghusn (Tablet of the Branch), He asserts:

*‘Render thanks unto God, O people, for His appearance; for verily He is the most great Favor unto you, the most perfect bounty upon you; and through Him every mouldering bone is quickened. Whoso turneth towards Him hath turned towards God, and whoso turneth away from Him hath turned away from My Beauty, hath repudiated My Proof, and transgressed against Me. He is the Trust of God amongst you, His charge within you, His manifestation unto you and His appearance among His favored servants . . . We have sent Him down in the form of a human temple. Blest and sanctified be God Who createth whatsoever He willeth through His inviolable, His infallible decree. They who deprive themselves of the shadow of the Branch, are lost in the wilderness of error, are consumed by the heat of worldly desires, and are of those who will assuredly perish.’*¹⁰

In such exalted and emphatic tones, Bahá'u'lláh elaborated upon His Covenant with His followers who were not to be left shepherdless after His passing in 1892. As to His meaning He left no room for interpretation or error of judgment. Above all, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá was the Center of the Covenant, a Center in which an unexampled variety of divine prodigies converge. It is no wonder, then, that ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, in an affirmation of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant, exclaims: *“So firm and mighty is this Covenant that from the beginning of time until the present day no religious Dispensation hath produced its like.”*¹¹ In another statement, He indicates the weight of Bahá'u'lláh's act: *“It is indubitably clear,”* He says, *“that the pivot of the oneness of mankind is nothing else but the power of the Covenant.”*¹²

His constant servitude to His Father from the age of nine—from that gloomy aftermath of the Báb's martyrdom when Bahá'u'lláh was cast into the dark pit in Tehran, marking the beginning of forty years of imprisonment and exile—earned him the title by which he preferred to be known: ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Servant of the Glory. Bahá'u'lláh left His nascent Cause in the capable hands of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá. During a period of twenty-nine years, from 1892 to 1921, through unceasing struggle and unremitting pain inflicted by the attacks of enemies of the Cause, He directed its far-flung affairs, traveled to the West to establish its Teachings, delineated its institutions, and revealed the whole pattern and framework of the Administrative Order brought by His Father. No narration, no exposition, no description, indeed no literature yet exists that adequately conveys the essential nature of One Who accomplished so much against so many odds.

Yet it is increasingly demonstrable that ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's appointment as Center of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant welded the universal concepts of the Faith He championed and prevented

⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, quoted *ibid.*

¹⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, quoted *ibid.*, p. 135.

¹¹ Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1944), p. 238.

¹² Bahá'u'lláh, quoted *ibid.*

its reduction to a veritable pandemonium of contending factions and vested interests. Bahá'u'lláh's metaphorical designations of His Son inspire feelings of awe: *"the Most Mighty Branch of God," "the Limb of the Law of God," "a shield unto all who are in heaven and on earth," "a shelter for all mankind," "a stronghold for whosoever hath believed in God," "the Master," "the Mystery of God,"*¹³ the last being, according to Shoghi Effendi, "an expression by which Bahá'u'lláh Himself has chosen to designate Him, and which, while it does not by any means justify us to assign to him the station of Prophethood, indicates how in the person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá the incompatible characteristics of a human nature and superhuman knowledge and perfection have been blended and are completely harmonized."¹⁴

'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretive mind was the crucible in which Bahá'u'lláh's purpose and the sum of Bahá'í experience were fused in the creation of yet another heretofore unknown institution, the Guardianship. From the reading of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament, following His passing on November 28, 1921, there flashes upon the consciousness of the bereaved Bahá'í community the youthful figure of Shoghi Effendi—*"as he is,"* according to that document, *"the sign of God, the chosen branch, the guardian of the Cause of God, he unto whom... His loved ones must turn. He is the expounder of the words of God."*¹⁵

The new interpreter, then twenty-five years old and a student at Balliol College, Oxford University, was an issue of the marriage of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's daughter to a descendant of the Báb—a fact emphasized in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's salute to the new Guardian: *"Salutation and praise, blessing and glory rest upon that primal branch of the Divine and Sacred Lote-Tree, grown out, blest, tender, verdant and flourishing from the Twin Holy Tree; the most wondrous, unique and priceless pearl that doth gleam from out the Twin surging seas..."*¹⁶

'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will, a tripartite document regarded by Bahá'ís as the Charter of Bahá'u'lláh's new World Order, is elaborate in its emphases on this appointment, in a manner reminiscent of Bahá'u'lláh's own treatment of the appointment of the Center of the Covenant. Bahá'u'lláh had written in His own hand the Kitáb-i-'Ahd (Book of the Covenant), in which the appointment of 'Abdu'l-Bahá was reaffirmed. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, too, wrote in His own hand the Will and Testament. There are certain resemblances in the constructions of the appointive language of each, in the elaborations, in the multiple confirmations. There is no room for doubt as to the identity of the appointee or the authority conferred upon Him. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes in the Will:

*O my loving friends! After the passing away of this wronged one, it is incumbent upon the Aghsán (Branches), the Afnán (Twigs) of the Sacred Lote-Tree, the Hands (pillars) of the Cause of God and the loved ones of the Abhá Beauty to turn unto Shoghi Effendi...*¹⁷

And again:

¹³ Bahá'u'lláh, quoted *ibid.*, pp. 242-43, and in Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 134-35.

¹⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 134.

¹⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament*, p. 11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.11.

*The sacred and youthful branch, the Guardian of the Cause of God as well as the Universal House of Justice, to be universally elected and established, are both under the care and protection of the Abhá Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of His Holiness, the Exalted One (may my life be offered up for them both). Whatsoever they decide is of God. Whoso obeyeth him not, neither obeyeth them, hath not obeyed God; whoso rebelleth against him and against them hath rebelled against God; whoso opposeth him hath opposed God, whoso contendeth with them hath contended with God; whoso disputeth with him hath disputed with God; whoso denieth him hath denied God; whoso disbelieveth in him hath disbelieved in God; whoso deviateth, separateth himself and turneth aside from him hath in truth deviated, separated himself and turned aside from God.*¹⁸

Viewing the Interpreter: An Augustinian Digression

Shoghi Effendi was the second person in history to be appointed interpreter of the words of a Divine Revelator, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá having been the first. It would seem to serve the purpose of scholarship to draw comparisons between the two in order to understand the nature and motivations that constituted their actions. Yet comparison here promises no understanding: the sum of the functions of each is essentially different. In appointing ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Bahá’u’lláh thus instructs the faithful: “refer ye whatsoever ye understand not in the Book to Him Who hath branched from this mighty Stock.”¹⁹ In a subsequent commentary, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá affirms: “I am according to the explicit texts of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and the Kitáb-i-Ahd the manifest Interpreter of the Word of God.”²⁰ In appointing Shoghi Effendi, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá uses almost identical words to clarify the function of His appointee: “He is the Interpreter of the Word of God,”²¹ He asserts. Thus Shoghi Effendi shares with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the right and obligation to interpret the Bahá’í Teachings. But the similarity in their explicitly appointed functions ends here.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá has to be seen in a much broader, although little understood, context in which are fused the Center of the Covenant, the Exemplar of the Bahá’í Teachings, and the Interpreter. We find, for instance, that this takes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s interpretations beyond the realm of words alone. Having invested His Son with unerring insight, Bahá’u’lláh went further to certify the infallibility of the volition which transmuted His thoughts into exemplary deeds. Thus ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s deeds were themselves the embodiments of interpretation. Therein lies the distinction upon which Shoghi Effendi comments in several of his writings. He states, for example, “There is a far, far greater distance separating the Guardian from the Center of the Covenant than there is between the Center of the Covenant and its Author [Bahá’u’lláh].”²² And again: “The fact that the Guardian has been specifically endowed with such power as he may need to reveal the

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Bahá’u’lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 134.

²⁰ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted *ibid.*, p. 138.

²¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted *ibid.*, p. 148.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 151.

purport and disclose the implications of the utterances of Bahá'u'lláh and of 'Abdu'l-Bahá does not necessarily confer upon him a station co-equal with those Whose words he is called upon to interpret. He can exercise that right and discharge this obligation and yet remain infinitely inferior to both of them in rank and different in nature.²³ "The Guardian cannot claim to be "the perfect exemplar of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh or the stainless mirror that reflects His light."²⁴

True, the Guardian, the offspring of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretive mind, a co-sharer in the genius of divine interpretation, occupies a lesser rank; nonetheless, he emerges as an unequaled figure in his own right.

Macaulay once remarked that men judge by comparison, explaining that "they are unable to estimate the grandeur of an object when there is no standard by which they can measure it." How then does one treat the consequences of uniqueness where there are no comparisons upon which to draw? It seems advisable to summarize them by whatever employment of narrative and description is deemed adequate. But the dimensions of uniqueness are not necessarily well judged through narrative alone; it may indeed be useful then to look back briefly at another time, to view the Bahá'í interpreter in the light of fulfilling a recognized, measured, and articulated centuries-old need rather than as the object of comparison.

The fact that one age is bequeathed blessings which a prior age did not possess does not necessarily mean that men in the former age were incapable of perceiving the need. Interpretation is a reality with which the followers of every religion from the beginning of the history of man have had to deal. How each group coped with it depended on their inheritance. The beginnings of Latin Christendom offer an instructive view of a perhaps heroic, if not wholly successful, struggle with this fundamental question of interpretation. Here enters Augustine, to whom is attributed the shaping of the history of Western exegesis.

In the preface to his treatise, *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine proposes to show that teaching rules for the interpretation of Scripture is not a superfluous task. He considers himself equal to it and lays down certain rules in concert with his thesis that "There are two things on which all interpretation of Scripture depends: the mode of ascertaining the proper meaning, and the mode of making known the meaning when it is ascertained."²⁵ Ascertaining proper meaning depends upon the ability of the interpreter to exemplify certain qualities. He must, for example, be endowed with the essential graces of faith, hope, and love; and in achieving the necessary wisdom he must ascend certain successive steps of the spirit: 'fear, piety, knowledge, resolution, counsel, and purification of heart—' 'For the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. From that beginning, then, till we reach wisdom itself, our way is by the steps now described."²⁶

Wisdom must be buttressed by certain practical means of understanding the unknown and ambiguous signs of Scripture. Among the conventional signs, words hold the chief place. Obscurities in Scripture arise from its figurative language—"Some of the expressions are so

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Augustine *On Christian Doctrine* 1.1.

²⁶ Ibid., 2.7.

obscure as to shroud the meaning in the thickest darkness.”²⁷ The interpreter is to unravel the meaning of figurative expressions partly by tracing the knowledge of languages and partly by tracing the knowledge of things. The study of the original languages of Scripture, the checking of the texts of translations, knowledge of history, the use of the “science of definition,”²⁸ the appropriation of whatever has been rightly said by the “heathens” (principally the Greek philosophers, like Plato, who influenced Augustine’s approach)—all are aids to ascertaining meaning.

In summary, the interpreter follows a certain procedure in making sense of obscurities and ambiguities of Scripture:

The man who fears God seeks diligently in Holy Scripture for a knowledge of His will. And when he has become meek through piety, so as to have no love of strife; when furnished also with a knowledge of languages, so as not to be stopped by unknown words and forms of speech, and with the knowledge of certain necessary objects, so as not to be ignorant of the force and nature of those which are used figuratively; and assisted, besides, by accuracy in the texts, which has been secured by skill and care in the matter of correction; when thus prepared, let him proceed to the examination and solution of the ambiguities of Scripture.²⁹

Augustine expounds a number of rules designed to assist the interpreter to achieve his goal. These rules help him, for instance, to decide whether an expression is figurative or literal: whatever in a literal sense is inconsistent either with purity of life or correctness of doctrine must be taken figuratively. What, then, validates or confirms the correctness of interpretation? Augustine gives a clue in his rule for interpreting figurative expression: “in regard to figurative expression,” he states, “a rule such as the following will be observed, to carefully turn over in our minds and meditate upon what we read till an interpretation be found that tends to establish the reign of love. Now, if when taken literally it at once gives a meaning of this kind, the expression is not to be considered figurative.”³⁰ The promotion of love is, of course, the established purpose of religion. The difficulty is that God’s view is not always clear to those who interpret His word. Augustine obviously recognizes this difficulty, but he rationalizes it into insignificance as though to say, if love is the object, misinterpretation can do no harm:

Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up his twofold love of God and our neighbour, does not yet understand them as he ought. If, on the other hand, a man draws a meaning from them that may be used for the building up of love, even though he does not happen upon the precise meaning which the author whom he reads intended to express in that place, his error is not pernicious, and he is wholly clear from the charge of deception.³¹

²⁷ Ibid., 2.6.

²⁸ Ibid., 2.35.

²⁹ Ibid., 3.1.

³⁰ Ibid., 3.15.

³¹ Ibid., 1.36.

He states further that if the interpreter's mistaken conclusion "tends to build up love, which is the end of the commandment, he goes astray in much the same way as a man who by mistake quits the high road, but yet reaches through the fields the same place to which the road leads."³² Here, perhaps, is one of those false inferences which, Augustine warns, can be drawn from a valid process of reasoning. His point rests on the intent of the interpreter and is understandable in its way; but it does not touch upon the drastic consequences of misinterpretation, however unintended, on those besides the interpreter who are guided by it.

Augustine's treatise, reduced to its essential usefulness, dramatizes the snares and pitfalls that make reliable interpretation of sacred obscurities improbable. The work is an elaborate exercise in antinomy, producing the very opposite of the author's stated purpose: "the man who is in possession of the rules which I here attempt to lay down," he purposefully asserts in the preface, "if he meets with an obscure passage in the books which he reads, will not need an interpreter to lay open the secret to him, but, holding fast by certain rules, and following up certain indications, will arrive at the hidden sense without any error, or at least without falling into any *gross* absurdity."³³ Judging from the history of the Christian Church, theory and experience, in this instance, simply did not coincide.

But it does no justice to Augustine's work to dismiss it on this note. The need for interpretation in the early days of Christianity was too palpable to be ignored, and the absence of any explicit statement by the Revelator left serious-minded followers with a legitimate problem. They cast about for some means of bringing order to the fragments of sayings passed down by oral tradition and found Greek philosophy, with its emphasis on logical arrangement, suitable to their design. Augustine fused these fragments with Platonism; Aquinas, with Aristotelianism. The doctors of the Church simply took matters into their own hands, not realizing that no amount of scholarly borrowings or man-made rules can preserve the ideal end of interpretation, which is to unify the thoughts of all believers in the essentials of faith. The dilemma for the scholars was resolved in their contentment with the idea of plurality of meanings but this luxurious expediency did not resolve the dilemma for the greatest part of the Christians, as can easily be seen from the consequent fragmentation of Christendom itself.

In the Bahá'í Dispensation, the dilemma is solved in the authoritative appointment of interpreters. Although this appointment does not by any means deny freedom of thought to anyone in search of meaning, it does identify and preserve the divine Standard against which free thought may measure its fruits. In this connection the Bahá'í position is unmistakable:

A clear distinction is made in our Faith between authoritative interpretation and the interpretation or understanding that each individual arrives at for himself from his study of its teachings. While the former is confined to the Guardian, the latter, according to the guidance given to us by the Guardian himself, should by no means be suppressed. In fact such individual interpretation is considered the fruit of man's rational power and conducive to a better understanding of the teachings, provided that no disputes or arguments arise among the friends and the individual himself understands and makes it

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., Preface.

clear that his views are merely his own. Individual interpretations continually change as one grows in comprehension of the teachings.³⁴

Viewed in this context, Augustine's treatise is suited to *individual* interpretation; the mistake is that he supposed himself to be dealing with *authoritative* interpretation, not realizing that this is in the province of the Prophet alone, Who, in the light of Bahá'í experience, explicitly confers it by an act of appointment; and, as the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá attest, the interpreter is "overshadowed by the unfailing, the unerring protection of Bahá'u'lláh and of the Báb."³⁵ It is this singular fact, and not the mere mastery of the tools of scholarship, as necessary as that is, which enables the Bahá'í interpreter to ascertain the proper meaning of Scripture.

The Interpreter as Guardian

Shoghi Effendi's interpretive work has to be seen against the broad fabric of his responsibilities as the successor of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "*For he is, after 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Guardian of the Cause of God... and the beloved of the Lord must obey him and turn unto him.*"³⁶ With the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá it fell to him to guide the Bahá'ís toward fulfillment of the world-encompassing goals set by Bahá'u'lláh and amplified by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. There was a divine Plan to be pursued; it required the firm establishment of new institutions, the pursuance of worldwide teaching projects, the protection of the Faith against its enemies, in short, the building of the new World Order proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh. Through the extensive travels of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the East and the West and the copious correspondence that flowed from His indefatigable pen, the Faith had been established in thirty-five countries; but the adherents were for the most part loosely organized and largely unaware of the principles of Bahá'í administration. If Shoghi Effendi's appointment as Guardian was to have meaning, if it implied preserving the integrity of the Faith as well as of its Teachings, he had to do more than explain the texts: he had to direct and guide his trust through the crucible of transformation; he had to forge a Bahá'í community. In addition to interpretation, Shoghi Effendi's writings were made to serve three major objectives: these were in fact the essential purposes of his exegetic works.

1) *Establishment and Consolidation of Bahá'í Administrative institutions.* Shoghi Effendi gave paramount attention at the outset to building administrative institutions. We find evidences of this among his first letters to the West. In a letter to the North American believers, dated March 23, 1923, he wrote:

And, now that this all-important Work may suffer no neglect, but rather function vigorously and continuously in every part of the Bahá'í world; that the unity of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh may remain secure and inviolate, it is of the utmost importance that in accordance with the explicit text of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Most Holy Book, in every

³⁴ The Universal House of Justice. *Wellspring of Guidance: Messages 1963-1968* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969), p. 88.

³⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 151.

³⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament*, p. 25

locality, be it city or hamlet, where the number of adult (21 years and above) declared believers exceeds nine, a local “Spiritual Assembly” be forthwith established. To it all local matters pertaining to the Cause must be directly and immediately referred for full consultation and decision. The importance, nay the absolute necessity of these local Assemblies is manifest when we realize that in the days to come they will evolve into the local Houses of Justice, and at present provide the firm foundation on which the structure of the Master’s Will is to be reared in future.³⁷

From this beginning, he urged and guided the formation of Local and National Spiritual Assemblies; on November 4, 1957, the time of his death, there existed as many as twenty-six National Spiritual Assemblies and over one thousand Local Assemblies throughout the world.

2) *Prosecution of Bahá’í Teaching Programs.* Having abolished the clergy, Bahá’u’lláh urged upon His followers the primary duty of teaching His Faith, singling out this act as the “*most meritorious of all deeds.*”³⁸ Moreover, Abdu’l-Bahá in a series of fourteen letters known as the Tablets of the Divine Plan, addressed to the Bahá’ís in the United States and Canada, outlined the program by which the teaching of the Faith was to be effected throughout the world.³⁹ Although various teaching projects had been undertaken in the spontaneous response of individuals to these Tablets, it was not until 1937, sixteen years after the death of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, that a systematic teaching scheme, known as the Seven Year Plan, was adopted by the North American believers under the tutelage of Shoghi Effendi and with the direction of their National Spiritual Assembly. In the interim he had been building the administrative system, the channel through which the teaching enterprises, which were to grow successively larger until they encircled the globe, were to be directed. A second Seven Year Plan launched in 1946 preceded the ambitious Ten Year International Teaching and Consolidation Plan initiated in 1953. At the time of his death at the midpoint of the latter Plan, the Faith had already been established in 200 countries and dependencies. The Plan achieved all its major goals; and at the end in 1963—the centenary of the anniversary of the declaration of Bahá’u’lláh’s mission—The Universal House of Justice was elected by fifty-six National Spiritual Assemblies.

3) *Nurture of Bahá’í Community Life.* The tragic circumstances which greeted the birth of the Faith—the imprisonment and martyrdom of the Herald-Prophet, the Báb, the vehement opposition of the Muslim clergy which led to the slaughter of 20,000 Bábís, the imprisonment and exile of Bahá’u’lláh, and the official proscriptions imposed upon His followers—had, by 1921, forged the beginnings of independent Bahá’í community life in Persia and other Muslim countries where Bahá’í membership had grown significantly.

But although, as a result of His travels from 1911 to 1913, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had raised up thousands of believers in the West, His instructions concerning Bahá’í collective life had not yet been absorbed. As has already been observed, Spiritual Assemblies, the pivots round which the various communities revolve, had not yet been established on a firm foundation. The believers had not yet known their significance as the channels for guiding and promoting the application of

³⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá’í Administration*, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1968), p. 37.

³⁸ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 278.

³⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1959).

certain devotional practices such as fasting and praying; the dissemination of Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings for developing the inner life of the individual believer; the use of the Bahá'í calendar in the observance of Bahá'í Feasts, Holy Days, and anniversaries.

The demands upon Shoghi Effendi for instructions, clarifications, and directions concerning these vital purposes were clear; he was the first and ultimate source of genuine guidance to whom the Bahá'ís must turn. His treatment of each and all was inextricably linked to his appointment as “*expounder*” of the Word of God.⁴⁰ These purposes were made the avenues of his exegetic expression, the means by which life was breathed into his explanations.

Every thought he expressed had some particular implication for the immediate or future action of the community, whether that action concerned institutional functions, great undertakings, or the transformation of the character of an individual. It becomes increasingly evident from the reading of his writings in relation to the occasions which elicited them that thought is not to be wasted on sheer argument, much less on satisfying the pride of authorship, as has been largely true of the philosophic and exegetic tradition followed by ancient and modern theologians. Hair-splitting arguments are to be avoided entirely. Thought expressed must serve some purpose, be related to some direction or deed, must urge, inform, confirm, or amplify action. Thus, we discover in his performance as interpreter an eminent example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's meaning when He states that the “*reality of man is his thought*” and points out as follows the differences in two classifications of thought:

*Thoughts may be divided into two classes: —
Thought that belongs to the world of thought alone.
Thought that expresses itself in action.*

Some men and women glory in their exalted thoughts, but, if these thoughts never reach the plane of action they remain useless: the power of thought is dependent on its manifestation in deeds. A philosopher's thought may, however, in the world of progress and evolution, translate itself into the actions of other people, even when he himself is unable or unwilling to show forth his grand ideals in his own life. To this class the majority of philosophers belong, their teachings being high above their actions. This is the difference between philosophers who are spiritual teachers, and those who are mere philosophers: the spiritual teacher is the first to follow his own teaching; he brings down into the world of action his spiritual conceptions and ideals. His divine thoughts are made manifest to the world, His thought is (a part of) himself, from which he is inseparable.⁴¹

Shoghi Effendi's interpretations were obviously oriented to action, in much the same way as the texts he was called upon to interpret. Note, for example, his summons (already quoted) to the believers to form Local Spiritual Assemblies:

⁴⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament*, p. 11.

⁴¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Reality of Man: Excerpts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1962), pp. 9-10.

And, now that this all-important Work may suffer no neglect, but rather function vigorously and continuously in every part of the Bahá'í world; that the unity of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh may remain secure and inviolate, it is of the utmost importance that in accordance with the explicit text of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Most Holy Book, in every locality, be it city or hamlet, where the number of adult (21 years and above) declared believers exceeds nine, a local "Spiritual Assembly" be forthwith established.⁴²

Here instruction and interpretation are synthesized; they are one and the same thing, because he is asserting the authority and meaning of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. The only variable is time, the use of which falls within the discretion of his authority as appointed guide. An exposition of the functions of Local Spiritual Assemblies follows the instruction and forms the basis of the letter containing it, a letter in which is also included an explanation of the need and basis for the establishment of National Spiritual Assemblies. In another example, a letter written on May 12, 1925, Shoghi Effendi explains further about the formation of a National Spiritual Assembly:

Regarding the method to be adopted for the election of the National Spiritual Assemblies, it is clear that the text of the Beloved's Testament gives us no indication as to the manner in which these Assemblies are to be elected. In one of His earliest Tablets, however, addressed to a friend in Persia, the following is expressly recorded:—

'At whatever time all the beloved of God in each country appoint their delegates, and these in turn elect their representatives, and these representatives elect a body, that body shall be regarded as the Supreme Baytu'l-'Adl (Universal House of Justice).'

These words clearly indicate that a three-stage election has been provided by 'Abdu'l-Bahá for the formation of the International House of Justice, and as it is explicitly provided in His Will and Testament that the "Secondary House of Justice (i.e., National Assemblies) must elect the members of the Universal One," it is obvious that the members of the National Spiritual Assemblies will have to be indirectly elected by the body of the believers in their respective provinces. In view of these complementary instructions the principle, set forth in my letter of March 12th, 1923, has been established requiring the believers (the beloved of God) in every country to elect a certain number of delegates who, in turn, will elect their national representatives (Secondary House of Justice or National Spiritual Assembly) whose sacred obligation and privilege will be to elect in time God's Universal House of Justice.⁴³

Here we gather some insight into the progressive stages of exegesis as they relate to the growth and actions of the community. This letter, which went on to amplify the principles enunciated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, was a reply to communications, dated April 4 and 18, 1925, which the Guardian had received from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, that supplied him with information on a variety of subjects and raised questions that he had already treated in a letter written two years before. A number of points emerge from a scrutiny of such letters. Interpretations are given in response to the expressed or demonstrated need of the community at the time. Shoghi Effendi seems completely to avoid

⁴² Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 37.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

gratuitous random interpretations of the Sacred Texts; the questions and needs of the community outline the course and output of his exegesis. In this way his exegesis evolves with the community; it is thus possible to trace and gauge the progressive stages of Bahá'í community development by reading his writings chronologically.

Since they rest on enduring principles, the interpretations given are not limited by time. They both satisfy and transcend the need of the moment and thus serve the future as well as the present. Take, for example, the letter just cited above. The principles of elections for National Spiritual Assemblies, which it explains, are unchangeable; yet they are written in reply to a question of the moment. The introductions of similar letters repeatedly affirm the interplay between the information or question received by Shoghi Effendi and the subsequent guidance he issued. Refer, for instance, to his letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada dated February 27, 1929:

Dearly-beloved co-workers:

I have been acquainted by the perusal of your latest communications with the nature of the doubts that have been publicly expressed, by one who is wholly misinformed as to the true precepts of the Cause, regarding the validity of institutions that stand inextricably interwoven with the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh.⁴⁴

Or to his letter dated March 21, 1930:

Dearly-beloved co-workers:

Amid the reports that have of late reached the Holy Land, most of which witness to the triumphant march of the Cause, a few seem to betray a certain apprehension regarding the validity of the institutions which stand inseparably associated with the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh.⁴⁵

These are the opening passages of letters published under the respective titles, "The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh" and "The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Further Considerations."⁴⁶ Both are indispensable statements on the philosophy of Bahá'í administration.

It is no wonder then that Shoghi Effendi had an insatiable need for information and was relentless in the gathering and meticulous in the classification of data. "I am eagerly awaiting the news of the progress of the activities initiated to promote the teaching work within, and beyond, the confines of the American continent," he cabled the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada in one of his typical requests for information.⁴⁷ But he could not have relied and did not rely solely on Assemblies for information. Rúhíyyih Khánum Rabbani, his widow, writes in her biography of him that "he did not always wait until official channels corroborated

⁴⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.3-12; 15-26.

⁴⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to America: Selected Letters and Cablegrams Addressed to the Bahá'ís of North America: 1932-1946* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1947), p.7.

the arrival of a pioneer at his post or some other piece of good news which had been conveyed to him through a personal letter or by a pilgrim... This practice of his should not, however, mislead us into thinking that he was not extraordinarily thorough. The exactitude with which he compiled statistics, sought out historic facts, worked on every minute detail of his maps and plans was astonishing.⁴⁸ Although the data he received were put to a variety of uses, it is evident that the springs of interpretation were often activated by the influx of information.

His principle of translating exegesis into action was variously manifested in his methods of persuasion by which he alternately employed several modes of praise, censure, and exhortation. A brief survey of *The Advent of Divine Justice*, the published letter which Shoghi Effendi wrote to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada on December 25, 1938, will illustrate his methods. In April 1937 these Bahá'ís had, at the direction of the Guardian, launched a Seven Year Plan. The first long-range program designed as a systematic response to Abdu'l-Bahá's charter, the Plan set three goals to be accomplished by the end, in 1944, of the first century of the Bahá'í era: forming a Local Spiritual Assembly in each province of Canada and each of the United States; establishing a Bahá'í center in each country of Central and South America and in certain European countries; and completing the exterior ornamentation of the Temple in Wilmette, Illinois.

In the series of letters and cablegrams he sent to the North American believers during the first year of the Plan, Shoghi Effendi marvels "at the range which the driving force of their ceaseless labors has acquired and the heights which the sublimity of their faith has attained."⁴⁹ His exhortations are frequent and compelling: "The seven year plan ... must at all costs be prosecuted with increasing force and added consecration."⁵⁰ "The American believers must gird up the loins of endeavor and step into the arena of service with such heroism as shall astound the entire Bahá'í world."⁵¹ But intermingled with his expressions of gratification and praise are displays of anxiety increasingly intensified by the falling shadows of World War II. He intimates his deepening concern not from fear of the gathering spectre but from uneasiness about its probable repercussions upon the outlook of those who were to prosecute such a bold program. "Severe and unprecedented as may be the internal tests and ordeals which the members of this Community may yet experience, however tragic and momentous the external happenings which might well disrupt the fabric of the society in which they live, they must not throughout these six remaining years, allow themselves to be deflected from the course they are now steadily pursuing."⁵² "The rumblings that must precede the eruption of those forces that must cause 'the limbs of humanity to quake' can already be heard."⁵³ Yet he praises the Community, which "is standing ready, alert, clear-visioned, and resolute."⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Rúhíyyih Rabbani, *The Priceless Pearl* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969), pp. 127-28.

⁴⁹ Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to America*, p. 10.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

It is against this background of bold planning and courageous action, on the one hand, and of precarious world conditions, on the other, that Shoghi Effendi penned one of his most widely used works—the *Advent of Divine Justice*. He had seized upon the chance afforded him by the seeming incongruity of the humble plan of hope and the imminence of war to reconcile the paradox in an exposition of Bahá'í principles.

He begins with praise:

Best-beloved brothers and sisters in the love of Bahá'u'lláh:

It would be difficult indeed to adequately express the feelings of irrepressible joy and exultation that flood my heart every time I pause to contemplate the ceaseless evidences of the dynamic energy which animates the stalwart pioneers of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh in the execution of the Plan committed to their charge. (p. 1)

He then documents the reasons for his praise, for he never stoops to flattery. He comments on the “resourcefulness of the national representatives of the American believers,” appreciates the generous support accorded them by the community at large, observes the “close interaction,” “complete cohesion,” “continual harmony and fellowship” between the various Bahá'í agencies as constituting “a phenomenon which offers a striking contrast to the disruptive tendencies” manifested in present-day society (p. 1). The Community has reason to be grateful for the “interpositions of an ever-watchful Providence” (p. 2):

Whereas every apparent trial with which the unfathomable wisdom of the Almighty deems it necessary to afflict His chosen community serves only to demonstrate afresh its essential solidarity and to consolidate its inward strength, each of the successive crises in the fortunes of a decadent age exposes more convincingly than the one preceding it the corrosive influences that are fast sapping the vitality and undermining the basis of its declining institutions. (pp. 1-2)

He enumerates certain crises afflicting the Bahá'í communities in Europe and Asia: the Nazi regime has banned the activities of the German community; “In central Asia, in the city enjoying the unique distinction of having been chosen by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá as the home of the First Mashriq'ul-Adhkár of the Bahá'í world,” the community “finds itself at the mercy of forces which, alarmed at its rising power, are now bent on reducing it to utter impotence”; in Persia, “wherein reside the immense majority of its followers,” the community faces a continuing campaign of repression; in the Holy Land, “the heart and nerve-center of a world-embracing Faith” a state of unrest interferes with the flow of pilgrims and suspends various projects associated with the physical development of the World Center (pp. 2-4).

This somber survey of the state of the Bahá'í community is not, however, to become a litany of defeat. For ‘Abdu'l-Bahá has written that “*The continent of America is, in the eyes of the one true God, the land wherein the splendors of His light shall be revealed, where the mysteries of His Faith shall be unveiled, where the righteous will abide, and the free assemble*” (p. 5). And, as Shoghi Effendi sees it, “Already, the community of the believers of the North American continent—at once the prime mover and pattern of the future communities which the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh is destined to raise up throughout the length and breadth of the Western Hemisphere—has, despite the prevailing gloom, shown its capacity to be recognized as the

torch-bearer of that light, the repository of those mysteries, the exponent of that righteousness and the sanctuary of that freedom” (p. 6).

Hence, the American Bahá’í Community is the “one chief remaining citadel, the mighty arm which still raises aloft the standard of an unconquerable Faith... ” (p. 6). Thus, “While its sister communities are bending beneath the tempestuous winds that beat upon them from every side, this community, preserved by the immutable decrees of the omnipotent Ordainer and deriving continual sustenance from the mandate with which the Tablets of the Divine Plan have invested it, is now busily engaged in laying the foundations and in fostering the growth of those institutions which are to herald the approach of the Age destined to witness the birth and rise of the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh” (p. 6).

He has resolved a paradox, and the burden of the actual proof rests on the shoulders of the American Bahá’í Community, “A community, relatively negligible in its numerical strength”—that fact, itself a paradox (p. 6). How can it bear this awesome challenge? He stirs the community’s sense of pride by reciting its “matchless and brilliant record of service” (p. 8), but quickly warns that, “Magnificent as has been this record, reminiscent as it is, in some of its aspects, of the exploits with which the dawn-breakers of an heroic Age have proclaimed the birth of the Faith itself, the task associated with the name of this privileged community is, far from approaching its climax, only beginning to unfold” (p. 9). He then points the community’s vision to the grand possibilities of the future which the successful prosecution of the plan in progress will lead to; these include, among others, the election of The Universal House of Justice and its establishment in the Holy Land (pp. 9-12). He asserts the certitude of the “ultimate blessings that must crown the consummation” of their mission (p. 13). But again, he warns:

Dearly-beloved friends! Great as is my love and admiration for you, convinced as I am of the paramount share which you can, and will, undoubtedly have in both the continental and international spheres of future Bahá’í activity and service, I feel it nevertheless incumbent upon me to utter, at this juncture, a word of warning. The glowing tributes, so repeatedly and deservedly paid to the capacity, the spirit, the conduct, and the high rank, of the American believers, both individually and as an organic community, must, under no circumstances, be confounded with the characteristics and nature of the people from which God has raised them up. A sharp distinction between that community and that people must be made, and resolutely and fearlessly upheld., if we wish to give due recognition to the transmuting power of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh, in its impact on the lives and standards of those who have chosen to enlist under His banner. Otherwise, the supreme and distinguishing function of His Revelation, which is none other than the calling into being of a new race of men, will remain wholly unrecognized and completely obscured. (pp. 13-14)

He then illustrates his meaning by calling attention to the circumstances and surroundings in which the Prophets of God choose to appear. They deliver Their Message in countries and amid peoples and races who are either in a state of decline or in a state of moral and spiritual degradation. He asserts the conviction that

not by reason of any “racial superiority, political capacity, or spiritual virtue which a race or nation might possess, but rather as a direct consequence of its crying needs, its lamentable degeneracy, and irremediable perversity, has the Prophet of God chosen to

appear in its midst, and with it as a lever has lifted the entire human race to a higher and nobler plane of life and conduct. For it is precisely under such circumstances, and by such means that the Prophets have, from time immemorial, chosen and were able to demonstrate their redemptive power to raise from the depths of abasement and of misery, the people of their own race and nation, empowering them to transmit in turn to other races and nations the saving grace and the energizing influence of their Revelation. (pp. 14-15)

This principle, he suggests, applies to a lesser degree to the American community, which has been appointed as the executor of the Divine Plan. The American believers are not therefore to

imagine for a moment that for some mysterious purpose or by any reason of inherent excellence or special merit Bahá'u'lláh has chosen to confer upon their country and people so great and lasting a distinction. It is precisely by reason of the patent evils which, notwithstanding its other admittedly great characteristics and achievements, an excessive and binding materialism has unfortunately engendered within it that the Author of their Faith and the Center of His Covenant have singled it out to become the standard-bearer of the New World Order envisaged in their writings. It is by such means as this that Bahá'u'lláh can best demonstrate to a heedless generation His almighty power to raise up from the very midst of a people, immersed in a sea of materialism, a prey to one of the most virulent and long-standing forms of racial prejudice, and notorious for its political corruption, lawlessness and laxity in moral standards, men and women who, as time goes by, will increasingly exemplify those essential virtues of self-renunciation, of moral rectitude, of chastity, of indiscriminating fellowship, of holy discipline, and of spiritual insight that will fit them for the preponderating share they will have in calling into being that World Order and that World Civilization of which their country, no less than the entire human race, stands in desperate need. (p. 16)

Having thus explained a divine riddle, he exhorts the American believers to “weed out, by every means in their power, those faults, habits, and tendencies which they have inherited from their own nation, and to cultivate, patiently and prayerfully, those distinctive qualities and characteristics that are so indispensable to their effective participation in the great redemptive work of their Faith” (p.17).

His logic is impeccable, the force of his presentation convincing. A sensitive alternating of praise, of censure, and of exhortation accomplishes the dual purpose of fixing his meaning and inducing volition. And there is drama as well in this versatile undulation of modes, which holds and fascinates the reader to the point of taking action—this is precisely what moved hundreds of the professional, the learned, and the lowly alike to plant the banner of their new-found Faith in remote parts of the earth amid peoples with whom they had previously been wholly unfamiliar. Those “distinctive qualities and characteristics”—which he identified as rectitude of conduct, chastity and holiness, and freedom from prejudice—with which they were to be indispensably armed for their magnificent undertakings received the full measure of his treatment in a subsequent section of this monumental message, a section constituting one of the most eloquent exegetic compositions to be found in his writings. A sampling:

This rectitude of conduct with its implications of justice, equity, truthfulness, honesty, fair-mindedness, reliability, and trustworthiness, must distinguish every phase of the life of the Bahá'í community. *“The companions of God,”* Bahá'u'lláh Himself has declared, *“are, in this day, the lump that must leaven the peoples of the world. They must show forth such trustworthiness, such truthfulness and perseverance, such deeds and character that all mankind may profit by their example.”* (p. 19)

This is followed by a copious quoting of corroborative extracts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdul-Bahá; then he continues:

Such a rectitude of conduct must manifest itself, with ever-increasing potency, in every verdict which the elected representatives of the Bahá'í community, in whatever capacity they may find themselves, may be called upon to pronounce. It must be constantly reflected in the business dealings of all its members, in their domestic lives, in all manner of employment, and in any service they may, in the future, render their government or people. It must be exemplified in the conduct of all Bahá'í electors, when exercising their sacred rights and functions. It must characterize the attitude of every loyal believer towards non-acceptance of political posts, non-identification with political parties, nonparticipation in political controversies, and non-membership in political organizations and ecclesiastical institutions. It must reveal itself in the uncompromising adherence of all, whether young or old, to the clearly enunciated and fundamental principles laid down by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His addresses, and to the laws and ordinances revealed by Bahá'u'lláh in His Most Holy Book. It must be demonstrated in the impartiality of every defender of the Faith against its enemies, in his fair-mindedness in recognizing any merits that enemy may possess, and in his honesty in discharging any obligations he may have towards him. It must constitute the brightest ornament of the life, the pursuits, the exertions, and utterances of every Bahá'í teacher, whether laboring at home or abroad, whether in the front ranks of the teaching force, or occupying a less active and responsible position. It must be made the hall-mark of that numerically small, yet intensely dynamic and highly responsible body of the elected national representatives of every Bahá'í community, which constitutes the sustaining pillar, and the sole instrument for the election, in every community, of that Universal House whose very name and title, as ordained by Bahá'u'lláh, symbolizes that rectitude of conduct which is its highest mission to safeguard and enforce.

So great and transcendental is this principle of Divine justice, a principle that must be regarded as the crowning distinction of all Local and National Assemblies, in their capacity as forerunners of the Universal House of Justice, that Bahá'u'lláh Himself subordinates His personal inclination and wish to the all-compelling force of its demands and implications. (pp. 22-23)

Again a compilation of corroborative extracts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá follows. This was the manner of Shoghi Effendi's interpreting.

Having equipped the believers with the tools of their success, he devoted the remainder of *The Advent of Divine Justice* to questions of the Seven Year Plan, relating his comments to the broader Divine Plan of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, of which it is a part, reminding them of the opportunities for teaching inherent in the turmoil of the present age, spelling out the

requirements of teaching for individuals and institutions, emphasizing the significance of awakening Latin America to the Message of Bahá'u'lláh, appealing to the youth to arise and play an active part in the teaching plans of the community, refocusing the vision of the believers on their high calling as the chief executors of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Divine Plan, directing their "special attention, at this decisive hour, to immortal passages, gleaned in part from the great mass of Bahá'u'lláh's unpublished and untranslated writings" (p. 63), and concluding with a word about the destiny of America as envisaged by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, assuring them that, "Paradoxical as it may seem, her only hope of extricating herself from the perils gathering around her is to become entangled in that very web of international association which the Hand of an inscrutable Providence is weaving" (p. 74).

As was the custom when letters such as this were received from the Guardian, the National Spiritual Assembly acted immediately to publish and circulate it. When, therefore, in September 1939, German guns fired the first shots of World War II, the North American Bahá'í Community knew how to react. At the end of its Seven Year Plan in 1944, it had accomplished every goal that had been set for it. On D-Day a year later, it had already, with the urging of its Guardian, been preparing for the second Seven Year Plan which would take scores of its members to teaching frontiers designated for them in the war-ravaged countries of Europe. Shoghi Effendi had succeeded eminently in translating exegesis into heroic action at one of the most critical and discouraging periods of world history.

A word more about his skill of persuasion. Exegesis is true to its purposes if it induces or perpetuates action in the building of the new World Order. The exegete, as Augustine might have observed, must therefore both expound knowledge and arouse response. As the above review of *The Advent of Divine Justice* shows, by employment of praise, censure, and exhortation, Shoghi Effendi produces that rhetorical drama which captivates and impels the reader; drama thus becomes a tool of instruction. But there is more. Time, being an indispensable factor of drama, must also perform its appropriate functions. Shoghi Effendi knew that well; and he found ample opportunities to bend time to his advantage, whether on the occasions of the observance of Bahá'í Holy Days and significant anniversaries, or of a temple construction project, or of the arrival of pioneers as their remote posts, or of the deaths of humble teachers of the Faith.

Such ceremonial messages as he was often moved to write—that is, statements in respect of the observance of important events—were therefore not spent on these occasions alone but served also to heighten the horizon and intensify the vision of the faith.

A Holy Day is imminent: "Fellow-laborers in the Divine Vineyard," he warmly addresses the North American believers on February 8, 1934: "On the 23rd of May of this auspicious year the Bahá'í world will celebrate the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. We, who at this hour find ourselves standing on the threshold of the last decade of the first century of the Bahá'í era, might well pause to reflect upon the mysterious dispensations of so august, so momentous a Revelation."⁵⁵ The rest of the introduction is a summary of the prophetic missions of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, an explanation of the position and rank of 'Abdu'l-

⁵⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 97.

Bahá, and a discourse on the theory on which the Bahá'í administrative order is based. The letter is now referred to as "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh."⁵⁶

It is the anniversary of the death of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "The inexorable march of recent events," he writes on November 28, 1931,

has carried humanity so near to the goal foreshadowed by Bahá'u'lláh that no responsible follower of His Faith, viewing on all sides the distressing evidences of the world's travail, can remain unmoved at the thought of its approaching deliverance.

It would not seem inappropriate, at a time when we are commemorating the world over the termination of the first decade since 'Abdu'l-Bahá's sudden removal from our midst, to ponder, in the light of the teachings bequeathed by Him to the world, such events as have tended to hasten the gradual emergence of the World Order anticipated by Bahá'u'lláh.⁵⁷

This began a letter now called "The Goal of a New World Order."⁵⁸ There are other examples of Shoghi Effendi's employment of time. He used the occasion of the Ridván Festival (April 21 to May 2)—the anniversary of the declaration of Bahá'u'lláh's mission, at which time the administration of the Faith is renewed by the election of Assemblies—to impress upon the Bahá'í community the practical steps toward the realization of its vision. In his messages on this occasion he would catalogue and measure the community's achievements, revise and interpret its goals, praise and challenge its capacity. A sense of historical significance permeates these messages in which the vision of the community is made to perceive, through its accomplishments and goals, a panorama of the past, the present, and the future. On one such occasion, 1957, he writes:

as we gaze in retrospect beyond the immediate past, and survey, in however cursory a manner, the vicissitudes afflicting an increasingly tormented society, and recall the strains and stresses to which the fabric of a dying Order has been increasingly subjected, we cannot but marvel at the sharp contrast presented, on the one hand, by the accumulated evidences of the orderly unfoldment, and the uninterrupted multiplication of the agencies, of an Administrative Order designed to be the harbinger of a world civilization, and, on the other, by the ominous manifestations of acute political conflict, of social unrest, or racial animosity, of class antagonism, of immorality and of irreligion, proclaiming, in no uncertain terms, the corruption and obsolescence of the institutions of a bankrupt Order.

Against the background of these afflictive disturbances—the turmoil and tribulations of a travailing age—we may well ponder the portentous prophecies uttered well-nigh fourscore years ago, by the Author of our Faith, as well as the dire predictions made by Him Who is the unerring Interpreter of His teachings, all foreshadowing a universal commotion, of a scope and intensity unparalleled in the annals of mankind.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp.97-157.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 29.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 29-48.

The violent derangement of the world's equilibrium; the trembling that will seize the limbs of mankind; the radical transformation of human society; the rolling up of the present-day Order; the fundamental changes affecting the structure of government; the weakening of the pillars of religion; the rise of dictatorships; the spread of tyranny; the fall of monarchies; the decline of ecclesiastical institutions; the increase of anarchy and chaos; the extension and consolidation of the Movement of the Left; the fanning into flame of the smouldering fire of racial strife; the development of infernal engines of war; the burning of cities; the contamination of the atmosphere of the earth—these stand out as the signs and portents that must either herald or accompany the retributive calamity which, as decreed by Him Who is the Judge and Redeemer of mankind, must, sooner or later, afflict a society which, for the most part, and for over a century, has turned a deaf ear to the Voice of God's Messenger in this day—a calamity which must purge the human race of the dross of its age-long corruptions, and weld its component parts into a firmly-knit world-embracing Fellowship—a Fellowship destined, in the fullness of time, to be incorporated in the framework, and to be galvanized by the spiritualizing influences, of a mysteriously expanding, divinely appointed Order, and to flower, in the course of future Dispensations, into a Civilization, the like of which mankind has, at no stage in its evolution, witnessed.⁵⁹

Among the most appealing features of Shoghi Effendi's writings, and particularly of his occasional messages, are the meaning they give to history and the prospect they assign to the future. The future, or, put differently, the destiny of man, emerges as the dominant theme of his work; and from his vision of it we gather a hitherto unformulated understanding of the past and the present. In his essay "The Unfoldment of World Civilization,"⁶⁰ for instance, there is an outline of the implications of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation which lends the reader an unusual perspective of historical process—a process that occurs in the light of man's purpose which, according to Bahá'u'lláh, is to "*carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.*"⁶¹ Having evolved through the various units of social life—family, tribe, city-state, and nation, mankind's present goal is the unity of nations, a world super-state. The final step in man's social evolution, this goal is concomitant with his impending spiritual maturity. In this connection, Shoghi Effendi states that:

The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, whose supreme mission is none other but the achievement of this organic and spiritual unity of the whole body of nations, should, if we be faithful to its implications, be regarded as signaling through its advent the coming of age of the entire human race. It should be viewed not merely as yet another spiritual revival in the ever-changing fortunes of mankind, not only as a further stage in a chain of progressive Revelations, nor even as the culmination of one of a series of recurrent prophetic cycles, but rather as marking the last and highest stage in the stupendous evolution of man's collective life on this planet. The emergence of a world community, the consciousness of world citizenship, the founding of a world civilization and culture—

⁵⁹ Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to the Bahá'í World: 1950-1957*, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1958), pp. 102-03.

⁶⁰ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 161-206.

⁶¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 215.

all of which must synchronize with the initial stages in the unfoldment of the Golden Age of the Bahá'í Era—should, by their very nature, be regarded, as far as this planetary life is concerned, as the furthestmost limits in the organization of human society, though man, as an individual, will, nay must indeed as a result of such a consummation, continue indefinitely to progress and develop.⁶²

Furthermore, in that same essay, Shoghi Effendi sketches the pattern for the society which is to be the outward expression of the unity of mankind. He writes:

The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded. This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples. A world executive, backed by an international Force, will carry out the decisions arrived at, and apply the laws enacted by, this world legislature, and will safeguard the organic unity of the whole commonwealth. A world tribunal will adjudicate and deliver its compulsory and final verdict in all and any disputes that may arise between the various elements constituting this universal system. A mechanism of world intercommunication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvelous swiftness and perfect regularity. A world metropolis will act as the nerve center of a world civilization, the focus towards which the unifying forces of life will converge and from which its energizing influences will radiate. A world language will either be invented or chosen from among the existing languages and will be taught in the schools of all the federated nations as an auxiliary to their mother tongue. A world script, a world literature, a uniform and universal system of currency, of weights and measures, will simplify and facilitate intercourse and understanding among the nations and races of mankind. In such a world society, science and religion, the two most potent forces in human life, will be reconciled, will cooperate, and will harmoniously develop

A world federal system, ruling the whole earth and exercising unchallengeable authority over its unimaginably vast resources, blending and embodying the ideals of both the East and the West, liberated from the curse of war and its miseries, and bent on the exploitation of all the available sources of energy on the surface of the planet, a system in which Force is made the servant of Justice, whose life is sustained by its universal recognition of one God and by its allegiance to one common Revelation—such is the goal towards which humanity, impelled by the unifying forces of life, is moving.⁶³

Future society thus outlined is no utopian dream; on the contrary, it is a natural outcome of man's spiritual maturity as is fruit-bearing the natural consequence of maturity in the tree.

⁶² Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 163.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 203-04.

Attaining to such a society involves the travail of growth and transition which in spiritual terms implies a transformation in the character of man—a transformation analogous to the process of adolescence. Shoghi Effendi therefore encourages no illusory ease of attainment to world unity. He is as forthright about the setbacks and pitfalls to be encountered as he is reassuring of the inevitability of this attainment. Referring to Bahá'u'lláh's principle of the federation of nations, Shoghi Effendi once mused:

Who knows that for so exalted a conception to take shape a suffering more intense than any it has yet experienced will have to be inflicted upon humanity? Could anything less than the fire of a civil war with all its violence and vicissitudes—a war that nearly rent the great American Republic—have welded the states, not only into a Union of independent units, but into a Nation, in spite of all the ethnic differences that characterized its component parts? That so fundamental a revolution, involving such far-reaching changes in the structure of society, can be achieved through the ordinary processes of diplomacy and education seems highly improbable. We have but to turn our gaze to humanity's blood-stained history to realize that nothing short of intense mental as well as physical agony has been able to precipitate those epoch-making changes that constitute the greatest landmarks in the history of human civilization.⁶⁴

By statements such as this Shoghi Effendi kept the balance between prospect and practicality. One derives from his balanced outlook a quality of naturalness about the goals of the Bahá'í Faith and their attainment. A cohesive and compelling analysis of historical process emerges from the portrayal of cause, effect, and prospect in such essays as “The Goal of a New World Order,” “The Unfoldment of World Civilization,” and “The Promised Day Is Come.”⁶⁵ This quality of naturalness induces belief in his perceptions, a belief which is enhanced by the success of the Bahá'í community in translating his instructions into triumphs despite some of the most trying circumstances. One recalls, for instance, that the instructions and advice given in “The Advent of Divine Justice” and other letters which Shoghi Effendi wrote in the thirties and forties guided the community toward the accomplishment of its goals amid the confusion and doubts caused by World War II.

The Interpreter as Literatus

Shoghi Effendi wrote a prodigious quantity of letters which form the bulk of his literary work. But he also translated the words of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá from Arabic and Persian into English. Gifted with a masterly grasp of the rich vocabulary and subtle nuances of English and endowed with the power of unerring perception, he turned any translation into a thing of wonder and delight. His major works of translation include three complete works of Bahá'u'lláh: *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, and *The Kitáb-i-Íqán* (Book of Certitude); and compilations of Bahá'u'lláh's Writings: *Gleanings from the Writings of*

⁶⁴ Ibid., p.45.

⁶⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day Is Come* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1961).

Bahá'u'lláh and *Prayers and Meditations*.⁶⁶ One of his most celebrated translations is *The Dawn-Breakers*, Nabíl's narrative of the early days of the Bábí Revelation.⁶⁷ It is said by those who know the original Persian text of the narrative that Shoghi Effendi did more than translate it. He performed the rare feat of creating a translation more splendid than the original yet unflinching in fidelity to its source.

Although a considerable number of Shoghi Effendi's letters and messages now appear in several anthologies and in a few instances a single letter has been lengthy enough to be published as a book (e.g., *The Advent of Divine Justice* and *The Promised Day Is Come*), he actually set out to write only one book in English, *God Passes By*, which is a stupendous history of the first century of the Bahá'í Faith.

It is in this book that one can appreciate the versatility of his narrative style. The temptation to cite an example is irresistible. The extract cited below follows a recitation of vivid activities during 'Abdu'l-Bahá's travels in the West. Note how skillfully Shoghi Effendi produces two contrasting bodies of narrative, one in an opening series of questions, the other in a corresponding series of answers. In this one paragraph, salient features of almost seventy years of Bahá'í history are strung together in contrasting colors, as it were, upon the thread of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's life:

Who knows what thoughts flooded the heart of Abdu'l-Bahá as He found Himself the central figure of such memorable scenes as these? Who knows what thoughts were uppermost in His mind as He sat at breakfast beside the Lord Mayor of London, or was received with extraordinary deference by the Khedive himself in his palace, or as He listened to the cries of "Allah-u-Abhá" and to the hymns of thanksgiving and praise that would herald His approach to the numerous and brilliant assemblages of His enthusiastic followers and friends organized in so many cities of the American continent? Who knows what memories stirred within Him as He stood before the thundering waters of Niagara, breathing the free air of a far distant land, or gazed, in the course of a brief and much-needed rest, upon the green woods and countryside in Glenwood Springs, or moved with a retinue of Oriental believers along the paths of the Trocadero gardens in Paris, or walked alone in the evening beside the majestic Hudson on Riverside Drive in New York, or as He paced the terrace of the Hotel du Parc at Thonon-les-Bains, overlooking the Lake of Geneva, or as He watched from Serpentine Bridge in London the pearly chain of lights beneath the trees stretching as far as the eye could see? Memories of the sorrows, the poverty, the overhanging doom of His earlier years; memories of His mother who sold her gold buttons to provide Him, His brother and His sister with sustenance, and who was forced, in her darkest hours, to place a handful of dry flour in the palm of His hand to

⁶⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1953); Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1954); Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1950); and Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1938).

⁶⁷ Nabíl-i-A'zam, *The Dawn-Breakers*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1932).

appease His hunger; of His own childhood when pursued and derided by a mob of ruffians in the streets of Tehran; of the damp and gloomy room, formerly a morgue, which He occupied in the barracks of Akká and of His imprisonment in the dungeon of that city - memories such as these must surely have thronged His mind. Thoughts, too, must have visited Him of the Báb's captivity in the mountain fastnesses of Ádhirbáyján, when at night time He was refused even a lamp, and of His cruel and tragic execution when hundreds of bullets riddled His youthful breast. Above all His thoughts must have centered on Bahá'u'lláh, Whom He loved so passionately and Whose trials He had witnessed and had shared from His boyhood. The vermin-infested Siyah-Chál of Tehran; the bastinado inflicted upon Him in Amul; the humble fare which filled His kashkul while He lived for two years the life of a dervish in the mountains of Kurdistan; the days in Baghdad when He did not even possess a change of linen, and when His followers subsisted on a handful of dates; His confinement behind the prison-walls of Akká, when for nine years even the sight of verdure was denied Him; and the public humiliation to which He was subjected at government headquarters in that city - pictures from the tragic past such as these must have many a time overpowered Him with feelings of mingled gratitude and sorrow, as He witnessed the many marks of respect, of esteem, and honor now shown Him and the Faith which He represented.⁶⁸

It should perhaps nor be surprising at all, given the motivations of his prose, to observe that Shoghi Effendi also possessed the power of definition to a superlative degree, and found more ways than many a celebrated giant of letters to use this power. When you read, for example, his definition of a "chaste and holy life," you perceive resources of this power that would hardly occur to you in reading the writings of the modern literati:

a chaste and holy life, with its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness, involves no less than the exercise of moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations. It demands daily vigilance in the control of one's carnal desires and corrupt inclinations. It calls for the abandonment of a frivolous conduct, with its excessive attachment to trivial and often misdirected pleasures. It requires total abstinence from all alcoholic drinks, from opium, and from similar habit-forming drugs. It condemns the prostitution of art and of literature, the practices of nudism and of companionate marriage, infidelity in marital relationships, and all manner of promiscuity, of easy familiarity, and of sexual vices. It can tolerate no compromise with the theories, the standards, the habits, and the excesses of a decadent age. Nay rather it seeks to demonstrate, through the dynamic force of its example, the pernicious character of such theories, the falsity of such standards, the hollowness of such claims, the perversity of such habits, and the sacrilegious character of such excesses.

It must be remembered, however, that the maintenance of such a high standard of moral conduct is not to be associated or confused with any form of asceticism, or of excessive and bigoted puritanism. The standard inculcated by Bahá'u'lláh, seeks, under

⁶⁸ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, pp. 292-93.

no circumstances, to deny any one the legitimate joys, beauties, and pleasures with which the world has been so plentifully enriched by an All-Loving Creator.⁶⁹

Shoghi Effendi took to his literary endeavors this code of chastity and holiness, as he had defined it. Neither art nor literature is to be prostituted. The use of language must therefore reflect the virtues of rectitude and yet employ the creative force of imagination, deny falsity and yet be quickened by drama, eschew perversity and yet engage the appeal of beauty; language must exhibit a wholesome respect for the meaning of words, a meticulous attention to the arrangements of sentences, a precise calculation of the effect of paragraphs. In any case, it must say what it means, and mean it well. The good purpose of language is related to the principle of a chaste and holy life; the proper use of language is related to the principle of rectitude of conduct. You see, then, that the fabric of his literary work owes its strength and integrity to his strict adherence to these principles; unlike the perversion of the language which George Orwell saw in modern political writing as “largely the defense of the indefensible,” his manner, his usage, his motivation of language embody the high principles it espouses and legitimize the information and pleasure it conveys.

The messages of the Guardian grew into a voluminous body of literature of a wholly new character; and although there is much more to be said about its uncommon literary quality than can be contained in this essay, the deepest sense of its character, it can be said, in summary, is in the realm of the spirit and thus remains somewhat elusive except to those who experience it directly.

Critics can easily detect in his style traces of the old masters, a Gibbon, a Macaulay, a Shakespeare; for he is known to have kept almost constant company with their books—particularly Gibbon’s—in searching out the wellspring of the English tongue. One could remark randomly about his mastery of what is sometimes called the periodic sentence in which multiple compounds of phrases explode with brilliant sparks of meaning at the ending statement, about the baroque constructions in which words are arranged in rich designs of meaning and imagery like settings of fine stones, about his appreciation of assonance and alliteration, about the lyrical cadence of his sentences which sound better and seem to enlarge upon their meanings when read aloud, about his one-sentence paragraphs, about the mathematical precision of his usage, or about his ability to compress multitudinous meanings into slight space, to reconcile conciseness and amplitude, precision and suppleness, force and elegance.

Concerning rhetoric, the habitual abuse of which aroused constant suspicion and fear among the ancients, Pascal said something that should seem trite to men of letters: “words differently arranged have a different meaning, and meanings differently arranged have a different effect.” Looking at the transcendent achievement of Shoghi Effendi takes the triteness out of Pascal’s statement.

When reading Shoghi Effendi, one senses, as it were, a procession of the great men of letters of bygone ages: you are apt to say, here is Shakespeare, here is Cicero, here is the Prophet of the House of Israel in his awesome eloquence, here is... You might say in the end that Shoghi Effendi has distilled the ancient classical virtues; in fact, he has distilled the virtues of

⁶⁹ Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, pp. 25-28.

language in any age and clothed them with principles of the spirit. You could say he rescued the virtues of English. In this respect, Orwell, who, early in this century, bemoaned the plight of English in our decadent civilization, would most likely have loved and lauded Shoghi Effendi's continual success in loading such substance into his sentences that they seemed to crackle from the weight of their significances.

The roots of all these marvels in the writings of Shoghi Effendi have their deeper foundation elsewhere: their foundation is in the fear of God to which Bahá'u'lláh repeatedly exhorts humanity. In these exhortations Bahá'u'lláh directs all men to what ennobles them—that correct respect for the majesty of their God, Who created them out of His love to “*carry forward an ever-advancing civilization*” which ultimately must lead them inexorably and eternally toward Him. Shoghi Effendi, being the noblest of men, knew better than any one else how vital was this sense of respect to the critical role in which he must unerringly guide through his interpretations of God's Word the processes of an ever-advancing civilization.

Shoghi Effendi died on November 4, 1957. It is too soon for a complete assessment of his literary legacy, but the credentials of his greatness as a writer are already obvious, his immortality assured. Shoghi Effendi was a true interpreter of Holy Scripture.

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