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The Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

BY AMÍN BANÁNÍ

THE WRITINGS of 'Abdu'l-Bahá are the fruit of more than half a century of prolific labor from His early twenties to the seventy-eighth and final year of His life. Their full volume is as yet unknown; and much remains to be done in gathering, analyzing, and collating His literary legacy.

His Writings consist of personal correspondence, general tablets, tablets on specific themes, books, prayers, poems, public talks, and recorded conversations. Approximately four-fifths of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Writings are in Persian; the rest—with the exception of a very small number of prayers and letters in Turkish—are in Arabic. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was both fluent and eloquent in these three languages. Transcriptions of His extemporaneous speeches are often indistinguishable from His Writings. In a culture that placed a high premium on rhetoric 'Abdu'l-Bahá was recognized by friend and foe, Arab and

Persian, as a paragon of distinctive style and eloquence.

It is the intent of this article to touch upon the character of that style and to present an overview of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Writings in various genres and categories. Discussion of the language and style is inherently limited, as it must be attempted across twin barriers of culture and tongue; the attempt at categorization is necessarily arbitrary and is meant to serve only as a catalogue. Obviously any number of criteria, such as chronological, thematic, and linguistic, can provide different sets of categories. Furthermore, some works cited as examples of certain categories could easily be put under others.

'ABDU'L-BAHÁ was, of course, not a prophet and at no time claimed to have received direct revelation from God. But as the Center of the Covenant of His Father and the appointed Interpreter of His Revelation, Bahá'ís believe, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was divinely inspired and guided. His Writings, therefore, constitute for the Bahá'ís at once a part and an elaboration of their Scriptures.

The question of divinely inspired language has traditionally posed a dilemma and given rise to baseless dogma in the religions of the past. In their literal-minded zeal to aver the authenticity of their Holy Writ, devotees of traditional religions have often insisted on the divine authorship of the very lexical and syntactic form of that Writ. This view not only reduces God to the use of particular and different human tongues, but it also attempts to isolate religious writings from the body of the language in which they were written. It equates divine origin with absolute linguistic and literary originality. Those who uphold this view are resentful of any comparison and precedence. With their perverted notion of originality, they completely miss the often striking literary originality of holy books

that can only be perceived in the light of traditions in their languages. By ignoring the literary traditions, conceptual methods, cultural associations—in short by denying the life of the language—they reduce rather than enhance comprehension and true appreciation of holy scriptures.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's two primary languages have vigorous and highly developed literary traditions with more than a thousand years of life. Only the briefest mention of facets of these traditions that are germane to the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá is possible here. Since most of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Writings are in Persian, the main focus here is on Persian literary traditions. But so many of these are shared with Arabic—indeed in many cases they are reflections of Arabic norms in Persian—that the observations will generally be true of the Arabic literary traditions as well.

For nearly a thousand years since the formulation and the crystallization of classical criteria in Arabic and Persian literature there has existed a preoccupation with and a primacy of form. Needless to say, tightly-metered and fully-rhymed poetry, as the most formal of literary arts, has been the master art form for the Arabs and the Persians. Prose writers from their aesthetically inferior position have attempted to ennoble their work with qualities of poetry, evolving a technique known as *saj'*. It introduces the basic poetic ingredients of rhyme and rhythm into prose without actually transforming it into equal-footed lines. A symmetry of expression is achieved by use of lexical devices such as synonyms, antonyms, and homonyms giving prose an architectural plasticity and rendering it memorable. This style of writing in Persian reached its apex during the thirteenth century A.D. and declined rapidly thereafter. By the end of the eighteenth century it had reached a nadir of artificial verbosity and lost its power to communicate.

THE STYLE of 'Abdu'l-Bahá is the outward mode of His inspiration and expression. The animus is the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. The clay is the Persian language with its characteristics. The mystery of His person forms it into a unique style. It is distinctive, unmistakably personal, and therefore original. Yet it is in the purest mold of literary tradition. It is a new flowering of *saj'*. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has breathed new life into a familiar form; but by harmonizing form and content He has banished contrived artifice.

In the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá form is an approach to the content. He makes use of poetic imagery and of a vast range of rhetorical and literary devices such as metaphors, similes, symbols, allegories, alliterations, assonances, and dissonances, not in order to draw a veil around the subject, but to expand the reader's mind by refraction of the same reality through different planes of perception, cognition, and intuition. This is the difference between sterile formality and organic integrity of form in a truly creative sense.

Two brief examples may illustrate this harmony of form and content in the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. First is the phrase "*the Sun of Reality*" which occurs frequently in His Writings both as a metaphor and a symbol for the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. There is mutual illumination of the concrete and the abstract here—at once self-evident, life-giving, and pervasive. But it also can remind us of creatures that avoid the sun. How often 'Abdu'l-Bahá referred to the Sun of Reality dawning over gatherings of bats! The other example is the imagery evoked in His own Tablet of Visitation: "... *Give me to drink from the chalice of selflessness: with its robe clothe me . . .*" The paragraph is made of a series of related cultural images of admittance to court, proffering of the cup of favor, and granting of the ceremonial bejeweled robe; all evoke the ceremony of a royal audience

and the bestowal of high rank—traditionally an occasion of pomp, pride, and vanity. By this dramatic inversion of images 'Abdu'l-Bahá has underlined the nobility of servitude and humility.

This use of artistic form for the expression of meaning and purpose is a hallmark of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Writings. To cultivate an appreciation for the poetic qualities of His Writings is to enhance one's understanding of His meaning. It must be admitted that the same qualities place an enormous burden on the translator; and much can be lost in inadequate hands. Fortunately, Shoghi Effendi, particularly in his translations of some of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prayers, has left us a true standard.

THE FOREGOING should not lead the reader to infer that the style of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, although at all times recognizable and personal, is unvarying. His subjects, ranging from philosophical treatises to meditative poems, are expressed in language appropriate to them. Before proceeding to the differentiation of the various categories of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Writings it might be helpful to clarify the traditional term, tablet (*lawh*) which is applied to the majority of His Works. It designates all of His Writings that are addressed to specific individuals or groups. As such it is applied to everything from His personal correspondence to such fundamental documents as the Tablets of the Divine Plan and the Tablets of the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

I. For purposes of analysis 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Writings can be divided into twelve groups of which personal correspondence (Tablets to individuals) constitutes by far the largest segment, despite the undoubted fact that a portion of this precious heritage has been irretrievably lost, and a portion remains in non-Bahá'í hands. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's letters are masterpieces of Persian epistolary genre. They are marked by directness, intimacy, warmth, love, humor,

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forbearance, and a myriad other qualities that reveal the exemplary perfection of His personality. 'Abdu'l-Bahá addresses everyone as an equal in the service of Bahá'u'lláh. His letters often open with an invocation of the quality of faith of the recipient rather than his name or identity—epithets such as "*O the Firm One in the Covenant*," "*O Lover of the Blessed Beauty*." (Later when the Persians were required by law to adopt family names, many Bahá'ís chose as surnames words of address from the Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to themselves or to their fathers.) In subject matter 'Abdu'l-Bahá's letters range from responses to the personal and ephemeral requests of His correspondents to profound elaborations, elucidations, and interpretations of the Bahá'í Revelation. But mostly they are concerned with direction and exhortation of the friends to spread the Teachings.

II. Tablets of specific topical or thematic significance addressed to individuals are perhaps best exemplified by the Tablet to Professor Auguste Forel, which is in fact a philosophical treatise written by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in September 1921 in answer to questions put to Him by the noted Swiss psychologist.

III. Tablets addressed to Bahá'í communities in various parts of the world chronicle 'Abdu'l-Bahá's loving and vigorous leadership of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh and its propagation from a handful of countries in the Near and the Middle East to some thirty-five countries in every continent on the globe. The most important in this group are undoubtedly the series of the Tablets of the Divine Plan, written at the close of the First World War.

IV. Among the Tablets written to world groups or congresses, the best known is the Tablet sent in 1919 to the Central Organization for a Durable Peace at the Hague.

V. The Tablets of the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá is a unique docu-

ment, written in three parts, that constitutes an integral part of the charter of the Bahá'í Administrative Order. Although undated, it is clear from its contents that the first part was written in 1906/7 during the most perilous and yet most prolific period of His life.

VI. The next category is that of prayers. The Arabic and Persian languages distinguish between what is translated in English as prayer (*munáját*) and obligatory prayer (*ṣalát*). The prayers of 'Abdu'l-Bahá are *munáját*. Approximately one half of these are in Persian and the other in Arabic, with a very few in Turkish.

The term *munáját* has a history in Persian literature beginning with Khwájih 'Abdu'lláh-i-Anṣarí, a Súfí mystic of the eleventh century A.D. The *munáját* of Anṣarí are highly stylized epigrammatic forms of communion with God. From a literary point of view these brief evocative compositions bear only the slightest generic resemblance to the *munáját* of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which, although called by the same name, are clearly a literary innovation and original creations in the Persian and Arabic languages. Their chief distinguishing quality is the sustained and expanding expression of man's experience of the Holy by means of poetic language.

The prayers of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, particularly, partake in the fullest measure of poetic qualities. Some actually include fragments or lines of metrical verse which are indistinguishable from the texture of the whole prayer. The purity and sanctity of natural imagery reveal a state of cosmic harmony. The musicality of some of them transcends limitations of language. Poetry is made to serve the ultimate goal of rising above "*the murmur of syllables and sounds*." The emotional intensity of some of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prayers, especially those that recall the sufferings of and separation from Bahá'u'lláh, is unrivaled.

بسمه

کی تندی نور بری نامه تو رسید
چشم فرستندم تو صفا را بر سر
شخصی گری بود بدخول در ملکوت
سیا دانان شد تو نوزاد
او نما مظهری تا ابدات الهی باش
و ملک الجاهلین علیه السلام
abdul Baha

FACSIMILE OF A TABLET TO A BELIEVER SIGNED IN ENGLISH
BY 'ABDU'L-BAHÁ

VII. Prayers written for special occasions such as meetings of Spiritual Assemblies, or embarking on teaching trips, focus upon overcoming of self and reliance upon confirmations from God.

VIII. Tablets of Visitation, virtually all written in Arabic, are primarily for commemoration of individual heroes and martyrs of the Faith, and are to be chanted when visiting their graves. The majority were written in the final years of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's life and are another testimony of His abiding love and faithfulness to the memory of those who sacrificed themselves for the Cause of God.

IX. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's poems are few in number, and mostly in *mathnavi* (rhymed couplet) form. His love for this form—universally associated with the great spiritual masterpiece of the twelfth century poet Rûmî—and His love for Rûmî's poetry are further evinced by frequent quotations of lines from the latter's works in His Writings.

X. Books and treatises, of which 'Abdu'l-Bahá left three, are *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, written in 1875 (and also known as *A Treatise on Civilization*); *A Traveller's Narrative*, written about 1886; and a short volume entitled *A Treatise on Politics*, written in 1893. The first two have been translated into English. The latter, available only in Persian, may be considered a sequel in subject and purpose, to *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. The fundamental theme is the generative force of religion and the degenerative role of priestly power in human affairs. The first book is addressed to the Persian nation as a whole; the second is directed to the Bahá'í community in that land. Their import obviously transcends the historical aims and the immediate occasion of their writing, but they also constitute significant documents within that context.

The Secret of Divine Civilization, particularly, occupies a preeminent historical position among the literature of moderni-

zation in Persia. Seen in the light of an unfolding Bahá'í Revelation, it is, of course, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's elaboration of the principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh in His Tablets to the rulers of the earth. But read in the light of modern analytical literature on the nature and problems of modernization, it is a unique document of equally profound implications. In it 'Abdu'l-Bahá presents a coherent program for the regeneration of Persian society. The program is predicated on universal education and eradication of ignorance and fanaticism. It calls for responsibility and participation of the people in government through a representative assembly. It seeks to safeguard their rights and liberties through codification of laws and institutionalization of justice. It argues for the humane benefits of modern science and technology. It condemns militarism and underscores the immorality of heavy expenditures for armaments. It promulgates a more equitable sharing of the wealth of the nation.

Of the long list of indictments that could be brought against the one hundred and twenty-five years of Qájár misrule of Persia, few could be as damaging as their neglect of this blueprint in 1875. Not until nearly twenty years later do some of these ideas appear piecemeal and unrelated in the writings of other so-called reformers and modernists in Persia. But the significance of *The Secret of Divine Civilization* is not merely in that it represents the earliest and the only coherent scheme for the modernization of Persia. We have come to recognize as the fatal flaw of nearly all reformist ideas and modernizing efforts of the last hundred years (not only in Persia but in many parts of the world), a naive imitation of effects without grasping the causes—superficial borrowing of forms unrelated to their underlying values. Everything in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's proposals is firmly based upon the validity and potency of divine

guidance. It is not westernization of the East that He advocates. He has as much to say to the spiritually impoverished societies of the West as to the people of Persia. Through a revivification of the spiritual and moral potentialities of man 'Abdu'l-Bahá seeks to create new institutions and viable political forms—to lay the foundation of a truly divine civilization.

A Traveller's Narrative, which is a history of the episode of the Báb, was written for the seeker and the curious. It presents a brief and dispassionate account of that portentous dispensation in a simple and moving narrative style. Like *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, this book was published anonymously. It may be another indication of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's humility before Bahá'u'lláh that He did not place His name on the two books He wrote for the public beyond the Bahá'í community during the lifetime of His Father. He also wished to emphasize, as He points out in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, that He had no expectation of personal gain from His efforts.

XI. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's discourses are extensive transcriptions of His utterances on various topics. The two major examples of the genre are *Some Answered Questions* and *Memorials of the Faithful*. The generic affinity of these two works is, however, strictly formal; for in subject matter they are widely different. The final written versions of both were examined by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and approved for publication.

Some Answered Questions is a compilation of the table talks of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in response to questions put to Him by Laura Clifford Barney on spiritual tenets of the Bahá'í Faith and on the Bahá'í understanding of some Christian beliefs. The conversations, their recording, editing, and authentication occurred in the difficult years immediately preceding 'Abdu'l-Bahá's relative freedom in 1908. The compilation was first published in 1907.

Memorials of the Faithful, which has only now (1971) been translated into English, is a compendium of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's remembrances of some seventy early believers, spoken to gatherings of Bahá'ís in Haifa during the early years of World War I. These were compiled, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's permission for their publication was granted in 1915, but due to the strictures of wartime the book was not published until 1924, when it was again authorized by Shoghi Effendi.

The outward form of *Memorials of the Faithful* is a collection of brief biographical sketches. Its title in the original, *Tadhkiratu'l-Vafá*, places it in a Persian literary tradition some nine centuries old. It brings to mind the *Tadhkiratu'l-Awliyá* (Remembrance of Saints) of the twelfth century mystic poet 'Aṭṭár. The spiritual and cultural impulses that have given rise to the literary form of *tadhkirib* have little to do with the particular, the personal, and the ephemeral aspects of human life. It is the quality of soul, the attributes of spirit, the quintessential humanity, and the reflection of the divine in man that is the focus here.

The root word of *dhikr* in the title means prayerful mention—reverent remembrance. It implies that it is not the biographer nor the reader who memorializes a human life, but rather the quality of that life which has earned immemorial luster and sheds light on all who remember that quality. Quite literally this book is a remembrance of *vafá*—faithfulness—not just memories of individual lives, but remembrance of that essential quality which was the animating force of all those lives.

The people whose "lives" are depicted here all share one thing in common. They are propelled by their love for Bahá'u'lláh. So great is this magnetic force in their lives that they literally travel vast distances and overcome every barrier to be with Him. Some of them arrive virtually

with their dying breath, to expire happily after having seen the face of their Beloved; some die on the arduous path. Despite the peculiarities of time and place, it should not take the reader long to recognize a gallery of timeless and universal human types in this book.

The spoken language of 'Abdu'l-Bahá is figurative and almost indistinguishable from His written style. He makes use of a rich fund of literary devices—rhymed phrases, symmetrical forms, alliterations, assonances, metaphors, similes, and allusions—that, far from sounding contrived and artificial, are naturally matched to the subject matter: the essence of faithfulness. With concrete images He describes spiritual states and psychic levels of consciousness, as if to assert the primacy and reality of the realm of spirit. Should the reader experience difficulty with the style, let him savor it slowly, allowing the unfamiliar language to create its own spirit and breathe life into its allusions. Let the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá trace in his mind the shape of the valley of love and faithfulness.

In His usual self-effacing way, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says almost nothing about Himself in this book. But occasional events in the lives of these companions are interwoven with His own. In these passages we have some thrilling glimpses of that essence of humanity and humility that was 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

XII. Next to His personal correspondence, talks comprise the largest segment of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's recorded words. One may distinguish between talks given to Bahá'ís and addresses to the general public, such as societies, groups, universities, and congregations. Generally they have the same literary marks and rhetorical patterns that are characteristic of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Writings.

This vast body of Writing, boundless in its wisdom, consummate in form, generous and loving in spirit, and rich in significance, is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's literary legacy, a legacy that, like His own prayer, rises "*above words and letters*" and transcends "*the murmur of syllables and sounds.*" It is the reality of 'Abdu'l-Bahá so far as we the grateful readers are capable of perceiving.