Eighteenth Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecture

Fact and Fiction
Interrelationships between History and Imagination*

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Abstract
We have inherited an uneasy legacy of tension, in the East and West, between "fact" and "fiction," between objective history and our many relative and subjective "stories," between art as the representation of reality and faith based on the Word of God. Depending on how this tension has been "read" and "written" into action, our civilizations in the past have produced beauty or horror, high culture or blind prejudice. But while we may have inherited "facts" like these from the past, our future can only be created by the power of the imagination to believe, by the spiritual force of our lives which material civilization calls "fictions." As Bahá'ís and believers in the cycle of Divine Unity, we have inherited a weighty responsibility to resolve this tension creatively and our common future, as a dynamic, diverse, and spiritual civilization, depends on it. The task of distinguishing "fact" from "fiction" in an age of maturity is a shared one. The question that must shape our words and deeds at the present hour, therefore, is not only who will write the future but also who will read it.

Résumé
En Orient comme en Occident, nous avons hérité d'une inconfortable tension entre la «réalité» et la «fiction», entre l'histoire objective et nos multiples «histoires» relatives et subjectives, entre l'art comme représentation du réel et la foi fondée sur la Parole de Dieu. Selon la façon dont cette tension a été «interprétée» et «transposée» en actions, les civilisations du passé ont été source de beauté ou d'horreur, de grande culture ou de préjugés aveugles. Toutefois, malgré ces «réalités» dont nous avons pu hériter, notre avenir ne repose que sur le pouvoir de notre imagination de croire en quelque chose, et sur la force spirituelle de notre vie, que notre civilisation matérielle qualifie pourtant de «fiction». En tant que bahá'ís croyant au cycle de l'unité divine, nous avons la lourde responsabilité de résoudre cette tension de façon créatrice. Il en va de la civilisation dynamique, diversifiée et spirituelle que nous voulons ériger pour l'avenir. En cet âge de maturité, établir une distinction entre «réalité» et «fiction» est une tâche collective. Pour l'heure, la

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question qui doit guider nos paroles et nos actes n'est pas seulement de savoir qui écrira l'avenir, mais aussi qui lira cet avenir.

Resumen
Hemos heredado un legado de tirantez inquietante, en el este y el oeste, entre "la realidad" y "la ficción," entre la historia objetiva y nuestros muchos "cuentos" relativos y subjetivos, entre el arte como representativo de la realidad y la fe basada en la Palabra de Dios. Dependiendo de cómo esta tirantez ha sido "leída" y "escrita" para incorporarse en la actividad, nuestras civilizaciones del pasado han producido o la belleza o el horror, la alta cultura o el prejuicio ciego. Pero aunque hayamos heredado del pasado "hechos" tales como estos, nuestro futuro puede ser creado solamente por el poder de la imaginación de creer, y por la fuerza espiritual de nuestras vidas que la civilización material tilda de "ficciones." Como bahá'ís y creyentes en el ciclo de la Unidad Divina, hemos heredado una responsabilidad seria de resolver creativamente esta tirantez, y nuestro futuro común, como civilización dinámica, diversa, y espiritual, depende de ello. La tarea de distinguir "la realidad" de "la ficción" en una época de madurez tiene que ser compartida. Por eso, la cuestión que debiera dar forma a nuestras palabras y actos en este momento, entonces, no es solamente ¿quién escribirá el futuro? sino también ¿quién lo leerá?

It is customary, at the start of a lecture of this nature, to make befitting reference to the illustrious scholar in whose memory we listen and in honor of whose name we attempt to speak. It is also customary to acknowledge one's insufficiency in assuming such an honor, to attest to one's unworthiness of the privilege. The first of these conventions establishes the significance of historical facts: the name of Mr. Hasan Balyuzi, his rank as Hand of the Cause of God, his contribution as one of the foremost writers of Bahá'í history; the second admits that no representation of his achievements can do them justice and whatever is said about him will be a fiction after all. Although "Fact and Fiction" is the ostensible title of my lecture, I prefer to forgo both these conventions and shall begin, in memory of the proverbial angels, by protecting you from their extremities. And the only way I know how to do this is by telling you a story . . .

An Early Meeting

One chilly day, in the grim, gray years of postwar Britain, a Persian family arrived at London Airport bearing bags of sweet melons, several pots of cooked rice, a roast turkey, and a dozen or so hard-boiled eggs. It was in the spring of 1951, there was still rationing in the United Kingdom, and this particular family had two beloved sons in British schools who had been writing pitiful letters

home. The only hard historical fact worth mentioning at this point, besides the quite astounding number of eggs they were bringing into the country, and one which distinguished this family from dozens of their compatriots who were possibly trying to smuggle stuffed aubergine and pistachio nuts into London in the early fifties, was that these particular Persians were Bahá'ís.

Around the same time, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the British Isles was pondering over the responsibility they had been given by Shoghi Effendi for a set of daunting pioneer goals. How they were pondering, to what degree they were pondering, whether the members of this distinguished institution were pondering more or less before or after the tea break is unknown, but that they were pondering to some degree is most likely and can doubtless be ascertained by any scholar brave enough to venture into the nether regions of Tunbridge Wells, where the British Bahá'í community has stored its archives. Such a claim can be safely based on the fact that the challenges of the Two Year Plan were great, the manpower available was small, and the chance of fulfilling the Guardian's goals as remote to the Bahá'ís of the United Kingdom then as were the prospects of slipping a pot of *zereshk pulaw* past the nose of a British customs officer during the period of postwar rationing.

But it may not have been the tantalizing odors of turkey and *zereshk* that caused a certain quickening of Hasan Balyuzi's pulse when he met with this Persian family soon after they arrived in London. A second historical fact about them was that their primary purpose in leaving Tehran was to pioneer somewhere in Africa, and they had been instructed by Shoghi Effendi to seek the guidance of the National Spiritual Assembly of Great Britain on the matter. It can be safely said, therefore, that it was with total disinterest as far as eggs were concerned, that Hasan Balyuzi, chairman of that Assembly, consulted with this family. And it may be confidently stated that one of the results of these consultations was that they laid the groundwork for the Guardian's historic Ten Year Crusade in Africa during the years that followed. It might also be hazarded, with no historical evidence whatever, that the British customs officer suffered a short-term blackout that blustery day in 1951, for by a miracle which may possibly be accredited to his mental paralysis at the sight of so much food, the contraband survived his scrutiny unscathed, although it could hardly have tasted in reality what it must have promised in anticipation to those boys that night.

But while we may imagine Mr. Balyuzi's joy in responding to Shoghi Effendi's Two Year Plan, his recognition of the important step being taken to achieve the Guardian's goals, his premonition even of the historic services to be rendered in Africa, there is no proof that he noticed the presence of a rather spoiled child who accompanied that family to London. Indeed, history would readily forgive him if he had chosen, rather, to ignore this vociferous appendage who demanded an inordinate amount of attention and required so considerable a

degree of restraint. And just as no record exists, mercifully, of what he thought of her on that occasion, I dare say she is grateful to retain no recollection either of being appraised by him.

And perhaps it is just as well. We cannot always stomach the hard-boiled facts. Much of history has been built on such likelihoods and lack of certainties, such *maybe*s and *perhaps*es, such *might have*s and *could have been*s as this. Indeed sometimes what we call "fictions" come closer to the truth than an assemblage of these so-called facts. And in the last analysis, many of us find it easier not to demand the justice of facts as long as we can take refuge in the mercy of fictions. Do we ever actually know for certain, let alone want to know, everything that has happened, even to ourselves?

A Second Introduction

The story now leaps twelve years forward, to a time when the facts appear at first glance to be better known, when documentation does not just depend on what might be salvaged from the British National Archives at Tunbridge Wells. Much evidence, after all, confirms that an event of considerable historic importance in the Bahá'í world took place in 1963.

It was a spring afternoon in 1963, and Mr. Balyuzi was trying to make his way through a crowd inside the Royal Albert Hall. Outside, unaware of History, crocuses were blooming in Hyde Park and the flow of cars had stopped in front of the Albert Memorial as Bahá'ís crossed the street. These were the days when Albert was still awash with pigeons and had not as yet been re-gilded for the benefit of Saudi Arabian shoppers, when crocuses too were innocent of political correctness and mad cow disease. The World Congress was drawing to a close. It had marked the centenary of the Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad. It was the Most Great Jubilee, a historic celebration coinciding with the triumphant completion of the Ten Year Plan and the election of the first Universal House of Justice. And at the height of the festivities, some days before, pictures of Persian ladies kissing British policemen had been flaunted in the Sunday dailies, a fact which one imagines may have caused Mr. Balyuzi some irritation, in the circumstances.

Perhaps he was tired as he made his way slowly through the corridors of the Albert Hall. Perhaps he was not only tired of Persians kissing policemen and journalists who took advantage of the fact to construct their fictions, but tired to his very soul. For his spiritual joy had been tempered by sorrows on this momentous occasion. This Festival of festivals was redolent with mixed emotions. And though I imagine all this, it is based on facts. The beloved Guardian was gone; it could not be denied. He had left no will; this too could not be contested. There had been a breaking of the Covenant and mighty trees had shaken in the course of those six years of custodianship. Were not these historical facts enough to weary the heart of a Hand of the Cause of God?

Small wonder, then, if Mr. Balyuzi may have been tired of greeting the many admirers and well-wishers and friends who accosted him as he made his way through the Albert Hall that late April afternoon in 1963. Small wonder, if it was hard to muster the strength not only to meet all these worthy friends and listen to them tut-tutting about the Sunday tabloids (as if Persians kissing policemen took historic precedence over the Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh), but also to be civil to their respectful parents, to say a word to their overawed spouses, to be gently courteous to their awkward children, most of whose names he may have wished he could forget. As it was, despite his weariness, he could not ignore one whom he saw that afternoon, walking rather hurriedly but not alone in the opposite direction down the same corridor. The friend looked tired too, pursued perhaps by his own admirers and well-wishers, weighed down by new responsibilities and burdens. They stopped. They greeted each other. They embraced—with tenderness, with relief perhaps, with compassion. And Mr. Balyuzi found himself being introduced to yet another daughter. Did he recognize in this brief encounter the same appendage whose unpromising beginnings he had witnessed twelve years before? Did his observant eye note the marks of terminal myopia in this graceless adolescent and the consequences of a boarding school diet of macaroni cheese and custard? Perhaps. But what he actually thought when my father presented me to him that afternoon, in April 1963, is unknown and what he said—remains uncertain.

Again, it may be just as well. It may be not so bad that History with a large *H* can sometimes render private records null and void; it may be a relief to hide our trivial memories under the unrolling carpet of its grand designs. Mr. Balyuzi's eyes, I remember, seemed to bear down on me, though he was not a tall man; his expression seemed sad despite the fact that he was very kind; his hand was cool and dry in my hot, clumsy one. But in the course of that rapid introduction, I was unaware of much beyond the weight of glasses on my nose, the pressure of a belt around my waist. And I was tongue-tied, for Mr. Balyuzi spoke to me in decorous Persian, in courtly tones. As a result, to my unbounded shame and deep chagrin, I can recall no single word of what he said. I have forgotten everything. Frankly, will anyone who knows these facts be much the wiser about anything besides the arduous burden of the ego at fifteen? And when history is reduced to such banalities, do we ever remember much more about it than what we have tried to forget?

On the other hand, despite everything imagined and forgotten, I remember being told by innumerable people how privileged I was, how lucky to have been in London, at the Albert Hall, in 1963. I remember believing this verbal formula to be a fact. Certainly the World Congress was a turning point for the Bahá'í community; it made history and was a charter for the future, but have not facts like these already turned the event into something like a fiction for most of us present? What I personally remember about the Most Great Jubilee has come

with hindsight, has been understood later; it is a reconstruction, therefore, a representation of reality. Although based on facts, my own memories are a kind of fiction. And is that necessarily wrong? Does that make the event any less real? The assumption that facts are "true" and fictions "false" can sometimes be a facile one. Maybe we have to remember the Most Great Jubilee over and over again to understand the Ten Year Crusade, to appreciate the spiritual significance of the election of the first Universal House of Justice in 1963, to sense the potency of those pressing, whispering presences, rank upon rank, in the red velvet recesses of the Albert Hall, to recognize the starry constellations gathered from all history to witness that eternal moment. And were I to say such things before certain audiences, I might be judged a dreamer, a teller of fanciful tales, a conjurer of fictions.

A Third Encounter

There were a few other occasions, distinguished by their dimness, at which I had the privilege of meeting Hasan Balyuzi before his passing and many subsequent years during which I have regretted my immaturity when given such opportunities. But it was not until quite recently that one more chance presented itself to me to meet him formally again, one last opportunity to record what actually took place. It was just after I was given the honor of speaking at this conference in memory of his name. And it occurred when I was preparing for this lecture. The fact that Mr. Balyuzi was now in the next world and I in this did nothing whatsoever to lessen the impact of the meeting. The fact that experiences like this cannot usually be shared without the risk of misunderstanding in no way diminished its significance, at least for me. And the fact that on this occasion we met without any intermediary, between the pages of a book, only intensified the validity of the third encounter.

His eyes bore the same expression as before, I noted, kindly but unnervingly observant; I felt no hand in mine, but the pressure of his gaze was possibly more grave and his concentration unwavering. His tone was the same too, mild and decorous, but this time his words were unequivocally in English and they stopped me in my tracks. He accosted me courteously, between pages 6 and 7 of *Edward Granville Browne and the Bahá'í Faith*: "It cannot be left unsaid," he said,

> that regrettably a host of writers, whenever they have had occasion to refer to the Faith of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, have not taken sufficient care to sift fact from fiction. In some instances, seemingly, one author has simply perpetrated a myth given currency by a predecessor. As far as the present writer recalls he has seldom come across a press account of any event of which he has had close personal knowledge without detecting either plain error or inadequate reporting. . . .

There it was: Fact and Fiction. I had the feeling Mr. Balyuzi had chosen the title of this lecture. There was no escaping the challenge in his voice, the check

in his courtesy. There was no escaping the mild reproach, either, or the sense of responsibility with which it left me. And these feelings filled me with anxiety, the same kind I have doubtless induced in the reader with my stories. In what sense, exactly, have I been "telling stories"? Where does the truth lie and where invention? What was fact and what was fiction? Was this a distortion of Bahá'í history? Or worse still, attempted autobiography? And at what point does the marriage between memory and imagination transcend or violate reality?

The more we think of this subject, the more anxious we can become. And just as it may be difficult to discern fact from fiction in these anxieties unless we evaluate them in the context of our spiritual legacy as Bahá'ís, so too it is impossible to gauge the reality of that spiritual legacy unless we first distinguish between the facts and fictions we harbor on the subject. This distinction, then, is what I shall first attempt.

A Bahá'í Legacy: The Anxiety of Interpretation

Bahá'ís have a particular set of anxieties about fact and fiction, and with good reason. The newness of this religion and the ignorance of most people about it, its relative obscurity and the distortions that have marked the ways in which it has frequently been defined, alert us to the dangers of misrepresenting facts and spreading harmful fictions about the Faith. The evolution of this Cause has cost lives and witnessed the persecution of countless of its ardent adherents, and Bahá'ís feel a keen responsibility towards this inheritance of sacrifice. The manipulation of the unscrupulous has also heightened our sensitivity on this matter, for much harm can be done, under the guise of distinguishing fact from fiction, by individuals tempted to distort facts and invent fictions for the purpose of wielding a personal power which is denied by Bahá'í Administration. Finally, the instructions of the Central Figures of this Faith as well as their example—which illustrates individual forbearance towards human folly combined with a systematic appeal to institutional justice—all these have increased the sensitivity that Bahá'ís feel about this subject. The legacy left by Mr. Balyuzi himself has played no inconsiderable role in educating a generation of scholars on the often invidious, always challenging interrelationships between history and imagination.

Besides these general points, however, there are also specific principles concerning the subject of fact and fiction which are implicit in the teachings of the Cause. Since its inception and in order to protect its integrity and the unity which is its fundamental purpose, a careful distinction has been made between what is verifiable in Bahá'í literature and what is not, between authorized interpretation and individual opinion. Bahá'u'lláh Himself established this distinction by authenticating His Tablets and Writings. The concept of the Center of the Covenant rests on this foundation, and obedience to that Covenant ensures against any ambiguity of interpretation that would undermine the unity

of the Bahá'í community. The very structure of the Administrative Order of Bahá'u'lláh has been raised upon this delicate equilibrium between respect for institutional authority on the one hand and the freedom of individual expression on the other. It is grounded on the twin partnership of "the rulers" and "the learned" and is crowned by that absent presence of the Guardianship, which graces the brow of the Supreme Universal House of Justice with the wisdom of restraint. It is an equilibrium which depends on justice as well as mercy, impartial detachment as well as personal initiative, objective as well as subjective points of view. And it should be remembered that an individual point of view, however "objective," however rooted and researched in facts, is nevertheless partial and to all intents and purposes "fictional," in the broad sense of the word, compared with the authoritative interpretations of the Faith.

Indeed, recognizing the difference between fact and fiction is part of our spiritual education as Bahá'ís. Our inability to bear "very much reality," as T. S. Eliot puts it, leads us to invent fictions about ourselves and each other all the time. Depending on the time, on the circumstances, on the motives behind these fictions, and on their consequences, they can be nourishing or annihilating, nurturing or utterly unnecessary. The essential seems not to be that one is "right" or the other "wrong" but rather that we know how to discern between them, to distinguish between the spurious and the real, between vain imaginings and essential verities. The oneness of religion, for example, depends on our ability to separate the "original" truths at the heart of all religions from the "priest-prompted" interpretations that have divided them, to distinguish facts about religious truth from fictions. The process of consultation too can only yield its best when it has as its main purpose the truth of facts at the core of differing opinions, some of which turn out to be mere fictions. The metaphorical emphasis in Bahá'í literature placed on mirrors, on reflected rays, on the removal of veils and the penetrating power of vision all insist on the same theme: that of seeing beyond material illusion to the heart of spiritual reality.

Fact and fiction exist side by side at every instant of our response to this Revelation, like choice. There is hardly a reference to light in Bahá'í literature which does not implicitly refer to the surface which reflects it, to the stone which barely notices its passing or the polished mirror which gleams at its mere glance. There is hardly a mention of sight, either, without a recollection that its purpose is to enable us to see beyond the visible. "God grant that, with a penetrating vision, thou mayest perceive, in all things, the sign of the revelation of Him Who is the Ancient King. . . ." writes Bahá'u'lláh (*Gleanings* 191–92). But whether we say all that we see, whether we speak of all that we know, leads to a another level of understanding fact and fiction. It leads to that subtle poise between the two indicated by the well-known saying: "Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can

disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it" (*Gleanings* 176), a delicate equilibrium which, as Bahá'u'lláh states in the Lawḥ-i-Maqsúd, can only be reached when the influence of human utterance is made "conditional upon refinement which in turn is dependent upon hearts which are detached and pure" (*Tablets* 172).

Somewhere between concealing and revealing, between the Hidden and the Manifest, between the stripping of veils on the one hand, and the retaining of silence on the other, lies the mystery of wisdom. "In My presence amongst you," He affirms in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, "there is a wisdom, and in My absence there is yet another, inscrutable to all but God, the Incomparable, the All-Knowing" (par. 53). There are times, as Bahá'u'lláh states, when the spirit of truth "breathe[s] it not . . . unto the hosts of holiness," (Persian Hidden Words no. 28) and "desire[s] not [our] shame" (Persian Hidden Words no. 27) even though our paltry fictions are transparently obvious. There were times, too, in Bahá'í history, when the forbearance of the Manifestation of God and His mercy, and the patience of the Mystery of God and His forgiveness, emboldened the foolish, deluded them into believing that their fictions had duped the wise. If we do not learn the art of discriminating between fact and fiction, we not only commit the folly of imagining we have successfully deluded others by our fictions but we delude ourselves with them for years. Our "superstitions become veils between [us] and [our] own hearts and keep [us] from the path of God, the Exalted, the Great" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Bahá'í Prayers* 212). We "object," as Bahá'u'lláh says in the Tablet of Wisdom, "to that which [we] comprehend, not to the expositions given by the Expounder, nor the truths imparted by the One true God, the Knower of things unseen. [Our] objections, one and all, turn upon [our]selves. . . ." (*Tablets* 141). Clearly, the subject of fact and fiction spans the whole gamut of significance in the Faith, from the soul's search for mystical reunion with its Beloved to the common soil of morality beneath our feet.

Then there are the rock-bottom facts of Bahá'í history itself. We have inherited a wealth of religious history in this Faith, a legacy unparalleled that not only provides a vast resource but also places a unique responsibility on our shoulders as Bahá'ís. It includes the archetypal chronicles and "sacred histories" as 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls them, on the one hand, and a wide range of personal records and commentaries, biographies, and diaries on the other. Shoghi Effendi's *God Passes By* and *The Dawn-Breakers*, for example, are among such authoritative works that illustrate the broad thrust of the Faith through history: timeless, mythic, and interpretive narratives that constitute a genetic pool of spiritual inspiration for the future. Other historical works reflecting the points of view of individual writers, including Hasan Balyuzi himself, provide a resource which is constantly replenished, variously slanted, culturally diverse, and of an

infinite variety. No other faith offers seekers and scholars such a storehouse of information about its birth and early development; no other world religion retains such records of its impact on society and individuals in the course of its early history. And "it cannot be left unsaid," as Mr. Balyuzi said, that this material, both factual and fictional, can be vulnerable to distortion.

Ancient Legacies: The Anxiety of Representation

Such theological platitudes and historical generalizations are merely intended to offer a context for the anxiety Bahá'ís may feel towards the subject of fact and fiction. But this anxiety has a long history and is not unique to Bahá'ís; this tension between fact and fiction arises from an old and very gnarled root in human affairs. I would like to propose a working definition, therefore, that may help us explore it a little further. I would suggest that this anxiety is the result of a conflict between different representations of reality and is created when different "fictions" claim to be "facts." I think it is caused by the moral judgment implicit in the notion that facts are "true" and fictions "false" and arises whenever one fictional construct claims to be "truer" than all the others. I believe, moreover, that our greatest anxiety is created by the power to convince which resides in fictional representations, a power to convince that does not necessarily depend on any facts at all.

When a story or an image is convincing, it is all the more disturbing because it comes closer than all other representations to the appearance of a "truth." Indeed the force and power of a convincing representation depends on its making us think we are being told "facts" or shown "reality." The aim of such convincing representations is to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction. And the more these blur, the better the fiction succeeds. This is at the root of our anxiety. Indeed, the power to convince someone that a political, religious, or economic idea is "true" must surely be the most convincing form that power can take because it has a direct impact on human behavior. It makes people act and can deprive them, too, of their will to do so. Under the present orthodoxy of scientific materialism, the imagination has been harnessed to fictions which convince us daily that we have the right to buy all kinds of things. But as history can attest, fictional representation is equally capable of convincing us to believe in all kinds of ideas and even to die for them.

Whether buying is less dangerous than dying is a matter for debate, but one thing is certain: since fictions have the power of convincing us, they have a profound impact on the human will. And to wield that power involves great risk. To use fictions to control human behavior at any level, therefore, is a grave responsibility.

This Cause, we are told, is "matchless" and the "tongue that celebrateth the praise of the Desire of all nations" should therefore be matchless too and "matchless the deed that aspireth to be acceptable in His sight" (Bahá'u'lláh,

Gleanings 39). The eye also should be matchless in seeing what He sees, and the ear matchless if it desires to hear His melodies. But it is not always humanly possible to be quite so matchless. The arts of persuasion, of eloquence, of proofs both logical and psychological, are all subject to a thousand influences of the ego, of culture, and of time. Human utterance, that ultimate signifier which in this dispensation has superseded the sword in representing human reality, is the vehicle for the most subtle and forceful of these influences. The fictions it constructs are therefore some of the most dangerous. To such a degree does it seek to "exert" itself, as Bahá'u'lláh states, and so powerful its ability to convince us to buy as well as die that it must needs be moderated and made dependent upon hearts that are refined and pure. Otherwise it can wreak havoc and do damage to generations.

All this is enough to render a presumptive speaker mute on the subject of fact and fiction. Wisdom, and that ambiguous word "safety," would advise that we kept silent. But there is the silence of wisdom and the silence of fear, just as there is the word of light and the word of fire, "fictions" which speak of reality and "facts" which can distort it. Despite our common spiritual inheritance, Bahá'ís come from many cultural and religious backgrounds with a wide variety of contradictory definitions about this subject. Despite our belief in the future, too, our common present also imposes on us its contradictory standards and definitions of fact and fiction. Given my limitations, which incline me to a rather literal/literary definition of fact and fiction, I will explore one such heritage briefly in Western literature and one such contemporary definition too, which may have contributed to the very anxieties I am referring to. For Western ideologies incline us to believe that dialectics of this nature underlie most things in life. The question is, what are the "facts" underlying the "fiction" of confrontation and what is its relation to the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh?

The Tradition of Defense

In an article entitled "The Art of Fiction," Henry James, who wrote compellingly of legacies in his novels, followed a literary model to explore his subject, which extends back to Plato and Aristotle and possibly to the Book of the Hebrews. It is the tradition of defense, the model of self-justification. Henry James was addressing an East Coast American audience in the 1880s, the sort born with money in their pockets, a sin which they expiated by making plenty more, and he was defining and defending the role of the novelist to the kind of people who may have read cultivated journals as a way of avoiding the need to read anything else. The "defense" tradition he was following consists of the marshaling of arguments, the ordering of evidence, and the citing of authority to prove the validity of a subject as well as its innocence, for implicit in the defensive trope is the inferred accusation. The guilty party, in this case, is fiction, and its crime—an old one—is that it has convinced us it was true. Since

the accused is not based on "facts," the underlying assumption in the argument is that it must therefore be "false," deceptive, and hypocritical. At best it is trivial, a waste of time; at worst it is downright bad, evil even. If Satan is the Father of Lies, the writer of fiction must be the son, or worse still, the Daughter Incarnate of Fibs.

Interestingly enough, Sir Philip Sydney had used the same technique four centuries before, when he wrote his *Defence of Poesy* for an earlier Puritan audience. Addressing their descendants, James echoes Sydney when he tries to protect fiction from the accusation of beginning and ending in words, by claiming that it is as serious as the study of history, theology, or philosophy. In other words, he borrows the historian's credentials to give authority to the novelist. "To represent and illustrate the past, the actions of men," he writes, "is the task of either writer, and the only difference that I can see is, in proportion as he succeeds, to the honour of the novelist, consisting as it does in his having more difficulty in collecting his evidence. . . ." (47).

Whether or not we are supposed to take this remark at face value, the residual anxiety within it remains. And it reminds us that we do not have to look so far back in history to recognize the roots of defense in the habits of attack. In the past, the threat implicit in fiction elicited relative degrees of anxiety, from verbal criticism and social ostracism to scandalous trials and the burning of books. Since the power to convince has been traditionally perceived as a threat to the status quo, every attempt has been made to harness it to the established church, or state, or the market and render it impotent as a force for social change. And as a result, writers of fiction have expended much time and ink protesting their innocence, insisting on the harmless nature of their fictions. For wherever attack and defense exist, of course, there is always the theoretical possibility of appeal.

The Tradition of Apology

Another consequence of the legacy of anxiety, therefore, is the convention of apologetics which parallels the tradition of defense. In the West, poets and writers of fiction have often tried to anticipate attack in order to avoid it, have tried to disarm their critics and beg their "gentle readers" for indulgence. Henry James states: "It is still expected, though perhaps people are ashamed to say it, that a production which is after all only a 'make-believe' (for what else is a 'story'?) shall be in some degree apologetic—shall renounce the pretension of attempting really to represent life" (45). The result, therefore, is that while writers of fact have barricaded themselves within fortresses of footnotes and citations to prove their authority and "objectivity," writers of fiction in our Western cultures have hidden themselves with veils of metaphor and elaborate masks of irony, behind the deception of mimicry and the dazzle of satire.

There is an immortal scene in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in which

Shakespeare dramatizes the absurdity of our anxiety about fictional representation. He too was directing his satire against the Puritans, and in the process, he implicitly mocks the need for either apology or defense of fiction while employing both. When the "Mechanicals" rehearse their play in the woods, the question arises as to whether the lion would not "fright the ladies" (1.2.64) by its realism, and in order to avoid this appalling possibility, this convincing power of fictional representation which could result in their being hanged "every mother's son" (1.2.63), two proposals occur to the fertile mind of Bottom. The first is that, if he had the part, he would "aggravate my voice, so that I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove. I will roar you and 'twere any nightingale" (1.2.65–67); the second, that a prologue be written to explain the lion away:

> BOTTOM: Nay, you must name his name, and half his face must be seen through the lion's neck, and he himself must speak through, saying thus, or to the same defect: "Ladies," or "Fair ladies, I would wish you," or "I would request you," or "I would entreat you, not to fear, not to tremble: my life for yours. If you think I come hither as a lion, it were pity of my life. No, I am no such thing; I am a man, as other men are"—and there indeed let him name his name, and tell them plainly he is Snug the joiner. (3.1.28–35)

Like Bottom, many writers of fact and fiction in the history of Western cultures have either begged not to be taken seriously or have become excessively so in order to avoid censure. And as we identify these reactions in ourselves, and as we evaluate how these anxieties may have refined our mental powers as well as marked and scarred us, how they have enhanced our sensibilities as well as sharpened our suspicions and superstitions, it may be helpful to remember that they may also at times have made us ridiculous.

But it is not easy to admit to being ridiculous, especially when our anxieties have made us so. A bare century ago, Henry James concluded in his "Art of Fiction" by admitting that "The Mahometans think a picture an unholy thing, but it is a long time since any Christian did, and it is therefore the more odd that in the Christian mind the traces . . . of a suspicion of the sister art should linger to this day" (46). Implied in that little word "odd" is the admission there is something ridiculous about the suspicion of fiction. But could there be something even more ridiculous about the word "Mahometans"? And might not we be equally ridiculous if we start applying values of political correctness to the use of a term that was acceptable according to the criteria of the times in which it was employed? For can we be sure that contemporary definitions of "political correctness" will be free of ridicule in the light of future history? Being found to be ridiculous may, in the last analysis, be part and parcel of our deepest anxieties.

But setting aside for a moment the cultural ironies here, setting aside too the

Romantic tradition which, since the late eighteenth century in Europe, has made a religion of art and a prophetic genius of the artist in order to vindicate his or her seriousness, it is significant to note that even while he claims to find it an unsatisfactory reason in the circumstances, Henry James instinctively falls back on religion for the explanation of our anxiety. By linking religion with fact and fiction, he raises certain fundamental questions for Bahá'ís.

The Tension between Religion and Imagination

How far has the tension between religion and imagination been responsible for the efflorescence as well as the decay of several civilizations? To what degree has it produced cultural calamity or esthetic providence? At one time, for example, this tension resulted in the expulsion of theater from the doors of the Christian church, which led in turn to a flowering of Renaissance drama. At another, it created an insurmountable divide between representational art and Islam which resulted in unparalleled beauties of calligraphy and architecture. But if the roots of our nervousness about fact and fiction are to be found in our collective religious history, how will the Bahá'í Faith contribute to or transform this dubious inheritance? If religion has been the reason for the centuries-old argument over the value/futility, the use/misuse/uselessness of the imagination, how will Bahá'í principles influence this debate in the future? Is this tension irreconcilable, as writers such as Emerson seems to think? Or can we escape such absolutes with a wider than Western perspective? "[T]he Universe has three children," according to Emerson,

> born at one time, which reappear, under different names, in every system of thought, whether they be called cause, operation, and effect; or, more poetically, Jove, Pluto, Neptune; or, theologically, the Father, the Spirit, and the Son; but which we will call here, the Knower, the Doer, and the Sayer. These stand respectively for the love of truth, for the love of good, and for the love of beauty. (1:1075)

It is interesting that Emerson's terms are heavily weighted with Christian ideology, for this leads to the question, what if . . .? Although cultural, psychological, and historical reasons seem to have created a seemingly doctrinal rift between fact and fiction in the West, what if that perspective is widened, deepened, expanded? If "religious formulae" have been threatened by the powers of individual imagination in the past, what will happen in the future if such shackles of the mind, in the words of Shoghi Effendi, "be swept away and relegated to the limbo of obsolescent and forgotten doctrines" (*World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 42)? And if the differences between art and faith, between religion and imagination are really irreconcilable, is this because they represent reality differently, or is it not rather because they symbolize different interpretations of power? Let us not forget that a convincing fiction has the power to make us act,

which is politically and economically dangerous as well as spiritually transforming. If one fictional construct claims to be "truer" than all the others, isn't social power and economic control at stake? And if we think social power and economic control are "at stake" in our relationships with the Bahá'í institutions, are we not in danger of constructing a fiction out of the Administrative Order of Bahá'u'lláh, of imagining it to be a tool made for the sole purpose of gratifying our Western notions of liberal democracy? What, after all, are the facts and what the fictions, perhaps even the superstitions, in terms we so glibly employ such as "social power and economic control"? Perhaps, if we are going to define fact and fiction from a Bahá'í point of view, we need to take into account not only the Western literary legacies I have enumerated based on our religious and cultural inheritance in the West but our current baggage of market values, our modern shibboleths too. We need to consider the impact of contemporary fictions on our understanding.

Some Contemporary Anxieties

At first glance, it would seem that the old debate about fact and fiction is a bit of a red herring today. We seem to have evolved beyond it. In the bored aftermath of *The Satanic Verses*, *fatvá*s are more likely to raise eyebrows, and maybe even yawns, than hackles in our Western democracies, and the local pastor is hardly the critic whose review the writer waits for with bated breath on opening the Sunday papers. Few readers of novels or watchers of television worry about whether a story is "strictly" true or feel the need to explain the reasons why a film is not. For most of us, inventiveness is the hallmark of creativity and contemporary writers have to guard against accusations of plagiarism rather than being of "the Devil's party."

Besides, our gullibility has shifted from the printed word, for which we have developed a fairly healthy skepticism after five hundred years, to flickering images of it on the screen that, ironically, we still trust. According to a recent reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement,* "Most people now take it for granted that statements within a literary work need not have the same force as statements in the real world outside," an assumption, adds the reviewer, which was not the case when "controversies in biblical interpretation made allegorical theories of literature suspect" (Fowler 11) and led to the accusation of lying leveled against writers of poetry and romance.

But the *Times Literary Supplement* notwithstanding, I believe that the debate about fact and fiction, far from being irrelevant in our Western liberal democracies, may be even more politically charged now than it was before. Not only is this argument double-edged, leading fiction directly back into the dock to face accusations of superficiality, but it has become more acutely psychological in its application. The tension between fact and fiction has

deepened in irony, for what we used to call "the real world" has itself lost its force as a "statement." The fact is that we no longer accuse fiction of being a lie because fewer people are interested in the truth. The old debate is more economically sensitive now, moreover, because Bottom's proposal is highly viable from a commercial point of view. Long before Disney, he anticipated sentimental lions that would capture the market rather than their bloody breakfasts.

Perhaps, too, the debate about fact and fiction is still relevant precisely because we are no longer concerned with the West alone but with the impact of its words, its images, and its interpretations of reality on the rest of the world. Who can forget the marshaled ranks we saw on our screens during the Gulf War, leveling their lenses to focus with maximum effect on enemy tanks? And what are we to make of the fact that refugees fleeing from Kosovo during the crisis there may have in some cases been impeded because the roads were clogged with journalists sent to "cover" the event? A recent BBC program on the "construction" and "stage-management" of the news quoted a U.S. State Department spokesman as saying, with rare guilelessness, that he would vouch for the fact that no item on the news could be "pure fiction," leaving us to distinguish between the facts we are not told and the fictions we hear, and to try and define what the adulterated variety of the latter might be.

We know that, from Mongolia to Peru, fictions engendered by Time Warner do have more force, for many people today, both psychologically and economically, than anything in their own "real worlds." We also know that a blurring between what is "real" and what is "false" as a result of the unholy and "pornutopic" (Collins and Skover) triumvirate of politics, commerce, and the media has led to a marked rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the East as well as a sharp decline in democratic discourse in the West. It is beginning to occur to us in the study of colonialism, for example, or our analysis of slavery or polygamy or even nationalism, that what is "fact" for one group of people may be "fiction" for another. We have started to question what we have been pleased in the past to call "objective reality." And as we have done so, certain features have begun to distinguish themselves in our use of these terms, which not only seem to undermine the age-old dichotomies between them but also reveal a remarkably "Bahá'í" definition of fact and fiction.

Features of a Definition

I have identified these features as the principles of continuity, of diversity, and of reciprocity, each of which seems to have a higher and lower form of expression.

The idea of continuity constitutes one of the three cardinal principles that distinguish "the Faith standing identified with the name of Bahá'u'lláh," according to Shoghi Effendi (*Promised Day Is Come* 108). While a

deconstructed application of the principle of relativity has undermined the continuity of time as it relates to a reading of history, and a debunking of the Victorian notion of progressiveness has been similarly jettisoned together with outdated theories based on the size of male and female skulls, it has also become an increasingly common assumption that our definitions of fact and fiction change with time, and our understanding of time also affects the way we define the facts or construct the fictions out of history. Seen in juxtaposition, these two tendencies seem at first glance to contradict each other, but I would suggest they offer us a fresh and distinctly "Bahá'í" approach to the relationship between history and imagination. In a recent collection of essays called *Thinking Past a Problem*, Preston King argues against the vogue of thinking about history as "a disinterested, autonomous and self-contained study of the past" (Parekh 35). We cannot study the past in its own terms, he says, because our relative grasp of history depends on the consciousness of temporal continuity rather than congruity. Furthermore, since "neither the past nor the study of it can . . . be dissociated from the present" (Parekh 35), a purely "objective" analysis of history must admittedly be fictitious. This change of perspective is a remarkable act of retrieval and a cautionary warning at the same time, which shows how critical theories and assumptions about historical facts both run the risk of turning into fictions.

A parallel change in this notion of continuity can be discerned in the way that the study of history has shifted from being about facts to being about fictions. As David Blackburn writes in a recent article on German history, "A generation ago, most historians would have been deeply offended to learn that their work told a story" (30). Since historical analysis was considered "far superior to mere narrative" and belonged within the purview of professionals, "storytelling could be left to the amateurs." Now, however, we are witnessing the "return of narrative." As Blackburn concludes: "The shift in emphasis is unmistakable. It has gained momentum from a greater self-consciousness about how historical texts are put together, one result," he claims, "of historians engaging more actively with literary theory" (30).

This curious reversal of the situation when literary critics had to engage more actively in historical analysis may merely reflect the growing stress among academics in the humanities for tenure at any cost, confirmed by the fact that it has spawned a hideous vocabulary containing words like "narratological." But it may also anticipate future values grounded in the Bahá'í principle of diversity, which push the boundaries of the imagination beyond anything we are accustomed to in fact or fiction today. For it has already stimulated a new kind of writing that is neither traditional biography nor pure fiction, neither history nor story, but lies somewhere between the two. More and more fiction today reads like seeming biography, imagined history, reconstruction of fact. New genres are emerging based on collective "rememorizing" and fictional

constructs of diverse peoples' cultural history, on the painstaking harvest of invented evidence, unauthenticated and invisible facts, half-heard and forgotten voices, buried and symbolic memories of those who died nameless and traceless in the vast uncharted past. Not that such forms of writing had never existed before; quite the contrary. Memory and inspiration have often provided substitutes for lost records, and historical traditions have sometimes been invented not with the intent to deceive but to recreate forgotten facts. But in our times there is a degree of *complicité* with the reader in these reconstructions which was less ubiquitous before; we have begun to realize that we need a wider and more inclusive reflection of our common human heritage, that nothing short of a thousand mirrors can suffice to tell us who we are.

But it is hardly surprising that fleeting reflections of half-known facts have the power of conveying the most convincing fictions. Implying the sum by not telling all the parts has always been the subtlest way to capture an audience because it involves self-deception. For disbelief, willingly suspended, is the best kind, as Coleridge knew; we believe in nothing so fervently as that which we construct ourselves. Economic and political control can therefore be most successfully exerted when people are duped by their own complacency. As in aikido, the best method of dealing with subversion is to use the opponent's own weight to throw him out of the window. And when that happens, you barely know that it has, for the facts are arranged in such a way as to leave a vacuum among them which the imagination rushes in to fill. And once the imagination is allowed free rein in the absence of hard facts, it does the job of convincing us better than any effort of the rational mind.

The construction of an argument across gaps of logic can sometimes achieve a similar effect, for we are often more readily convinced by our own intellectual gymnastics than by the systematic delivery of plodding proofs. Film editing, political campaigning, and high-level banking and diplomacy are constructed on the basis of this same principle, the art of stimulating appropriate response. Indeed, a great deal of television depends on reciprocal viewing: we watch what we believe ourselves to be seeing. That perfect cathartic experience of summer tennis for example, which arouses and whets our appetite with just enough sensation as will give us the illusion that it is informative, and just enough analysis as will keep us passively watching the screen. The banking structure of the West also depends on our believing the fiction of our financial investments: a fascinating combination of involvement and detachment, obsession and remote control which, when you think about it, has been the hallmark of the best theatrical experiences since the days of Sophocles.

And if convincing fictions are constructed on partially known facts, does that imply that the Best of all Fictions is based on no facts at all?

The Real Story

But before I take the next step in this vertiginous argument, I have to make a confession. It is getting late and time is running out and I am only partially done with this point, but something is weighing on my conscience. I'm afraid that when I was telling you about my third encounter with Hasan Balyuzi I fudged the facts. I did not tell you all that happened. I admit that I actually withheld vital information. Can I make amends? Is there time to tell you what *really* happened?

Allow me to return, briefly, to that third encounter, between pages 6 and 7 of *Edward Granville Browne and the Bahá'í Faith.* "It cannot be left unsaid," he said and then said it. And as Mr. Balyuzi went on, I knew myself guilty of the worst crimes against humanity, of having "perpetrated myth[s] given currency by a predecessor," of having committed "either plain error or inadequate reporting." And by the end I wished the ground would open and swallow me whole. I wanted to turn tail and flee.

But to my horror, the meeting was not over. And this is what I did not tell you. When it was clear from Mr. Balyuzi's words that there was no possible ground for ambiguity between fact and fiction and anyone who had confused the two had been guilty of the worst sin imaginable, when I was beginning to think I might duck away, close the book without his noticing, and slide downstairs to cups of tea and ignominy, the interview went on. I realized, to my grave consternation, that Mr. Balyuzi was introducing me to someone else. This was worse than even the briefest encounter at a conference, that heady moment when you bump hurriedly into someone on your way out only to find yourself passed from the first greeting to the second, from one introduction to another. It took place just a few pages later, in the same book, when to my great embarrassment, Mr. Balyuzi ushered E. G. Browne into the discussion.

It was a youthful Browne shortly returned from his historic journey to Persia. It was an enthusiastic Browne in the throes of writing his book, and his words at that moment, which Mr. Balyuzi quoted, confounded me completely. They were a description of Gobineau's seminal work, *Les religions et les philosophies dans l'Asie Centrale*, and they were on the subject of fact and fiction. "To anyone who has already read this masterpiece of historical composition," writes Browne, "this most perfect presentation of accurate and critical research in the form of a narrative of thinking and sustained interest, such as one may, indeed, hope to find in the drama or the romance, but can scarcely expect from the historian, it is needless to describe the effect which it produced on me" (qtd. in Balyuzi 10).

Needless to describe, indeed, because the effect would be lying between our hands had we been reading the original. Despite the convoluted structure of Browne's sentence—and it is an awkward sentence, a hard sentence—we

discover here that Gobineau's book had not only inspired the young English scholar to seek out the remnant followers of the Bábí Faith in the land of its birth but may have served as a model, perhaps, for Browne's own masterpiece, *A Year amongst the Persians*.

So there it was: history as a sustained narrative of thinking interest. Accurate and critical research as powerful as anything found in drama or romance. Fact, in other words, as fiction and fiction controlled by fact. Was this the final resolution? Had it all come back to the very same muddle with which we began? So why had the blurring of boundaries aroused our anxiety in the first place? Is our sensitivity on this subject as Bahá'ís a sign that we could see further than our contemporaries or less acutely after all? Are we the torch-bearers of a more scrupulous standard of integrity about fact and fiction or just reactionary? Has the world begun to catch up with the principles of Bahá'u'lláh or have the Bahá'ís merely failed to live up to His principles?

One thing is clear, at least: the "effect," as Browne calls it, of history as a sustained narrative of thinking interest, the consequences of this accurate and critical research as powerful as anything found in drama or romance, brought him to the knowledge of the Bábí Faith before all his contemporaries. And it was by similar "effects" of his own narrative of thinking interest, his own dramatic research, that he brought the name of the Báb to so many scholars since. "That which is due to Edward Granville Browne," as Hasan Balyuzi notes, "must be gratefully recognized." But most important of all, it brought him to the very threshold of the door of that "wondrous and venerable figure . . . who is the object of a devotion and love which kings might envy and emperors sigh for in vain!" (Browne, Introduction xxxix). And has it also brought us to the end of our definitions? Have we finally managed to resolve the tensions between fact and fiction in the light of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh? How splendid if we could all imagine the argument had reached some kind of conclusion at this point.

But as E. G. Browne bent and removed his shoes at the threshold of the room of the Blessed Beauty, bent and removed his shoes and then—paused, paused indefinitely, paused for infinitely and tragically too long, we must pause too. Fact and fiction. Or was it fact? Or was it fiction? And what indeed was its effect?

Ah! "Regrettably . . ." We remember Mr. Balyuzi's cautionary warning between pages 6 and 7. "Regrettably a host of writers have not taken sufficient care to sift fact from fiction." And isn't it regrettable that a host of readers have not taken sufficient care to do the same thing? Had E. G. Browne taken that care, sufficiently? Had he weighed with sufficient care whether fact or fiction lay at the heart of his response to this Revelation? What was it that caused what Mr. Balyuzi calls his tragic mistake? Had this scholar actually been duped by his own agenda? Had his own illusions blinded him to the basic facts? Had the

strength of a story line supplanted the importance of history for him? He perpetuated myths which were, perhaps, extensions of his own private dreams, his personal concerns, his petty fictions. And could he have remained unaware of the irony in all this?

But the problem with irony is that it awakens self-awareness. And self-awareness might warn us against the myths we perpetuate ourselves, the extensions we construct from our own private dreams, all of which are so often a reflection of the prejudices of our own cultures and our times. Even in the act of unveiling history we may be easily mesmerized by the Ṭáhirih Syndrome, the illusion of ourselves as the casters off of veils. Even while exposing how Browne may have reacted under the spell of Gobineau's writings, we cannot forget that he was not alone in being thus mesmerized. Gobineau, after all, was one of the early French proponents of the supremacy of the white race and his half-fact, half-fictional theories have fed the fascism of our own times. Had Browne known how Gobineau's half-baked theories would be read in a latter generation, would he have qualified the approach to history "as a sustained narrative," would he have recognized that drama and romance masquerading as "accurate and critical research" might be responsible for the horrors and hatreds of the racism of our civilization? And can Browne himself carry the entire responsibility for how the future may read his own words?

Let us not forget Mr. Balyuzi. It was his book I was reading, after all. He had read Browne, and Browne had read Gobineau, and even if my words now interpose between the reader and these authors, it is impossible to ignore Hasan Balyuzi standing beyond the layers of irony and the convoluted syntax of history, smiling quietly with that unrelenting kindness that is only possible among the members of the Concourse. His presence reminds us of our *complicité* in this affair; we are implicated in the very act of reading the words. Every reader carries his or her share of responsibility for interpretation. The page becomes a mirror, and the mirror contains a thousand books reflecting our very lives. Electronic paper is nothing compared to this.

Beyond Definitions

So perhaps there is no conclusion to this endless dialogue after all. There can be no fixed and absolute definitions of fact or fiction that absolve us of responsibility as readers and writers. Facts are not always the equivalent of truth, nor fictions necessarily lies. And to arrive at a relative understanding of the truth that is always larger than either of these means can convey, we employ both all the time. At any given moment, in any given argument, everything depends on moderation, on refinement, on wisdom in being able to distinguish between fact and fiction; everything depends on our response to their shifting emphasis and their long-term implications, on how we weigh all this evidence against the standards of the Cause, that standard which enables us to distinguish

truth from error and to test the wisdom of every command. Above all, everything depends on our being independently responsible and vividly conscious of this process, on our being anxious about its consequences. Or maybe awestruck is a better word. For I would suggest that our anxiety on this subject as Bahá'ís arises from somewhere deeper than our pockets, some root older than religious priestcraft, some Fiction vaster than anything conceived by our own minds.

It is a very ancient story. "Have ye forgotten that true and radiant morn . . . ?" murmurs Bahá'u'lláh to us, and the unspoken, the unspeakable, the unknown within us instantly leaps to reciprocate, to respond. How could we ever forget "those hallowed and blessed surroundings"? And we recall them all, we construct the whole scene. We were all gathered together, He reminds us, and within the bare throb of a throat beat we are there again, "beneath the shade of the tree of life," in His presence, and awestruck. How did it happen? Before the end of that immortal Hidden Word the familiarity of that truth has taken root in us, has raised its tender shoots in us, lifted its lovely arms and spread wide its boughs, letting us step in, always further into the green shade of the paradise of His recognition, to the very edge of the limpid pool of His quiet words. "Would ye but sanctify your souls," He says, "ye would at this present hour recall that place and those surroundings, and the truth of My utterance should be made evident unto all of you" (Hidden Words Persian no. 19). But the sanctity of our souls depends entirely on our own participation in this process. We can only be convinced of His Revelation if we desire that reciprocity. For is not this same process—which involves that perfect correlation between speaker and listener, reader and word, which creates so thorough an engagement, so complete an empathy that we feel ourselves convinced by ourselves—is this not also called love?

I asked a dangerous question earlier, and one that no doubt raised anxiety levels by several factors: I asked: "If the most convincing fictions are constructed on only partially known facts, are the Best Fictions based on no facts at all?" The doctrinal significance of this question is immense in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh: the definition of the Manifestation of God, unique to this Dispensation, depends on it. Since absolute truth cannot be grasped except by relative means, Bahá'u'lláh tells us, these Manifestations are the highest and purest representation of reality which humankind can bear. In relation to humanity, therefore, They are all that we can ever know of the Unknown. But in relation to that Vast Immensity, that Unknowable Essence, They are themselves no more than relative reflections. The drama of the Manifestation of God is therefore the necessary Fiction played out in each succeeding age, and this Divine Fiction is the most convincing form of power we have ever experienced. Its proof lies in the way it has transformed not only human behavior but the human heart. Indeed, one of the most ironic principles implicit in Divine Fiction

is that this is the standard against which we measure all the so-called facts of our lives. Without it we could never carry forward the ever-advancing, endlessly interesting, infinitely various story of civilization.

Who, then, can we say is writing the future, if it has already been written by the Most Supreme Pen? Who can write the future when the Guardian has so powerfully done so, in his *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, in his *Goal of a New World Order*, in his letters to the Bahá'í world? We bear witness now to what our heroes once imagined; the future they had the courage and imagination to write is what we are living today. But we are not only challenged by the Manifestations of God to become letters and words on the scroll of existence: we have also been challenged to read aright what has been written. Nothing corresponds more closely to an exercise in futility than the act of writing in the absence of an informed, a discriminating, an independent-minded readership. A world lacking appointed observers with artistic sensitivity, imagination, and humor would be, according to Nabokov, "like a small volume of Shakespeare lying open in the dust of a boundless desert." A divine kingdom lacking self-convinced witnesses endowed with spiritual faculties alive with love and irony would be like the Hidden Words tossed lightly in the rolling flood of the Tigris and washed away. If we have begun to recognize who are the authors of the future, we carry at least the same responsibility for who will read it and how it may be read.

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