

Metaphor and the Language of Revelation

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Abstract

Metaphor is the literal language of the soul. To enter the realm of metaphor as the language of the soul is to come into direct contact with the Word as the originating power of creation, in the Bible identified with God. In this exploration of metaphorical language as the language of revelation, the richer unveiling of its meaning to be found in the writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh will serve to clarify further the nature of metaphor as that clarification which contains within it an immediate consciousness of the station of Bahá'u'lláh. This newly released consciousness signifies humanity's coming of age in and as a fully awakened human realization that the earth is now the throne of God, as proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh in his impassioned address to Carmel as his New Jerusalem Bride. Metaphorically understood, Bahá'u'lláh's proclamation is "the trumpet" that in the biblical tradition signals the Resurrection. "Trumpet," "Pen," "Bride," "Resurrection"—in metaphors such as these the soul finds its proper home in the redeeming consciousness of a new era described by Bahá'u'lláh as the "Divine Springtime."

Résumé

La métaphore est le langage littéral de l'âme. Pénétrer le domaine de la métaphore en tant que langage de l'âme, c'est entrer en contact direct avec la Parole, soit le pouvoir qui est à l'origine de la création, et que la Bible identifie comme étant Dieu. Dans cette exploration du langage métaphorique comme langue de la révélation, la riche découverte des significations que recèlent les Écrits du Bab et de Baha'u'llah sert à clarifier davantage la nature de la métaphore, comme étant cette clarification qui renferme en elle-même une conscience immédiate de la station de Baha'u'llah. Cette conscience nouvellement accordée montre que l'humanité est parvenue à sa maturité et à une réalisation maintenant pleine et entière que la terre est le trône de Dieu, tel que proclamé par Baha'u'llah dans la tablette passionnée qu'Il adressa au Carmel, l'Épousée de la Nouvelle Jérusalem. Au plan métaphorique, la proclamation de Baha'u'llah est la «trompette» qui, dans la tradition biblique, annonce la Résurrection. «Trompette», «Plume», «Épousée», «Résurrection»: dans des métaphores comme celles-ci, l'âme retrouve sa demeure véritable dans la conscience rédemptrice de cette ère nouvelle décrite par Baha'u'llah comme le «printemps divin».

Resumen

La metáfora es el idioma textual del alma. Entrar al reino de la metáfora como idioma del alma es ponerse en contacto directo con la Palabra como poder dimanante de la creación, identificado en la Biblia con Dios. En esta exploración del idioma metafórico en carácter de idioma de revelación, descubrir los significados más suntuosos que han de encontrarse en los escritos del Báb y Bahá'u'lláh servirán para aclarar aún más la calidad de aquella metáfora que contiene dentro de sí una conciencia inmediata del rango espiritual de Bahá'u'lláh. Este conocimiento nuevamente liberado significa que la humanidad ha logrado su mayoría de edad habiendo despertada plenamente a la comprensión de que la tierra es ahora el trono de Dios, según lo proclama Bahá'u'lláh en su discurso apasionado a la Montaña Carmelina en carácter de su Novia de la Nueva Jerusalén. Comprendido metafóricamente, la proclamación de Bahá'u'lláh es "la trompeta" que en tradición bíblica señala la Resurrección. "Trompeta," "Pluma," "Novia," "Resurrección": en metáforas tales como éstas el alma halla su hogar apropiado en la conciencia redentora de una nueva era señalada por Bahá'u'lláh como la "Primavera Divina."

In *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, Northrop Frye, greatly influenced by his reading of the apocalyptic poet William Blake, explores in considerable depth the poetic language of the Bible as what he calls "a single, gigantic, complex metaphor" (63). For Blake, as for Frye, this gigantic "metaphor" is the total form of the Bible, which Blake calls Jerusalem, at once the city and bride of God that is progressively taking shape throughout the Bible, until in its final book it is seen in vision "coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2). The visionary form that the New Jerusalem metaphorically assumes is what Blake calls the "human form divine" ("The Divine Image" 13), which is to say, the human form of the divine creation. "All Human Forms identified," Blake thus concludes *Jerusalem*, his hundred-plate epic,

even Tree, Metal, Earth & Stone: all
Human Forms identified, living, going forth & returning wearied
Into the Planetary lives of Years, Months, Days & Hours: reposing
And then Awakening into his Bosom in the Life of Immortality.
And I heard the Name of their Emanations: they are named Jerusalem.
(Plate 99:1-5)

In his shorter epic *Milton*, Blake describes the descent of the New Jerusalem more personally as Milton's twelve-year-old feminine Muse, Ololon. In Blake's reading of Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*, Ololon unites at last with Milton and

descends as Christ's return into Blake's garden at Felpham, a small village in the south of England where Blake is reading Milton's epic to his wife. Christ's return becomes in Blake's vision the opening of the eighth Eye of God, the entire Adamic cycle, now finished, constituting what he calls "the Seven / Eyes of God & the Seven Lamps of the Almighty" (*The Four Zoas* 1:553–54). "Then as a Moony Ark," writes Blake of the visionary opening of God's eighth Eye in "the Fires of [Blake's] Intellect,"

Olonon descended to Felpham's Vale
 with dreadful thunderings
 Into the Fires of Intellect that rejoic'd in Felpham's Vale
 Around the Starry Eight; with one accord the Starry Eight became
 One Man, Jesus the Saviour, wonderful! round his limbs
 The Clouds of Ololon folded as a Garment dipped in blood,
 Written within & without in woven letters, & the Writing
 Is the Divine Revelation in the Litteral expression,
 (*Milton* 42 [49]: 7–14)

The "Garment dipped in blood / Written within & without in woven letters" is Blake's own illuminated text of *Milton*, which is his apocalyptic reading of Milton's epic, a reading that constitutes a new revelation of its previously hidden or "Litteral" (i.e., unveiled) meaning. Like the biblical prophets with their messianic message, Milton, Blake suggests, could only partially discern what still remained sealed within the Adamic cycle that is haunted by its controlling vision of a lost Paradise. "Now is the dominion of Edom, & the return of Adam into Paradise; see Isaiah xxxiv & XXXV Chap" (Plate 3), Blake boldly declares as he announces the subject of his early prophetic work *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in which all that Milton did not yet know is unveiled by Blake, progressive revelation constituting for Blake the visionary relationship between them.

Blake's "All Human Forms identified" is, for Blake as for Frye, the state of total metaphoricality understood as the primal state of language itself. In this primal state of origination or originating power, language as metaphor is for both Blake and Milton intimately connected to the Logos or Word, God's creative power. When, therefore, Milton in *Paradise Lost* calls upon the "Heav'nly Muse" (1:6) to dictate his verse even as the "Heav'nly Muse" had dictated to Moses, he is conscious that what is being dictated is the Word of God, as the Word is renewed or regenerated by the inspired poet. Night after night in sleep, the blind Milton declares, he was "up led" as an "Earthlie Guest" into "the Heav'n of Heav'ns" (7:12–13) by his "Heav'nly Muse," in her feminine form, whom he names Urania. Though he knows as argument what he wants to say, he is totally dependent upon obtaining what he calls an "answerable style" from his "Celestial Patroness"

who deignes

Her nightly visitation unimplor'd,
And dictates to me slumbring, or inspires
Easie my unpremeditated Verse.

(9:20–24)

Milton describes divine dictation as an ascent into the “Heav’n of Heav’ns.” Blake, as Milton’s successor, more boldly describes Milton’s Muse (whom Blake calls Ololon) now emerging from “the Portals of [Blake’s] Brain, where by [her] ministry / The Eternal Great Humanity Divine planted his Paradise” (*Milton* 2:7–8). Having emerged from his brain, Ololon is then called upon by Blake to “[c]ome into [his] hand” by “descending down the Nerves of [his] right arm” (2:4–5).¹ Milton’s “Heav’n of Heav’ns,” the Seat of God’s throne, now becomes in Blake’s vision Blake’s own body, even as in the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh the realm of Bahá’u’lláh’s Muse or Maid of Heaven becomes the earth itself. “Great is thy blessedness, O earth,” declares the Ancient of Days to Bahá’u’lláh as the “Most Exalted Pen,” “for thou has been made the foot-stool of thy God, and been chosen as the seat of His mighty throne” (*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* 30).

Blake’s subject is the Return of Christ as the New Jerusalem’s descent to earth. His bodily experience of its descent as what he calls “a Pulsation of the Artery” (*Milton* 29[31]:3) prefigures Bahá’u’lláh’s revelatory encounter with the Maid of Heaven (the New Jerusalem Bride) in the prison in Tehran, an encounter that constituted his awakening to his station as the Manifestation of God for this day. “During the days I lay in the prison of Tīhrán,” he writes,

though the galling weight of the chains and the stench-filled air allowed Me but little sleep, still in those infrequent moments of slumber I felt as if something flowed from the crown of My head over My breast, even as a mighty torrent that precipitateth itself upon the earth from the summit of a lofty mountain. Every limb of My body would, as a result, be set afire. At such moments My tongue recited what no man could bear to hear. (*Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 22)

In a passage that bears a certain resemblance to Bahá’u’lláh’s account of his limbs set aflame as he becomes in a moment the very incarnation of the Promised One, Blake describes his bodily vision of Christ’s return. “My bones

1. When Blake writes that the Daughters of Beulah, the counterpart of the Maids of Heaven in the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh, proceed out of his brain where God planted Paradise down his right arm into his writing hand, Blake’s conception of his head as the earthly seat of God anticipates Bahá’u’lláh’s description of his hair, in the Tablet of the Hair, as his “Phoenix” that “hath . . . set itself upon the blazing fire of My Face and receiveth sustenance from the garden of My Countenance.” Again, Bahá’u’lláh addresses his hair as his “Messenger” who “is calling aloud at all times upon the branch of Fire within the hallowed and luminous Garden of Paradise” (qtd. in Lambden, “The Sinaitic Mysteries: Notes on Moses/Sinai Motifs in Bábí and Bahá’í Scripture”).

trembled,” Blake writes, describing the descent of Christ, Christ’s limbs folded in the “Clouds of Ololon.” “I fell outstretchd upon the path / A moment” (42[49]:25–26). In that “moment,” equal for Blake to the entire Adamic cycle (six thousand years from its creation to its judgment), his work as a poet was done.² “Every Time less than a pulsation of the artery,” he writes,

Is equal in its period & value to Six Thousand Years,
For in this Period the Poet’s Work is Done: and all the Great
Events of Time start forth & are conciev’d in such a Period,
Within a Moment, a Pulsation of the Artery.

(28 [30]: 62–63; 29 [31]: 1–3)

In *The Great Code*, Frye explores the originating nature of metaphor as the power of words that resides ultimately in the Word, which announces itself to Moses as the “I AM THAT I AM” (Exod. 3:14). In the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh this power of the Word is “He Who hath been manifested” as “the Hidden Mystery, the Treasured Symbol, through Whom the letters B and E (Be) have been joined and knit together” (*Bahá’í Prayers* 13). Following the suggestion of biblical scholars, Frye argues that the “I AM THAT I AM” in the Authorised King James Version might be more accurately rendered, “I will be what I will be.” “That is,” he explains,

we might come closer to what is meant in the Bible by the word “God” if we understood it as a verb, and not a verb of simple asserted existence but a verb implying a process accomplishing itself. (*Great Code* 17)

God as “a verb” rather than a noun removes the word *God* from a state of unknown being and places it in the realm of an ongoing action, “a process

2. When Blake describes the work of six thousand years from the Creation to the Judgment or the entire Adamic cycle as taking place in his body in “the Pulsation of the artery,” he again anticipates Bahá’u’lláh who in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* declares that “it behoveth whoso hath quaffed the Mystic Wine of everlasting life from the Hands of the loving-kindness of the Lord his God, the Merciful, to pulsate even as the throbbing artery in the body of mankind, that through him may be quickened the world and every crumbling [mouldering] bone” (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* #173, 82).

Blake’s visionary presentation of his body as the divine Creation itself, undergoing a renewal or rebirth as Milton journeys through it in search of Christ’s return that both he and Blake as twin prophets await, further anticipates Bahá’u’lláh’s Tablet to Queen Victoria in which he calls upon “the elected representatives of the peoples in every land” to “regard the world as the human body which, though at its creation whole and perfect, hath been afflicted, through various causes, with grave disorders and maladies” (*Gleanings* 254–55).

Blake is restoring the body of the world, as the macrocosm of his own body, to its original wholeness and perfection. This radical act of restoration Blake boldly identifies (as Christ’s return in his glorified body) as the body of Blake’s own illuminated text. Blake as poet/painter is enacting the descent of the Kingdom of God to earth as their descent takes place in his own body. It is, I suggest, the clearest, most exact anticipation of Bahá’u’lláh’s awakening in the *Síyáh-Chál* in all English prophetic literature.

accomplishing itself," a process that Bahá'u'lláh describes as Progressive Revelation, which is, of course, precisely the process that Blake describes in his poetic vision, most particularly in his own prophetic relationship to Milton.

As "a process accomplishing itself" (Progressive Revelation), we must try, Frye asserts, "to think our way back to conception of language in which words were words of power, conveying primarily the sense of forces and energies rather than analogues of physical bodies" (17). We must, that is, "think our way back" (rather than, as in this essay, forward into revelations beyond the revelation of Christ) to a metaphorical view of language rather than a literal one in which language is answerable to things. For Frye, this "think[ing] our way back" now remains most immediately available to us in what he calls "the secular scripture," the imaginal body of literature in which the Word is liberated from the interpretative closure that characterizes the institutional life of religion and is free to renew itself perpetually as poetic, as distinct from religious, truth succinctly described by Coleridge as a "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment" (2:6). Though ordained in the United Church of Canada, Frye was more himself in a literary world than in a religious one, finding in literature an imaginal body to which he could more intimately relate than to the rather more doctrinal body of Christ that had in the dogma of the Incarnation imposed a closure upon the Progressive Revelation that, in Frye's Christian view, had culminated in Christ. In Blake, one may argue, Frye found the ideal prototype of his own struggle with Christianity, though, it may equally be argued, in his brilliant, far-reaching reading of Blake's poetry in *Fearful Symmetry*, he may finally have rendered Blake less of a religious revolutionary than he actually was.

Unknown or unrecognized by Frye, the Word, kept alive in and as "secular scripture" (described by Shelley as "a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet"³ (*Defence of Poetry* 504), has now been renewed and extended at its divine source in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. What as mimesis, as "secular scripture," in Romantic poetry stops short of divine revelation, while at the same time it opens itself to revelation in its anticipation of Christ's return, remains in Frye what may be called as supplement, a secular anticipation of the return, which in the end denies metaphor the full spiritual power of the Word that belongs to scripture. The return, that is, is a metaphor that is finally denied the object it contains and in Bahá'u'lláh is, Bahá'u'lláh's exploration of return in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* being as metaphor the unveiling of Bahá'u'lláh's own station. "O brother," Bahá'u'lláh writes, referring directly to his own person,

3. Shelley describes the poet's "mind in creation" as "a fading coal which some invisible influence awakens to a transitory brightness. . . ." Of this "invisible influence," he argues, "the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure" (*Defence* 503-4).

behold how the inner mysteries of “rebirth,” of “return,” and of “resurrection” have each, through these all-sufficing, these unanswerable, and conclusive utterances, been unveiled and unravelled before thine eyes. God grant that through His gracious and invisible assistance, thou mayest divest thy body and soul of the old garment, and array thyself with the new and imperishable attire. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 158)

What is evident in Blake’s *Milton*, when compared to the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh that it so clearly prefigures, is less a weaving of a “new and imperishable” garment to replace Milton’s old one (of which Milton could not as a Puritan divest himself) than an extraordinary reweaving of Milton’s garment that, in patching it, opened it to its apocalyptic meaning, a meaning that Blake in his day (1804) could not inhabit “except remotely” (*Milton* 40 [46]: 3).

“What do I here before the Judgment? without my Emanation [Bride]? / With the daughters of memory, & not with the daughters of inspiration?” Milton asks in Blake’s epic recreation of *Paradise Lost*. A prisoner of his own poem, Milton hears in Blake’s reading of it to his wife a way out of its “intricate mazes” (*Milton* 2:17). Leaping out of these mazes, he lands at Blake’s left foot and enters it at the tarsus (“on my left foot falling on the tarsus, entered there,” Blake writes in *Milton* [17(19):49]).

Like Shaykh Aḥmad writing in Persia at the same time that Blake was writing in England, Blake was preparing the way for the Second Coming, a Coming requiring for recognition the vastly enlarged spiritual senses of the resurrected body by which alone we are able, in the words of the “Tablet of Aḥmad,” “to see God with [our] own eyes” and “hear His Melody with [our] own ears” (*Bahá’í Prayers* 212). In Shaykh Aḥmad, the resurrected body is what he calls the “subtle body.” Shoghi Effendi explains this body at some length in his translation of *The Dawn-Breakers* by quoting an article in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. “He [Shaykh Aḥmad] declared,” the article reads,

that the body of man was composed of different portions, derived from each of the four elements and the nine heavens, and that the body wherewith he was raised in the resurrection contained only the latter components, the former returning at death to their original sources. This subtle body, which alone escaped destruction, he called *Jism-i-Húriqlíyá*, the latter being supposed to be a Greek word. He asserted that it existed potentially in our present bodies, ‘like glass in stone.’⁴ Similarly he asserted

4. The “glass in stone” is the soul as mirror in the stone of the physical or opaque body. Shaykh Aḥmad taught the essentially Sufi doctrine that if the “glass [mirror] in stone” is turned to God, the glass [mirror] will become luminous so that the physical body itself will become transparent rather than opaque, a “subtle body” or “resurrected body” which is the body of Muḥammad that ascended to Heaven in his famous night journey. Shaykh Aḥmad further explained that the “glass” when turned toward the sun (the Manifestation of God) becomes flaming crystal, and the crystal, in turn, further transformed by the heat of the sun as it is progressively intensified, becomes a diamond. The soul as a “diamond body” is the soul that dwells immortally in the Abhá Kingdom.

that, in the case of the Night-ascent of the Prophet to Heaven, it was this, and not his material body, which performed the journey. On account of these views, he was pronounced unorthodox by the majority of the 'ulamás, and accused of holding the doctrines of Mullá Şadrá, the greatest Persian philosopher of modern times. (Qtd. in Nabil, *The Dawn-Breakers* 4)

The question that Milton asks as he is about to enter the body of Blake to join with him in its resurrection process (Frye's "process accomplishing itself") is the question that Frye might well have asked himself as he as reader entered the body of Blake's work, particularly what Blake called its "Furnaces the Stomach for digestion" (*Milton* 24[26]:59), which he named "Bowlahoola" (*Milton* 24[26]:67). What was he (Frye) doing with "the daughters of memory, & not with the daughters of inspiration?" Why could he not see that Blake's subject was not the Christ of the Gospels but the Christ of the Second Coming, the Christ of the Book of Revelation that the Gospels only in part revealed, his return remaining in them largely concealed? Why, that is, did Frye not grant to metaphor the full authority he ascribed to it as the original and originating state of language?

All of this Şhaykhí doctrine is to be found in the Writings of the Báb. "The One true God," he writes,

may be compared unto the sun and the believer unto a mirror. No sooner is the mirror placed before the sun than it reflects its light. The unbeliever may be likened unto a stone. . . . Indeed, if God willeth, He is potent to turn the stone into a mirror. . . . Had he wished to become a crystal, God would have made him to assume crystal form. (*Selections from the Writings of the Báb* 103)

Thus when, for example, Bahá'u'lláh speaks of "the pure, the gem-like reality of man" (*Gleanings* 77), the "gem-like" may be understood as the "diamond body." And, again, when Bahá'u'lláh describes the radiance of this "gem-like reality of man" as being so intense that no human being on earth could survive its intensity if suddenly exposed to it, he is describing the reality of his Revelation as the unveiling of the full "reality of man." "Were it [the physical sun], all of a sudden, to manifest the energies latent within it," Bahá'u'lláh writes, "it would, no doubt, cause injury to all created things." Bahá'u'lláh then continues, moving from the physical sun to the spiritual sun:

In like manner, if the Sun of Truth were suddenly to reveal, at the earliest stages of its manifestation, the full measure of the potencies which the providence of the Almighty hath bestowed upon it, the earth of human understanding would waste away and be consumed; for men's hearts would neither sustain the intensity of its revelation, nor be able to mirror forth the radiance of its light. Dismayed and overpowered, they would cease to exist. (*Gleanings* 88)

Indeed, so intense was the potency of Revelation that not even the Pen of Bahá'u'lláh could on certain occasions endure it. Addressing the "people of Bahá," Bahá'u'lláh declares: "Were We to reveal the hidden secrets of that Day, all they that dwell on earth and in the heavens would swoon away and die. . . ." As if these "hidden secrets" were at this moment on the sacred tip of his "shrilling" Pen (a reference to the reed-like sound of the pen nib on the paper), Bahá'u'lláh writes:

Such is the inebriating effect of the words of God upon Him Who is the Revealer of His undoubted proofs, that His Pen can move no longer. (*Gleanings* 35)

In the ongoing process of the “secular scripture,” itself the mythical displacement of the Word as divine revelation, Frye aesthetically gratifies as poetic faith what is absent in the Christian closure that constitutes the doctrine of Incarnation. In his exploration of the typology that metaphorically binds the Old Testament to the New, (the Old becoming the rearview mirror image of the New), the Bible remains essentially sealed. The fact that the Old and New Testaments in their metaphorical identity became the type of the Qur’án (“I am all the Prophets,” declared Muḥammad, “I am the first Adam, Noah, Moses, and Jesus” [qtd. in *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 153]), and that together as one they became the type of the Revelations of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh, is a larger global “process accomplishing itself” that remains arrested in Frye’s reading of the Bible, though not in his reading of the “secular scripture” that constitutes world literature. Nevertheless, within its clearly delineated Christian limits, Frye’s reading of the Bible, particularly with reference to his analysis of language, metaphor, and typology, provides a brilliant model for an understanding of the metaphorical nature of the Word, especially when his reading of the Bible is carried forward (the word *meta-phor* means a carrying across) to include the revelations of Muḥammad, the Báb, and Bahá’u’lláh in a divine “process” that in accomplishing itself must never allow accomplishment, however impressive, to arrest the process forever. Metaphor, as the unveiling of new meanings within a given or literal meaning, can no more be arrested or exhausted than can God as the unknowable source of life. “Veil after veil may be undrawn,” Shelley writes, describing the infinite world of metaphor, “and the inmost naked beauty of meaning never exposed.” After “one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share,” he explains, “another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and unconceived delight” (*Defence of Poetry* 500). Metaphor as the progressive revelation of a ceaseless unveiling has never been better described.

The Trial of the Báb: The Literal and the Metaphorical

Frye illustrates the metaphorical reality of the Bible by arguing that when Jesus says “I am the door” (John 10:9)—another translation is “the gate”—there are “no doors outside the verse to be pointed to” (*Great Code* 61). If, indeed, literal doors outside the verse needed to be pointed to in order to understand the station of Jesus, then Jesus as a literal door would point to a madman rather than to a Manifestation. The failure, that is, to grasp the metaphorical rather than literal nature of the Word calls into question the sanity of Jesus, even as later in the interrogation of the Báb by the ‘ulamá in Tabríz the Báb’s purely metaphorical account of himself in and through the verses he uttered registered as madness to those who heard him. Indeed, the entire interrogation of the Báb by the ‘ulamá focused upon the Báb’s insistence upon his metaphorical identity

as the Word and the determination of the 'ulamá to make him as metaphor answerable to a literal reading of scripture and tradition. In steadfastly refusing to be rendered answerable, the Báb was finally judged to be insane. Had he not been so judged, he would have been sentenced to death.

Just as Jesus in the New Testament declared his station by metaphorically identifying himself with Old Testament verses, the Báb, according to the official report of the proceedings by E. G. Browne, affirmed the Báb's station before the Tribunal at Tabriz by reciting the famous *ḥadīth*, "I am the city of knowledge and 'Alí is its gate." "It is incumbent on you to obey me, by virtue of [the verse] 'Enter the gate with reverence!'" (Qur'án 4:153), he commanded the Tribunal. Clearly distinguishing his utterance as the Manifestation of God from a merely human utterance, the Báb then explained: "But I did not utter these words. He uttered them who uttered them." When asked "Who then is the speaker?" the Báb replied: "He who shone forth on Mount Sinai." The Báb then recited the famous verse: "[If to say] 'I am the Truth' be seemly in a Tree, why should it not be seemly on the part of some favored man? There is no selfness in between." The Báb, that is, addressing the Tribunal in verses drawn from the Qur'án and the *ḥadīth* was totally identified with the Word so that the self had completely disappeared. "These are God's words," he declared. "I am but the Tree [the Burning Bush] on Sinai. At that time [the divine word] was created in it, now it has been created in me" (qtd. in Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 389).

Shocked and angered by the Báb's declaration of himself as the return of the Hidden Imám, the promised Mahdí, the Tribunal cited the absence of any literal or physical evidence to support his claim. The Twelfth Imám, they pointed out, "was born [of a holy ancestry] in Sámirra in the year 256 [869]," whereas the Báb was born in Shíráz of humble origin, the son of a Shírází clothier. The Twelfth Imám would appear from Mecca with a sword as well as the support of "the leaders of men and the Jinn and their forty thousand followers," which are "all promised in the *ḥadīth*." The Imám would bring along "David's coat-of-mail, rod of Moses, Solomon's ring and the white hand [of Moses]." To which the Báb replied: "I am not permitted to bring such things" (qtd. in Amanat, *Resurrection* 389–90). God, that is, would not permit a Messenger to render God answerable to the literal demands of those who rejected the Word. The Word is answerable to God rather than to humans, having within it the principle of its own integrity. The 'ulamá having failed to understand the metaphorical nature of the Word, the Báb refused to confirm them in their failure by subjecting the Word of God to their perverse demands. On the contrary, his divinely assigned task was to restore the authority of the Word to its source in God by divesting the 'ulamá of it.

Following the Tribunal, the matter of the Báb's sanity was raised, and a conditional death sentence was issued pending a confirmation of the Báb's

sanity. Dr. William Cormick, the crown prince's physician, and two Persian physicians were instructed to examine the Báb and determine "whether he was of sane mind or merely a madman." In his recollections of his visit to the Báb in the Tabríz citadel, Dr. Cormick wrote:

He only once deigned to answer me on my saying that I was not a Musulman and was willing to know something about his religion, as I might perhaps be inclined to adopt it. He regarded me very intently on my saying this, and replied that he had no doubt of all Europeans coming over to his religion. Our report to the Shah at that time was of a nature to spare his life. (Qtd. in Amanat, *Resurrection* 391)

The "of a nature to save his life" carried within it the implicit assumption that the Báb was insane.

In terms of the teachings of *Shaykh* Aḥmad, the forerunner of the Báb out of whose school all the Letters of the Living⁵ emerged, the Báb himself, having as a child attended a *Shaykhī* school and been instructed by a *Shaykhī* tutor, addressed the 'ulamá from the Hurqalya,⁶ the intermediary world of the Hidden Imám that resides between the elemental world of the five senses and the transcendent realm of God or pure intelligence. In this intermediate world in which the Hidden Imám resides and from which he would appear, the physical body of the elemental world (the realm of the four elements) that disintegrates at death is replaced by a spiritual or resurrected body inhabiting a spiritual earth that is made up of what may be called eternal images. It is this realm of eternal images that constitutes the metaphorical world from which proceed the verses of the prophet. The Báb before the Tribunal at Tabríz addressed the 'ulamá out of this metaphorical realm which is the celestial Earth of the soul, the Earth of Hurqalya. "*Hurqalya is the Earth of the soul, because it is the soul's vision,*" writes Henri Corbin. "To see things in Hurqalya" is to see them

as they are as events of the soul, and not as constituted into autonomous material realities, with a meaning detached from and independent of the soul, as our positive

5. A designation by the Báb for the first eighteen people to recognize his station.

6. The term *Hurqalya* is likely to remain troublesome for many readers unfamiliar with the realm it designates. Bahá'u'lláh describes his Revelation as the calling into being of a "new creation." This "new creation" is the Earth itself newly unveiled to the soul that has opened itself to Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. It is, therefore, what Henri Corbin calls "the Earth of the soul" or "the soul's vision" of Earth. For the Bahá'í, this "soul's vision" is not merely a subjective experience; it is an objective reality unveiled by divine Revelation. It is reality itself, the Earth as the creation of God and the seat of God's throne. The Earth is "the Earth of the soul." In the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh that constitutes the soul's "coming of age," the Earth is no longer what Blake called "a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses" (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 4). It has vastly expanded beyond the material limits of the five senses to include and embrace the "Energy" formerly hidden in matter and now in its fullness released. This "Energy" is at once the reality of matter and its "throne." It is a literal or objective reality directly communicated in and as metaphor.

science constitutes and objectifies them. (*Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran* 88)

The substance of metaphor, which is to say “the Earth of the soul,” is the substance of the Word, an eternal body of permanent images (city, tree, gate, door, garden, bridegroom, bride) that is ceaselessly renewed through Progressive Revelation until, at last, it becomes, in the Revelations of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, inhabited by a human consciousness that has long been evolving toward it.

It may also be argued that it is precisely here in this view of Progressive Revelation as the soul's historical evolution toward the Hurqalya that the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh separates itself from Henri Corbin's reading of Shaykh Aḥmad. “[E]verything that we call ‘history’, and value as ‘historical’,” writes Henri Corbin interpreting Shaykh Aḥmad,

is not “seen in Hurqalya,” is not an event in the Earth of Hurqalya, and therefore is devoid of religious interest and spiritual meaning. The orientation of the terrestrial Earth toward the Earth of Hurqalya, toward the celestial pole, confers a *polar dimension* on terrestrial existence, gives it a direction *not evolutionary but vertical, ascensional*. (90, italics added)

Missing in Henri Corbin's interpretation of Shaykh Aḥmad is any sense of an historical evolution of consciousness toward the consciousness of the oneness of humankind, which is the distinguishing feature of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. While humanity has always been one, the consciousness of such oneness belongs to this day. The struggle to adapt to its revolutionary implications in the necessary construction of a new world order over which Shoghi Effendi presided following the blueprint of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the laws laid down by Bahá'u'lláh in the *Aqdas* is, for Corbin interpreting Shaykh Aḥmad, “not ‘seen in Hurqalya’” and “therefore is devoid of religious interest and spiritual meaning.” Indeed, the appearance of the Báb in the human form of Mírzá 'Alí Muḥammad Shirází as an historical event taking place at two hours and eleven minutes after sunset on May 23, 1844, or, as designated in the Persian *Bayán* (Váḥid 2, Báb 7), “when two hours and eleven minutes [had passed] from the evening preceding the fifth of Jamádfiyu'l-Úlá, 1260 [A.H.], which is the year 1270 of the mission [of Muḥammad]” (quoted in Nabíl, *Dawn-Breakers* 61n), is itself devoid of spiritual meaning. For Corbin, as for most members of the Shaykhí school who rejected the claims of the Báb, the return of the Hidden Imám lay in the soul's ascent to the Hurqalya, even as for many Christians the Return of Christ resides in the believer's recognition of him as the Savior, each act of conversion enacting his return. What those who rejected the claims of the Báb saw in those claims was a literalization of the sacred texts that corrupted their pure metaphoricity. They saw in the Báb the

rejection of the metaphorical reality the Báb uncompromisingly defended by openly sacrificing his physical body to it.

The scandal of every Manifestation of God is the scandal of the Manifestation's physical body. This scandal, which the early Christian Church attempted to resolve by the dogma of the Trinity, is resolved in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh by an "ascensional" view of evolution in which the mineral, vegetable, and animal kingdoms, far from being "devoid of religious interest," are themselves the outward forms of the human creation in the earlier stages of its evolution, an evolution that has now achieved its providential goal in the human consciousness of its purpose, a consciousness which, Bahá'u'lláh declares, is "the same as the comprehension of Mine own Being" (*Gleanings* 327). The realm of Hurqalya, that is, has in this day become the Earth itself as the Kingdom of God. The meaning of "return" as Bahá'u'lláh explains it in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* is the union rather than separation, the marriage rather than divorce, of Heaven and Earth. Not surprisingly, therefore, Bahá'u'lláh declares, in the words of the Maid of Heaven, that

when the hour at which Thy resistless Faith was to be made manifest did strike, Thou didst breathe a breath of Thy spirit into Thy Pen, and lo, the entire creation shook to its very foundations, unveiling to mankind such mysteries as lay hidden within the treasuries of Him Who is the Possessor of all created things. (*Gleanings* 15)

What has been unveiled within "the entire creation" had remained "hidden" until "the hour" of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation struck. What then was called into being was "a new creation, as a token of Our grace unto men" (*Gleanings* 29–30). What lay hidden in the Hurqalya of the Hidden Imám from all save a chosen few was now the human kingdom itself as humanity's coming of age. To adjust to this coming of age and the global demands placed upon it becomes in this day the work of the soul that for mystical Islam was the soul's process of ascent from the physical to the spiritual body. The metaphor of spatial ascent has merged with the metaphor of linear time. The matter that is Earth has become the energy that is spirit.

The Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, the Word, and the Soul

The martyrdom of the Báb, like the martyrdom of Christ, was the result of binding the Word to a fixed "literal interpretation" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 26) that attempted to usurp its authority. By arresting metaphor, cutting it off from what Frye calls its "upward metamorphosis" (*Great Code* 76), the ceaseless unveiling of hidden meanings that constitutes the inner life of Progressive Revelation is imprisoned in a sepulcher of ignorance and prejudice. Directly addressing those who rejected the Báb because they could not recognize in him the unveiling of what was in previous scriptures veiled and concealed, Bahá'u'lláh in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* declares that what remained concealed because of their own blindness

emerged as malevolence. The concealing of all that had been revealed became as malevolence the substitution of Satan for the Báb in their own hearts. “We conclude Our argument,” Bahá’u’lláh writes, “with His words—exalted is He— ‘And whoso shall withdraw from the remembrance of the Merciful, We will chain a Satan unto him, and he shall be his fast companion’” (Qur’án 43:36, qtd. in Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 257). “None apprehendeth the meaning of these [symbolic] utterances,” Bahá’u’lláh explains,

except them whose hearts are assured, whose souls have found favour with God, and whose minds are detached from all else but Him. In such utterances, the literal meaning, as generally understood by the people, is not what hath been intended. Thus it is recorded: “Every knowledge hath seventy meanings, of which one only is known amongst the people. And when the Qá’im shall arise, He shall reveal unto men all that which remaineth.” He also saith: “We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings; each one of these meanings we can explain.” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 255)

The meaning hidden in the Súrih of Joseph in the Qur’án as the Báb unveiled it in his commentary on it (revealed in the presence of Mullá Ḥusayn as the Báb’s declaration of his station as the Gate to Bahá’u’lláh) lay in the desire of all the prophets to be united with Bahá’u’lláh even as Joseph was finally united with his father, Jacob. In the Revelation of the Báb, that is, the desire of all previous prophets was fulfilled. For this reason, the Báb instructed Mullá Ḥusayn to take to Tehran the first chapter of his commentary, which, he told Mullá Ḥusayn, “enshrines a Mystery of such transcendent holiness as neither Hījáz nor Shíráz can hope to rival” (Nabíl, *Dawn-Breakers* 96). Eventually the Báb’s commentary came into the hands of Bahá’u’lláh. At Mullá Ḥusayn’s request, Mullá Muḥammad, an enthusiastic student of Shaykh Aḥmad and Siyyid Kázim, took the scroll to Mírzá Músá, the brother of Bahá’u’lláh. Mírzá Músá, in turn, presented it to Bahá’u’lláh who invited Mullá Muḥammad into his presence. Later Mullá Muḥammad recounted to Nabíl what then took place:

He [Bahá’u’lláh] glanced at its contents and began to read aloud to us certain of its passages. I sat enraptured as I listened to the sound of His voice and the sweetness of its melody. He had read a page of the scroll when, turning to His brother, He said: Músá, what have you to say? Verily I say, whoso believes in the Qur’án and recognizes its Divine origin, and yet hesitates, though it be for a moment, to admit that these soul-stirring words are endowed with the same regenerating power, has most assuredly erred in his judgment and has strayed far from the path of justice. (Nabíl, *Dawn-Breakers* 106–7)

Bahá’u’lláh’s instantaneous recognition of the station of the Báb is the recognition that is proper to the soul whose home is not the elemental body of the senses but rather the eternal world of the spiritual body where the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh forever remain in ceaseless “regenerating” communication with

each other, and upon which the creation depends so that if that communication were ever withdrawn, even for an instant, the creation would cease to be. Bahá'u'lláh points to such an instant as the passing away of “the entire creation” so that “[n]othing remaineth, except My Face, the Ever-Abiding, the Resplendent, the All-Glorious” (*Gleanings* 29). This “instant,” he explains, takes place in the measureless interval (for Blake “less than a pulsation of the artery”) between the abrogation of one dispensation and the inauguration of another. “Consider the hour at which the supreme Manifestation of God revealeth Himself unto men,” Bahá'u'lláh writes,

Ere that hour cometh, the Ancient Being, Who is still unknown of men and hath not as yet given utterance to the Word of God, is Himself the All-Knower in a world devoid of any man that hath known Him. He is indeed the Creator without a creation. *For at the very moment preceding His Revelation, each and every created thing shall be made to yield up its soul to God.* (*Gleanings* 151, italics added)

Dismissing Mullá Muḥammad from his presence, Bahá'u'lláh charged him to take to Mullá Ḥusayn a gift of Russian sugar and a package of tea and to convey to him the expression of Bahá'u'lláh's appreciation and love. When Mullá Ḥusayn received the gift and the message from Bahá'u'lláh, he was overwhelmed to such a degree that Mullá Muḥammad was at once amazed and bewildered. “He started to his feet, received with bowed head the gift from my hand, and fervently kissed it. He then took me in his arms, kissed my eyes . . .,” Mullá Muḥammad told Nabíl. “I was amazed at the behaviour of Mullá Ḥusayn,” Mullá Muḥammad continued,

What could be, I thought to myself, the nature of the bond that unites these two souls? What could have kindled so fervid a fellowship in their hearts? Why should Mullá Ḥusayn, in whose sight the pomp and circumstance of royalty were the merest trifle, have evinced such gladness at the sight of so inconsiderable a gift from the hands of Bahá'u'lláh? I was puzzled by this thought and could not unravel its mystery. (Qtd. in Nabíl, *Dawn-Breakers* 107)

Despite the fact that he was a student of Shaykh Aḥmad and Siyyid Kázim, Mullá Muḥammad could not unravel the “mystery” of the Hurqalya, the celestial Earth in which Mullá Ḥusayn was forever bonded to the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, an Earth in which “so inconsiderable a gift” as Russian sugar and a package of tea assumed the metaphorical dimension of ecstatic spiritual communion. Not surprisingly, many of those who rejected the Báb believed that his ecstatic disciples were drugged.

Plato in *Ion* compares what he calls the “divine insanity” of the inspired poet to the Corybantes, the followers of Dionysus, “who lose all control over their reason in the enthusiasm of the sacred dance; and, during the supernatural

possession, are excited to the rhythm and harmony which they communicate to men." "Like the Bacchantes," he goes on,

who, when possessed by the God draw honey and milk from the rivers, in which, when they come to their senses, they find nothing but simple water. . . . For a poet is indeed a thing ethereally light, winged, and sacred, nor can he compose anything worth calling poetry until he becomes inspired, and, as it were, mad, or whilst any reason remains to him. For whilst a man retains any portion of the thing called reason, he is utterly incompetent to produce poetry or to vaticinate. . . . The God seems purposely to have deprived all poets, prophets, and soothsayers of every particle of reason and understanding, the better to adapt them to their employment as his ministers and interpreters; and that we, their auditors, may acknowledge that those who write so beautifully, are possessed, and address us, inspired by the God. (*Julian* 7: 197–98)

Because, for Plato, the poets like Homer declare themselves to be divinely possessed, they or their followers may mistake "simple water" for "honey and milk." He therefore exiled the poets from his ideal Republic lest they seduce the populace into embracing a delusion as truth. Comparing the poet's Muse to the magnet that has the power of attracting other iron rings to create "a long chain of rings," Plato sees an entire people drawn to a poet's verses to create what he calls "a chain and a succession" capable, like the Maenads in Euripides' *Bacchae*, of reducing the civic order to chaos. Precisely this fear, it may be argued, instigated and propelled the attempt of the Persian authorities to wipe out the Bábí community.

Plato's fear of "divine insanity" is a fear that many non-Muslims have over the centuries projected onto Muḥammad and the verses of the Qur'án, which they find unintelligible. "Many people, especially non-Muslims, who read the Qur'án for the first time," writes Siyyid Hossein Nasr (who might well be commenting upon the reaction of the 'ulamá to the "ungrammatical" nature of the Báb's verses),

are struck by what appears as a kind of incoherence from the human point of view. It is neither like a highly mystical text nor a manual of Aristotelian logic, though it contains both mysticism and logic. The text of the Qur'án reveals human language crushed by the power of the Divine Word. It is as if human language were scattered into a thousand fragments like a wave scattered into drops against the rocks at sea. One feels through the shattering effect left upon the language of the Qur'án, the power of the Divine whence it originated. The Qur'án displays human language with all the weakness inherent in it becoming suddenly the recipient of the Divine Word and displaying its fragility before a power which is infinitely greater than man can imagine. (*Ideals and Realities of Islam* 47–48)

Plato rejected the poets, not because he himself rejected divine possession, but because he believed it could neither be directly communicated nor long

sustained. By treating divine possession as entirely devoid of “every particle of reason and understanding,” he knew that he had himself failed to understand it. He could therefore declare in his seventh Epistle: “I certainly have composed no work in regard to it [divine madness], nor shall I ever do so in the future, for there is no way of putting it into words like other studies.” “Acquaintance with it,” he goes on to explain, “must come rather after a long period of attendance or instruction in the subject itself and of close acquaintance when suddenly like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining” (341 C–D).

In the *Shaykhí* school, the generation in the soul that “at once becomes self-sustaining” is mythically explained in terms of the Hurqalya, the intermediate world between the senses and the realm of pure intelligence. The reason it is “self-sustaining,” *Shaykh* Ahmad argued, is because the Hurqalya is the eternal home of the soul to which it inherently belongs. Though Plato in his *Dialogues*, including the *Republic*, was himself the author of a similar mythical formulation of the soul’s reality, he opposed the tendency of the populace to take such a formulation literally and, what was worse, the tendency of the Sophists to make a religion of literalism, thereby imprisoning the population in the tyranny of a superstition to which it was far too willing to submit.

Bahá’u’lláh, like Plato, composed no work analyzing the generative power of the Word by explaining the unknown divinity that informs it. “Nay, forbid it, O my God,” declares Bahá’u’lláh,

that I should have uttered such words as must of necessity imply the existence of any direct relationship between the Pen of Thy Revelation and the essence of all created things. Far, far are They Who are related to Thee above the conception of such relationship! All comparisons and likenesses fail to do justice to the Tree of Thy Revelation, and every way is barred to the comprehension of the Manifestation of Thy Self and the Day Spring of Thy Beauty.

Far, far from Thy glory be what mortal man can affirm of Thee, or attribute unto Thee, or the praise with which he can glorify Thee! Whatever duty Thou hast prescribed unto Thy servants of extolling to the utmost Thy majesty and glory is but a token of Thy grace unto them, that they may be enabled to ascend unto the station conferred upon their own inmost being, the station of the knowledge of their own selves. (*Gleanings* 4–5)

Recognizing and respecting the limitations of human beings whose knowledge is bound ultimately to “the knowledge of their own selves” rather than a knowledge of what lies beyond them, Bahá’u’lláh nevertheless declares that the knowledge of themselves is a “token of [God’s] grace unto them” that depends for its reception upon “extolling to the utmost [God’s] majesty and glory.” Human beings must extol “to the utmost” what lies beyond them in order to penetrate to “their own inmost being.” In that paradox of what is

beyond them as the door to what lies within them, resides what Bahá'u'lláh calls the "mystery" of the soul.

"Verily I say," Bahá'u'lláh writes,

the human soul is, in its essence, one of the signs of God, a mystery among His mysteries. It is one of the mighty signs of the Almighty, the harbinger that proclaimeth the reality of all the worlds of God. Within it lieth concealed that which the world is now utterly incapable of apprehending. (*Gleanings* 160)

What "lieth concealed" is, Bahá'u'lláh continues, "a station such as no pen can depict, or tongue describe." After its "ascension" from the elemental world of the senses that constitutes its "return . . . to the glory of the Beloved," it will, Bahá'u'lláh declares,

be possessed of such power that all the worlds which the Almighty hath created can benefit through him. Such a soul provideth, at the bidding of the Ideal King and Divine Educator, the pure leaven that leaveneth the world of being, and furnisheth the power through which the arts and wonders of the world are made manifest. (*Gleanings* 160)

The "divine madness" that Plato describes, the "Celestial Patroness" who dictated to the "slumbring" Milton, and the feminine Muse ("Daughters of Beulah! Muses who inspire the Poet's Song" [*Milton* 2:1]) who descended down the nerves of Blake's right arm into his writing hand are in their inmost reality "the power" of ascended souls "through which the arts and wonders of the world are made manifest." The myths that enact their regenerating power are contained within the metaphoricity of language which is, ultimately, the Revelation of the Word understood as "the bidding of the Ideal King and Divine Educator" that metaphor serves in order to make the arts manifest. To the amazed and bewildered Mullá Muḥammad, the "wonders of the world" were contained as a mystery in a loaf of Russian sugar and a package of tea.

The *Kitáb-i-Íqán* and the Marriage Chamber

Metaphorically binding the Revelations of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh to the divine "process toward accomplishment" is the focus upon the holy city, New Jerusalem, Bahá'u'lláh's "City of Certitude" that is "renewed and re-adorned" once in about a thousand years (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 197, 199). In addressing Mount Carmel, the Mountain of God where Isaiah preached and Bahá'u'lláh pitched his tent, Bahá'u'lláh metaphorically addresses the mountain as his bride. In the "Tablet of Carmel," he sees the mountain as the Maid of Heaven "coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2). As metaphor, the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh celebrates the divine marriage or *hieros gamos* that now in his Revelation achieves its destined consummation in the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Uniting the spiritual and physical worlds anticipated by all the Semitic prophets, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes: “The spiritual world is like unto the phenomenal world. They are the exact counterpart of each other. Whatever objects appear in this world of existence are the outer pictures of the world of heaven” (*Promulgation of Universal Peace* 10). This world as a metaphor of heaven, if denied its full metaphorical status as the outer picture of heaven, becomes a world in which God is dead, entombed in what Frye called a “dead language” (18), a death humanly enacted in the martyrdom of the Báb and the crucifixion of Christ. “We perceive none . . . amongst the people of the earth who, sincerely yearning for the Truth, seeketh the guidance of the divine Manifestations concerning the abstruse matters of his Faith,” declares Bahá’u’lláh at the dark conclusion of the *Kitáb-i-Iqán*. “All are dwellers in the land of oblivion . . .” (256).

As he observed the total disintegration of the Bábí community, Bahá’u’lláh, prior to his own Revelation, was determined to rescue from “the land of oblivion” the immediate relatives of the Báb. For this reason, in 1862, when he was informed that the Báb’s maternal uncles were visiting Baghdad on their way back from their pilgrimage to the holy shrines of the Imáms in Iraq, he sent a messenger to them inviting them to his home. Only one of the uncles accepted his invitation; Hájí Mírzá Siyyid Muḥammad arrived armed with questions that raised most of the Shi’ite issues about which the ‘ulamá had interrogated the Báb in Tabriz. Bahá’u’lláh, using the written advice of the Báb, was determined that the sorry spectacle would not be repeated.

“It is not permissible,” the Báb wrote in the Persian *Bayán*,

to ask questions from Him Whom God will make manifest, except that which well beseemeth Him. For His station is that of the Essence of divine Revelation. . . . Whatever evidence of bounty is witnessed in the world, is but an image of His bounty; and every thing owes its existence to His Being. . . . The Bayán is, from beginning to end, the repository of all of His attributes, and the treasury of both His fire and His light. *Should anyone desire to ask questions, he is allowed to do so only in writing, that he may derive ample understanding from His written reply and that it may serve as a sign from his Beloved.* However, let no one ask aught that may prove unworthy of His lofty station. For instance, were a person to inquire the price of straw from a merchant of rubies, how ignorant would he be and how unacceptable. Similarly unacceptable would be questions of the highest-ranking people of the world in His presence, except such words as He Himself would utter about Himself in the Day of His manifestation. (*Selections* 101, italics added)

Accordingly, following the instruction of the Persian *Bayán*, Bahá’u’lláh instructed the maternal uncle to prepare his questions in a written form and deliver them to him the following day. Bahá’u’lláh would then prepare his written reply, using “such words as He Himself would utter about Himself in the Day of His manifestation.”

Not wishing to accuse the maternal uncle, as his guest, of treating his nephew the Báb as the 'ulamá had treated him, Bahá'u'lláh, in his written response that gradually unveiled his own station, made it abundantly clear that it was not for the servant to test God, but for God to test the servant. "If at the time of the appearance of Him Whom God will make manifest all the dwellers of the earth were to bear witness unto a thing whereunto He beareth witness differently," declares the Báb in the Persian *Bayán*,

His testimony would be like unto the sun, while theirs would be even as a false image produced in a mirror which is not facing the sun. For had it been otherwise their testimony would have proved a faithful reflection of His testimony. (*Selections* 100)

The divine authority with which Bahá'u'lláh addressed the maternal uncle of the Báb was carefully and lovingly modulated. He addressed the uncle as his brother and shared with him the anguish he was experiencing in Baghdad after his return from his two-year voluntary exile. At the same time, however, quoting verses from the Qur'án that applied directly to the initial reception of Muḥammad, Bahá'u'lláh made it clear that they applied equally to those who had rejected the Báb and, indeed, to those Bábís who were now rejecting Bahá'u'lláh as the One whom the Báb announced. "If God should chastise men for their perverse doings, He would not leave upon the earth a moving thing! But to an appointed time doth He respite them" [Qur'án 16:61] (Qtd. in *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 170). The maternal uncle could not help but be aware of the fact that the eighteen-year period of his "respite" was over and that now, in the spiritual presence of Bahá'u'lláh, being directly addressed in writing by him, the "appointed time" had arrived. "Whoso sayeth 'why' or 'wherefore' hath spoken blasphemy!" Bahá'u'lláh continued.

Were these people to shake off the slumber of negligence and realize that which their hands have wrought, they would surely perish, and would of their own accord cast themselves into fire—their end and real abode. Have they not heard that which He hath revealed: 'He shall not be asked of His doings' (Qur'án 21:23)? In the light of these utterances, how can man be so bold as to question Him, and busy himself with idle sayings? (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 171)

"A Revelation, of which the Prophets of God, His saints and chosen ones, have either not been informed, or which, in pursuance of God's inscrutable Decree, they have not disclosed," Bahá'u'lláh writes again, defending the Revelation of the Báb,

—such a Revelation these mean and depraved people have sought to measure with their own deficient minds, their own deficient learning and understanding. Should it fail to conform to their standards, they straightway reject it. "Thinkest thou that the

greater part of them hear or understand? They are even like unto the brutes! yea, they stray even further from the path!” [Qur’án 25:44] (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 244)

Since, however, the maternal uncle had never actively opposed the Báb and had shown in Bahá’u’lláh’s presence a genuine desire to resolve his bewilderment, Bahá’u’lláh recognized in him one who had, by a grace bestowed, now spiritually as well as physically attained his presence. “Inasmuch as it hath been clearly shown that only those who are initiated into the divine mysteries can comprehend the melodies uttered by the Bird of Heaven,” Bahá’u’lláh declares,

it is therefore incumbent upon every one to seek enlightenment from the illumined in heart and from the Treasuries of divine mysteries regarding the intricacies of God’s Faith and the abstruse allusions in the utterances of the Day-springs of Holiness. Thus will these mysteries be unravelled, not by the aid of acquired learning, but solely through the assistance of God and the outpourings of His grace. “Ask ye, therefore, of them that have the custody of the Scriptures, if ye know it not.” [Qur’án 16:43] (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 191–92)

The maternal uncle of the Báb, in the reading of Bahá’u’lláh’s written reply to his questions, had entered the presence of “the Bird of Paradise” and there, under Bahá’u’lláh’s interpretative guidance, had “comprehended the melodies.” Having asked of the One who had “the custody of the Scriptures,” the maternal uncle was rewarded with an unravelling of their “mysteries.”

Bahá’u’lláh describes the unraveling of the divine mysteries hidden within the scriptures in terms of the marriage metaphor. “Within every garden,” Bahá’u’lláh explains,

they [the initiated] will behold the mystic bride of inner meaning enshrined within the chambers of utterance in the utmost grace and fullest adornment. Most of the verses of the Qur’án indicate, and bear witness to, this spiritual theme. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 140)

Here, enacting the soul’s direct encounter with divine verses and the vivid actuality of the soul’s response, Bahá’u’lláh sees the verses not in the likeness of a garden, not as a simile, but as the spiritual reality of the verses, the verses as they exist in the Paradise of the Manifestation’s Presence directly communicated through “the chambers of [His] utterance,” the “Nightingale of Paradise” singing “upon the twigs of the Tree of Eternity, with holy and sweet melodies” (*Bahá’í Prayers* 209).

“The overpowering effect of the manner in which He wrote,” declared Mullá Ḥusayn, describing the Báb’s composition (revelation) of his commentary on the Súrih of Joseph, “*was heightened by the gentle intonation of His voice which accompanied His writing. . . . I sat enraptured by the magic of His voice. . .*” (Nabíl, *Dawn-Breakers* 61, italics added). Indeed, Mullá Ḥusayn

was so enraptured that when he begged leave to depart, the Báb bade him be seated. "If you leave in such a state, whoever sees you will assuredly say: 'This poor youth has lost his mind'" (61) the Báb told him. "I sat enraptured as I listened to the sound of His voice and the sweetness of its melody" (Nabíl, *Dawn-Breakers* 106–7), Mullá Muḥammad declared as he listened to Bahá'u'lláh reading aloud "the soul-stirring words" of the Báb's commentary, which, Bahá'u'lláh declared, were endowed with the "regenerating power" of the verses of the Qur'án.

In the Islamic conception of spirit, the "regenerating power" of the Word is designated, as in other Semitic languages, by two sharply contrasting views of breath: *nafs* and *rúh*. *Nafs* is the breath of the throat that, coming from the entrails, is "carnal" and "bound up with the blood." *Rúh* is the breath of the nostrils that, coming from the brain, confers "the discernment of spiritual qualities" (Massignon, "The Idea of the Spirit in Islam" 309). *Rúh* is associated with *pneuma*, the divine breath that God breathed into the nostrils of Adam ("And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul"[Gen. 2:7]). *Nafs* is associated with "the dust of the ground," the elemental body that comes from the dust and returns to the dust. In Islam, *rúh* is identified with the 'internal upheavals' felt by Muḥammad at the beginning of his prophetic mission when, according to Aisha, Muḥammad first had "a vision of isolated, luminous letters," which were accompanied by isolated sounds (Massignon, "The Idea" 319).

Bahá'u'lláh refers to these isolated letters cited at the head of certain chapters of the Qur'án in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*. "In the beginning of His Book," declares Bahá'u'lláh of Muḥammad's revelation of the Qur'án,

He saith: "'Alif. Lám. Mím. No doubt is there about this Book: It is a guidance unto the God-fearing" (Qur'án 2:1). In the disconnected letters of the Qur'án the mysteries of the divine Essence are enshrined, and within their shells the pearls of His Unity are treasured. . . . Outwardly they signify Muḥammad Himself, Whom God addresseth saying, "O Muḥammad, there is no doubt nor uncertainty about this Book which hath been sent down from the heaven of divine Unity. In it is guidance unto them that fear God." (202–3)

The sound identified with each of the "disconnected letters" of the Qur'án, sounds that taught Muḥammad how to read and to write "this Book which hath been sent down from the heaven of divine Unity," enshrined "the mysteries of the divine Essence." The sounds were, indeed, the breath (*rúh*) that God breathed into the nostrils of Adam, which is to say the generating power of God, which in its regenerating form as chant becomes a repetition of God's eternal act of creation. What, then, Mullá Ḥusayn heard in the gentle voice of the Báb that accompanied the motions of his pen and what Mullá Muḥammad heard in

the voice of Bahá'u'lláh as he read aloud from the Báb's commentary is what Carmel in Bahá'u'lláh's "Tablet of Carmel" heard as Bahá'u'lláh directed his steps towards her: ". . . the shrilling voice of Thy Pen, a voice Thou didst ordain as Thy trumpet-call amidst Thy people." "And when the hour at which Thy resistless Faith was to be made manifest did strike," declares Carmel,

Thou didst breathe a breath of Thy Spirit into Thy Pen, and lo, the entire creation shook to its very foundations, unveiling to mankind such mysteries as lay hidden within the treasuries of Him Who is the Possessor of all created things. (*Gleanings* 14–15)

When, further, Bahá'u'lláh points out that within the "shells" of these disconnected letters are contained "the pearls of His Unity," he is extending his metaphor to identify "the pearls of His Unity" with the virgin "Brides of inner meaning" who, in the breathing aloud (*rúh*) of the divine verses "hasten forth, unveiled, out of their mystic mansions, and manifest themselves in the ancient realm of being" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 175–76). These "Brides of inner meaning," like the *ḥúrís* who in the Qur'án greet the blessed in Paradise, unite with the soul that has opened itself to receive the Word so that the relationship between the initiated soul and the Word is the union of the lover of the Word with the Word itself, now experienced as the Beloved.

Precisely this nuptial union was celebrated by both Ṭáhirih and Quddús in their martyrdom. For three days and nights, alone in her room, redolent with the choicest perfume, herself apparelled in a gown of snow-white silk, Ṭáhirih prepared to meet her Beloved by composing odes to him which she chanted aloud to herself. Paraded in chains through the streets, assailed with knives and axes by the populace, Quddús, before being delivered to the flames, cried aloud: "Would that my mother were with me, and could see with her own eyes the splendour of my nuptials!" (Nabíl, *Dawn-Breakers* 413). Their souls, they believed, had entered the divine marriage chamber into which, as the Bridegroom, Christ had promised to take the faithful upon his return.

"Then shall the Kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom," Matthew's gospel reads,

And five of them were wise, and five *were* foolish. They that *were* foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them: But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him. Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out. But the wise answered, saying, *Not so*; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves. And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut. Afterward came also

the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. (Matt. 25:1–12)

In these verses the entire *Kitáb-i-Íqán* is prefiguratively enacted, the maternal uncle of the Báb inhabiting the metaphorical world of the Word, which is the realm of the soul, to become one of the wise virgins. The foolish virgins, who went to the sellers of oil (the 'ulamá), come "afterward" and are unknown to the bridegroom. "We conclude Our argument with His words—exalted is He," writes Bahá'u'lláh at the end of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, "—'And whoso shall withdraw from the remembrance of the Merciful, We will chain a Satan unto him, and he shall be his fast companion'(Qur'án 43:36). 'And whoso turneth away from My remembrance, truly his shall be a life of misery'" (Qur'án 20:124).

The Descent of the New Jerusalem

In this article, I have attempted, among other things, to demonstrate, with reference to the metaphor of the New Jerusalem descending as bride, the operation of a single, dynamic, and unifying metaphor moving through "a process accomplishing itself," which Bahá'u'lláh describes as Progressive Revelation. My purpose has been to invite the reader to inhabit a metaphorical world, not as a fiction, but as the soul's reality, the mystery of which can never be fully unveiled, its inmost essence being known only to God. "Give me a place to stand, and I will move the world," Archimedes is reported to have said with reference to the principle of the lever. To "move the world," I suggest, it is now no longer possible to stand where Northrop Frye stood in the composition of *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. The world he addressed as a Christian has moved on to a position of radical interdependence in which all its parts mirror or reflect each other, confronting us with a metaphorical unity that we do not yet know how to embrace creatively. In revealing the Second Coming as what still lay hidden in the Bible, Bahá'u'lláh, who is that Coming, suggests that in the rejection of him (as in the rejection of the Báb), the Second Coming as the hidden metaphorical content of the Bible has become the gigantic, malevolent shadow or anti-Christ cast upon this century, a shadow that may be compared to Yeats's "rough beast, its hour come round at last," that in Yeats's poem, "The Second Coming," "[s]louches towards Bethlehem to be born" (*Poems* 184). The Second Coming, that is, appears outwardly in the rejection of it, as "fire and vengeance," though inwardly in its reality it is "light and mercy." The "calamity" that now to all outward appearances faces the world contains a hidden "providence" ("My calamity is My providence") (Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* 15).

Judgment and Resurrection, the subjects of the Book of Revelation and the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, thus emerge in the context of the Revelations of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh as the same event experienced in two distinct perspectives. That

event, understood as a metaphorical event of the soul, is the descent of the New Jerusalem adorned as a bride, an event, which in the passing away of former things (“for the former things are passed away” [Rev. 21:4]), constitutes either a “new creation” or the “nothing” that “remaineth.” What is immediately at stake in the acceptance or rejection of Bahá’u’lláh, as Bahá’u’lláh makes abundantly clear in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, is the fate of the soul. In the dismissal of soul as an epiphenomenon of matter that in itself is nothing at all, that fate, as a human judgment upon it, has by many already been made, though the consequences of its making have not as yet, outside the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh, been fully measured.

By arguing for a shift in focus as a new point on which to stand, I am suggesting that the Revelations of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh now provide a lever that has moved the world into a new divinely ordained position of unity. To position ourselves upon this Archimedian point is the divine purpose of their Revelations. As Bahá’u’lláh insists in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, the Archimedian point was unveiled by the Báb as the “Primal Point” around which all the Prophets of the past have circled, their coming together in and as the Báb unveiling in their constellated union the Glory of Bahá’u’lláh as the object of their ceaseless yearning. Only, Bahá’u’lláh insists, through the descent of the “Brides of inner meaning,” who are the indwelling spirit of metaphoricity inhabiting as the wise virgins the world’s scriptures, into the sanctified hearts that are prepared to receive them, is the truth of his Revelation unveiled in its multidimensionality, a multidimensionality that Dante, in the concluding canto of his *Paradiso*, metaphorically presents as a multifoliate white rose.

Employing the same metaphor, Bahá’u’lláh addresses humanity as “mortal birds” who, throughout Persian literature, have sung their song of praise to the rose and must now fully inhabit its reality. “Hear Me, ye mortal birds!” proclaims Bahá’u’lláh,

In the Rose Garden of changeless splendor a Flower hath begun to bloom, compared to which every other flower is but a thorn, and before the brightness of Whose glory the very essence of beauty must pale and wither. Arise, therefore, and, with the whole enthusiasm of your hearts, with all the eagerness of your souls, the full fervor of your will, and the concentrated efforts of your entire being, strive to attain the paradise of His presence, and endeavor to inhale the fragrance of the incorruptible Flower, to breathe the sweet savors of holiness, and to obtain a portion of this perfume of celestial glory. Whoso followeth this counsel will break his chains asunder, will taste the abandonment of enraptured love, will attain unto his heart’s desire, and will surrender his soul into the hands of his Beloved. Bursting through his cage, he will, even as the bird of the spirit, wing his flight to his holy and everlasting nest. (*Gleanings* 320–21)

The union of the nightingale and the rose, a recurrent metaphor in Persian poetry, here becomes the metaphor of the soul’s union with the Manifestation. In this

union, the soul enters the everlasting nest of the ceaselessly unfolding Word, a nest that is the wedding chamber into which the long-expected bridegroom takes the waiting virgins whose lamps are filled with oil. To enter this metaphorical realm, the eternal home of the soul, is the purpose of all the world's scriptures. The recognition of this ascension from the physical to the spiritual, the literal to the metaphorical, as an evolutionary process within the creation and within a human history that has now completed the earthly phase of its progressive revelation is a recognition that resides as "the hidden and treasured Gem" (*Gleanings* 30) in the inmost sanctuary of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation.

The Earth as "the seat of [God's] mighty throne" (*Gleanings* 30) has rendered material evolution a part of Progressive Revelation, matter itself now standing unveiled as a manifestation of the same divine energy that propels the soul to its eternal union with the Word. In the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, scripture now embraces the entire multifoliate creation "regenerated and made new" (*Gleanings* 27) by a new outpouring of the Word. To reject this outpouring is to convert its energy to destructive ends that are in their ultimate nihilism unthinkable only because they would include an end to human thought itself, an end that, in the words of Bahá'u'lláh, would leave "the Creator without a creation" (*Gleanings* 151). That the Creator will not be so left resides in the "providence" that "calamity" is, God's love for the creation being greater than any human effort to destroy it. Precisely for this reason, the disciples of Bahá'u'lláh in their long obligatory prayer repeat: "Look not upon my hopes and my doings, nay rather look upon Thy will that hath encompassed the heavens and the earth" (*Bahá'í Prayers* 8–9). In the pure metaphoricity of the Word, that encompassing will is progressively unveiled as Bahá'u'lláh, the glory of God.

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