

## Compilation: Writers and Writing

### Introduction

The importance of the written word in the Bahá'í religion was established in its first moments. Bahá'u'lláh received this assurance in a dream while incarcerated in the Black Pit: “Verily, We shall render Thee victorious by Thyself and by Thy Pen.”<sup>1</sup> While exhortation unsupported by action is considered empty, Bahá'ís regard as worthy the delivery of words that inspire, educate, and transform.

Bahá'u'lláh frequently refers to the power of words and the impact of speech: “If it be Our pleasure,” he wrote, “We shall render the Cause victorious through the power of a single word from Our presence... However since Our loving providence surpasseth all things, We have ordained that complete victory should be achieved through speech and utterance, that Our servants throughout the earth may thereby become the recipients of divine good.”<sup>2</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh guided his followers in the development of apologetic skills, best exemplified by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. In *The Secret of Divine Civilization*,<sup>3</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá skilfully balances social analysis with spiritual exposition, using language that epitomized Bahá'u'lláh's call for a style of communication replete with tact, wisdom, fairness, and integrity. In 1933, Shoghi Effendi stated, “What the Faith needs, even more than teachers, is books that expound the true significance of its principles in the light of modern thought and social problems.”<sup>4</sup> Several writers, including Mirzá Abu'l-Faḍl, John Esslemont, and George Townshend reached standards of excellence.

The present compilation, *Extracts from the Bahá'í Writings on the Subject of Writers and Writing*, indicates that there has been a consistent stream of advice for Bahá'í writers for more than a century. Bahá'u'lláh enjoins the use of words in which “lie hid the property of milk” (#1). Holding fast to the “Root of Knowledge, and to Him Who is the Fountain thereof” (#2) protects the writer from weighing the book of God with “the standards current amongst men.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá takes up the theme with his call for language that should be “moderate, tempered and infinitely courteous” (#7), wherein “conclusive and brilliant proofs” should be adduced (#8). Elsewhere, the Universal House of Justice has written that “Content, volume, style, tact, wisdom, timeliness” will lead to the birth of an “etiquette of expression worthy of the approaching maturity of the human race.”<sup>5</sup>

Shoghi Effendi's guidance contained here is directed to the specific questions put by writers. One correspondent displays extraordinary literal-mindedness—do shorthand

<sup>1</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1941) 21.

<sup>2</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, “Lawh-i-Siyyid-i-Mihdíy-i-Dahají,” *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978) 197-198.

<sup>3</sup> Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1957.

<sup>4</sup> From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 6 May 1933 cited in *Unfolding Destiny* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981) 431.

<sup>5</sup> The Universal House of Justice, *Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1989).

or typing constitute “sciences that begin and end in words” (#13)? Another seeks advice on whether writing fiction may be regarded as an appropriate means of spreading the Bahá'í Faith (#15). Some correspondents are clearly seeking the Guardian's approval for a piece of work they have submitted to him (#14), or asking whether following a career as a writer or journalist is appropriate (#16,18,19). It is, of course, important to weigh up these responses in the light of the context of the question asked, and the specific needs of the Faith at the time of answering. At the beginning of this new century when the cultural expression of Bahá'í ideas and values is likely to diversify enormously, one can certainly anticipate the important contribution of Bahá'í writers, cultivating their unique vision, maintaining their personal integrity, producing works which can stand alongside the best of contemporary writing, and as a result, introduce thousands of readers to Bahá'í thought. Many examples from the last thirty years attest to the impact of excellent writing within the Faith, such as the descriptions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Roger White's *A Sudden Music* and *The Diary of Juliet Thompson*,<sup>6</sup> and the brilliant artistry of Marzieh Gail's memoir in the final three chapters of *Arches of the Years*<sup>7</sup> which create for the reader an emotional bond with Shoghi Effendi, unattainable by conventional, factual descriptions.

The challenge for Bahá'í communities is to value and recognise the contribution of writers, in common with other artists and scholars, who may not necessarily conform to expectations. The African American poet Robert Hayden found becoming a Bahá'í extremely difficult because “he was not a group person.”<sup>8</sup> Insult was added when the chairperson of a poetry recital that Hayden was giving, asked the award-winning poet, “But what have you done in the way of Bahá'í service?”<sup>9</sup>

This compilation may not only help writers discover their voice but Bahá'í communities to discover their writers. Poet Roger White, addressing a group of youth at the Bahá'í world centre, expressed his “conviction that in the future, increasingly, one important measure of the spiritual maturity and health of the Bahá'í world community will be its capacity to attract and win the allegiance of artists of all kinds, and its sensitivity and imaginativeness in making creative use of them...To the degree the Bahá'í community views its artists as a gift rather than a problem will it witness the spread of the Faith ‘like wildfire’ as promised by Shoghi Effendi, through their talents being harnessed to the dissemination of the spirit of the Cause.”<sup>10</sup> Disseminating the spirit through the pen returns us once more to the promise voiced in the Black Pit of all things being made new through the regenerative power of words.

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<sup>6</sup> Oxford: George Ronald, 1983, and Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1983.

<sup>7</sup> Oxford: George Ronald, 1991.

<sup>8</sup> John Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1984) 17.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>10</sup> Roger White, “Bring Chocolate – Advice from a Poet,” in *The Language of There* (Richmond, BC: New Leaf Publishing, 1992) 79-80.