

The Silences of God: A Meditation

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Abstract

The impact of the Word of God has dominated the history of religion and our definition of the evolving maturation of humankind. But in an age in which the power of words has been systematically eroded and the orthodoxy of language has been questioned, it may be that our awareness of God's silence is essential in shaping our individual choices and defining our collective histories. This essay explores some of the ways that Divine silence is inferred in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and offers a meditation on how it plays a vital role in helping us understand His words.

Resumé

L'influence du Verbe de Dieu a dominé l'histoire de la religion et notre définition de l'évolution de l'humanité vers sa maturité. Mais, à une époque où le pouvoir des mots subit une érosion systématique et où l'orthodoxie du langage est remise en question, notre conscience du silence de Dieu pourrait bien jouer un rôle déterminant dans l'orientation de nos choix personnels et de notre expérience collective. Dans le présent essai, l'auteur explore certaines allusions au silence divin que nous trouvons dans les écrits de Bahá'u'lláh et il propose une réflexion sur la façon dont ce silence joue un rôle vital dans notre compréhension de Sa Parole.

Resuman

El impacto de la Palabra de Dios ha dominado la historia de la religión y nuestra definición de la madurez en evolución de la humanidad. Sin embargo, en una edad en que el poder de las palabras ha sido sistemáticamente erosionado y la ortodoxia del lenguaje ha sido cuestionada, podría ser que nuestra consciencia acerca del silencio de Dios sea esencial en moldear nuestras selecciones individuales y al definir nuestras historias colectivas. Este ensayo explora algunas de las maneras en que el silencio Divino es inferido en los escritos de Bahá'u'lláh y ofrece una meditación sobre cómo el mismo juega un rol vital en ayudarnos a entender Sus palabras.

“The silence of the unsaid,” according to John Berger, “is always working surreptitiously with another silence, which is that of the unsayable. What is unsaid one time,” he continues, “can be said on another occasion. But the unsayable can never be said—unless maybe in a prayer.”¹ The Argentinian writer Borges, who was blind, believed that to have a word for “silence” at all was an aesthetic event, if not actually a prayer. And if speech was to be “right” according to the poet W. B. Yeats, it might only be “after long silence.” That may be why Hamlet died with the words, “The rest is silence” on his lips, after four and a half hours of talk, in spite of which critics of the play have been chattering about what he meant for the past five centuries.

1 Preface to Timothy O'Grady, *I Could Read the Sky*.

And in keeping with the words of poets and other tragic heroes, my brother once told me that he wondered when God might one day send us a Manifestation of His Silence—"Just for a change," he added, "because we never seem to listen to His words." But I am going to ignore all this good advice. Despite Bahá'u'lláh's warning that "[t]he essence of true safety is to observe silence [and] look at the end of things" (*Tablets* 156), I shall take the risk of speaking about the impact of God's silences on us and of writing about how His words can, and perhaps must, ultimately render us mute.

God's silences have always pre-empted our words. Poets have tried to fill them. Philosophers have sought to question them. Theologians of all cloths have attempted to define their dazzling darknesses. The history of religion itself, like the science of cosmology, is as thick as the spangled night sky with the silences between the stars. Sometimes these gaps have been seen as challenges to our awareness, creative challenges that enable us to aspire to seek that wholeness we call "truth." At other times, they have been interpreted as contradictions in the world and in ourselves, incongruities that can never be resolved and that remind us of the endlessness of humility. We have all failed, by and large, to gauge these breathless immensities. We have either repeated each other's errors in different languages or have disagreed with them using different metaphors, or we have simply echoed

the assumptions of our predecessors regarding these huge vacuities. And in the end, as Eliot says, "And what there is to conquer / . . . has already been discovered / Once or twice, what there is to conquer has already been discovered / Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope / To emulate" ("East Coker," v., ll. 11-14).² We have invariably misunderstood.

But perhaps all our theologies, like our ancient astrologies, have been constructed on fictitious constellations. Perhaps our attempts to understand the wheeling mysteries of God have been built, like the Ptolemaic universe, in ignorance of these subtle black holes in our understanding, which can only be filled gradually, and over time. The study of religion has traditionally been based on meditations of Holy Scripture. But perhaps a meditation on the silences between these holy words will bring us closer to the fundamental unity underlying our faiths. All religions are equally concerned with the interpretation of Divine silence. They all direct our attention to its infallible mysteries and claim to hold the key to its understanding.

They all caution us, too, about its impact, about its import on our lives. It is recorded, in *The Book of Revelation* that, after the seventh seal was broken, God withdrew into His silence for the length of half an hour. It must have been the most unbearable half hour in all creation. A single moment more and the universe would have imploded.

2 Quartet no. 2 of the *Four Quartets*.

Certainly it was sufficient to render the angels mad. But there is much to be learned from that brief half hour. It is a reminder that, contrary to received opinion, God is not actually all that voluble. He does not, generally speaking, waste words. His messages are brief; His silences much longer than His passages among us. In fact, His reticence is as significant as His Revelation—both contain secret wisdoms, mysteries that require our deepest meditation.

Indeed, if we compare the book of Revelation with the book of Creation, there appears at first glance to be considerably more surplus in the latter. Whether due to human obtuseness or some graver mystery, God's words tend to double up, like puns or reversible clothing, and seem to serve more than one purpose at a time. They reach beyond evolutionary utilitarianism, like wonder, like beauty, or, as Nabokov noted, like a butterfly's wings. Perhaps this is another meaning of divine economy: the exquisite capacity of God's silences to resonate with the alternative meanings of His words.

When He does speak, His intervention in human affairs is not only creative but destructive, too. We are revived by the breeze of His presence: we are restored, resurrected, rendered vivid to our selves whenever He passes by. But our lives are simultaneously reduced to rubble by the resonance of His comings, the echo left by His goings: our theories

are invalidated, our suppositions swept aside, our institutions and ideologies all undermined by the impact of what He has told us. His utterances, moreover, are not only brief but long term in their effects—so vast that they stretch beyond the grasp of human minds; so dense and packed with meaning, so gnomic and enigmatic in their import that it takes millennia to unpick the knots, break open the seals, and understand them. He comes among us intermittently, traces His Will briefly on our human shores, and leaves us measuring His tracks in the sands for centuries.

"In My presence amongst you," writes Bahá'u'lláh, "there is a wisdom, and in My absence there is yet another, inscrutable to all but God, the Incomparable, the All-Knowing" (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ¶53, 39). A sigh from the Ancient of Days can cause each atom to acquire its own unique and separate character. A breath from His lips can set the fires of hell ablaze and open paradise before men's eyes. Meaning is blasted into a thousand pieces by one syllable from Him, and words, stripped naked by the stroke of His Pen, are sent scuttling into the world, like monks shorn of their old habits. We live and die as He breathes through our collective histories. For He is the Cleaver, the Ravager, the Inflictor of Trials. He is the supreme Love and the Slayer of lovers, all in one.

THE DEATH OF WORDS

End-of-the-world vocabulary strikes an ominously repetitive note in the human ear. We are fatally familiar with it. We have heard it all before. But although we like to believe that each of these turning points in history is hyperbolically unique and each end absolute, no resurrection is entire, no rebirth final. We seem to be afflicted, as a species, by an inclination toward the supremacy fallacy, that fatal propensity to imagine ourselves chosen to be the first or doomed to be the last, to assume we are unique and believe ourselves to be the only. But beginnings and ends have always involved re-interpretation. Turning points in human history have invariably coincided with inquiries into language and a questioning of words. Clichés have to die in order for poems to be reborn.

And we do not even need God to tell us this, because poets have done so over and over again. John Donne not only bore witness to the end of an epoch in the seventeenth century, but to the breaking of a poetic tradition, the shattering of meter, the revolution of rhyme:

And new philosophy calls all in
doubt,
The element of fire is quite put
out,
The sun is lost, and th'earth, and
no man's wit
Can well direct him where to look
for it.
....

'Tis all in pieces, all coherence
gone,
All just supply, and all relation...."
("The Anatomy of the World,"
ll.205-14)³

At the start of the twentieth century, Yeats, too, described a collapse of significance as well as of society; he brooded over the demise not only of Ireland, but of all civilization:

Things fall apart; the centre
cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the
world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed,
and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is
drowned
("The Second Coming." ll.3-6)⁴

And one of the characteristic nightmares of our own times is to find ourselves standing on ground zero of language itself. Not only have culture and tradition given way over the course of two world wars and their rumbling consequences, but the very foundation of words has been eroded. Writers in the Western literary tradition have been pondering this collapse for the past two centuries. We cannot talk

³ *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), Vol. B, pp. 1293-94.

⁴ *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), Vol. F, p. 2036.

without being conscious that we are cloning the same clichés, echoing the same dead phrases. We cannot open our mouths without reiterating the same trivialities. We stand in the rubble of buildings undermined by our own echoes, entertaining ourselves in a vacuum of meaning, “playing,” as Auden put it,

... among the ruined languages
 So small beside their large
 confusing words,
 So still before the greater silences,
 Of dreadful things you did...
 (“Anthem for St. Cecilia’s Day,”
 III, ll.11-14)⁵

We have been raised to dread such “greater silences.” According to the traditional Judeo-Christian and Islamic relationship to God, the disintegration of language, witnessed in the story of the collapsing Tower of Babel, is synonymous with punishment for pride; the death of words is associated with dark and chaotic times before the utterance of the angel Gabriel brought meaning to the world. Since we associate the Word of God with our beginnings, we naturally assume His silence could mean our ends. And since our ends are rarely consummations “devoutly to be wished” but rather a consequence that does not always promise with

⁵ Set to music by Benjamin Britten, Op. 27. privately printed 1941, published one year later as a musical score, New York: Boosey and Hawkes, 1942.

its surcease inevitable success, our immediate response to the silences of God is to feel the heartbeats of terror, the sweat of panic and remorse. Instead of being suffused with awe, we associate these moments with fear and guilt, with the earth-shaking tread of Jove, with the thunderbolts of a forever-wrathful Jehovah.

And so it is that instead of listening to these silences, we rush in and make fools of ourselves by talking. We stuff the absence that intervenes between His brief passages among us with a veritable cacophony of our own. We interpret, analyze, comment, and define. We theorize and theologize the infinite meanings of His Words in the resonating gaps between them. We respond to each moment of God’s infinitely plangent silences with centuries of verbal superfluity and fill the chance to meditate upon them with our chatter.

All nature abhors a vacuum. It is small wonder, then, that human nature will do anything to fill a perceived spiritual void. Our kind, as Eliot avers, “cannot bear very much reality” (“Burnt Norton, I, l.34”).⁶ But reality, as Bahá’u’lláh suggests in His Writings, beckons us into it through the very power of silence. We may be missing the point by not listening.

GOLD AND SILVER

One of the distinctions of this Dispensation may be that Bahá’u’lláh has

⁶ The first of the “Four Quartets.”

invited us to think about the golden silences of God as well as the unsullied silver of His Words. He has drawn our attention to their reciprocity. Perhaps there are as many lessons to be learned from the former as there is guidance implicit in the latter. It may even be that we can only understand the fundamentals of His Covenant in the relationship between the two.

No one can speak and listen simultaneously. Words require silence to be heard. Even the least significant speech, uttered at the most primary level of communication, depends on the assumption that someone is listening. And this is a fundamental law, an absolute prerequisite for communication, which we ignore to our cost, and it is one of the crucial lessons we learn from silence in this Dispensation. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá confirms this principle in *Paris Talks* when He observes, “Bahá’u’lláh says there is a sign [from God] in every phenomenon: the sign of the intellect is contemplation and the sign of contemplation is silence, because it is impossible for a man to do two things at one time—he cannot both speak and meditate” (174).

Silence is therefore essential for understanding. When Bahá’u’lláh writes in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, “Blessed is he who, at the hour of dawn, centring his thoughts on God, occupied with His remembrance, and supplicating His forgiveness, directeth his steps to the *Mashriqu’l-Adhkár* and, entering therein, seateth himself in silence to listen to the verses of God,

the Sovereign, the Mighty, the All-Praised” (¶ 115, 61), He is summoning us to enter into that primary silence. Once the listening soul steps into that sacred space, attunes itself to the remembrance of God, and implores His forgiveness, we become receptive to understanding the Word of God, but only if we give it our undivided attention. And if we are to attend to all the meanings implicit in the Word of God, the purest silence is required.

But it is hard to hear the Voice of the Ancient of Days in the middle of the cacophony of daily life. We are surrounded by noise: the vapid chatter of political campaigns, the rumble of collapsing ideals, the grunts of lust and howls of greed on every side. If we catch His accents behind the uproar, we are lucky. Shoghi Effendi vividly describes this challenge using the metaphor of light and darkness: “Amidst the shadows which are increasingly gathering about us,” he writes, “we can faintly discern the glimmerings of Bahá’u’lláh’s unearthly sovereignty appearing fitfully on the horizon of history” (*World Order* 168).

And the counterpoint between what we see and what we hear, between the shrillness of our age and God’s silences, is depicted by the Guardian in another remarkable sentence. Here, were it not for the *basso ostinato* of God’s Will that keeps the syntax steady, the hiss and spit of our own noise would literally wind around our throats and strangle us:

Mysteriously, slowly, and resistlessly God accomplishes His design, though the sight that meets our eyes in this day be the spectacle of a world hopelessly entangled in its own meshes, utterly careless of the Voice which, for a century, has been calling it to God, and miserably subservient to the siren voices which are attempting to lure it into the vast abyss. (*Promised Day* 116)

We would never have reached the last of these subsidiary clauses had we not kept hold of the main sentence that quietly reminds us that God does and always will accomplish His design.

Silence, in such circumstances as we live, is synonymous with spiritual life. Small wonder, therefore, that in this Dispensation Bahá'u'lláh has annulled the role of the chattering theologian, invalidated the authority of the priest. Our response to God's silence cannot be passive, but neither can it be foisted on others. The principle of autocracy in the Bahá'í Faith lies in the authenticated texts of this religion, in the absolute authority of the words written by its Founder and His appointed Interpreters. No individual can usurp that autocracy; no one has to right to impose his or her personal interpretations of those words over others'. But the principle of democracy also exists, not only in how we vote, nor just in how we consult, or are governed by elected institutions rather than appointed individuals, but also in the way

we listen. Democracy resides in our right to think, to ponder the silences.

Bahá'u'lláh has liberated us to an equality of hearing in this Revelation; He has invited us into a democracy of listening, of meditating on His words. Each one of us has this God-given right, this freedom. In fact, He has granted it as an obligation, a necessity for our spiritual independence. While abrogating individual authority and placing power in His divinely conceived institutions, He has freed us to ponder His meanings, to plunge into the ocean of His Revelation without carrying the burden of influence on others, without being weighed down by individual power. He has literally released us to be lovers rather than priests. The true pearl diver in this age cannot barter what he has found in the marketplace of power because the proof of his treasure lies in the fact that he has drowned.

EARS TO HEAR

But we are not, by nature, inclined to drown. We cling to the dry land of received ideas, the sand and pebbles of inherited notions. We turn our backs on the ocean and become adept at cultivating spiritual deafness, especially when it is too much of a challenge to hear the uncomfortable truth. As a result, there is another kind of silence buried between the words of God, which is caused not only by our inability but by our unwillingness to listen.

There are times, Bahá'u'lláh explains, when God chooses to be silent because of “the impediments that have hindered Thy people from recognizing Thy truth” (*Gleanings* 28). He withholds His Words when He knows we are not listening to them; He speaks only if we are ready to hear, for “words are revealed according to the capacity of the people.” And, as He tells us, with beguiling candour, “as there were few ears to hear, for some time the Pen has been silent in its own chamber, and to such a degree that silence has had precedence over utterance” (*Bahá'í Scriptures* 133).

In the Hidden Words, Bahá'u'lláh goes even further and establishes this reciprocity between the ear and the tongue as a spiritual principle. The method of the Manifestations, in other words, is one which we should emulate: “The wise are they that speak not unless they obtain a hearing, even as the cup-bearer, who proffereth not his cup till he findeth a seeker, and the lover who crieth not out from the depths of his heart until he gazeth upon the beauty of his beloved” (*Hidden Words*, Persian n.36). Such words not only caution us to weigh what we say but invite us to meditate on the reasons for and causes of silence.

God's silences cannot, by their very nature, be fathomed, but the withholding ones caused by our unreadiness to listen, our inability to hear, are worth pondering. To be responsive to the receptivity of the listener, Bahá'u'lláh seems to suggest, can be as eloquent

a proof of truth as the words when they are uttered. He reminds us of the wisdom of this withholding silence by highlighting the relationship of words to time as well as to circumstance: “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). Once we understand this wisdom, our hearts might be more willing to absorb the import of His Words. But until we do so, we are effectively deaf. And our deafness delays the inevitable.

“How manifold are the truths,” He tells us, “which must remain unuttered until the appointed time is come!” (*Gleanings* 176). And even when the right time comes, how often do truths remain unuttered because we are still not listening?

SUFFERING IN SILENCE

Once we do begin to listen, however, we hear new layers in all that God does not say. His silence, we discover to our shame, can be filled with sadness, with disappointment on our account, which is that terrible alternative to His good pleasure.

“O Bond Slave of the World!” writes Bahá'u'lláh in the *Hidden Words*, “Many a dawn hath the breeze of My loving-kindness wafted over thee and found thee upon the bed of heedlessness fast asleep. Bewailing then thy plight it returned whence it came” (Persian n.30).

The sorrow of the Best Beloved and the Friend is more dreadful, perhaps, than the wrath of the Father. Divine displeasure is more difficult for us to bear than any punishment, because it resonates with the silence of God's forbearance, it echoes with His long suffering:

At many a dawn have I turned from the realms of the Placeless unto thine abode, and found thee on the bed of ease busied with others than Myself. Thereupon, even as the flash of the spirit, I returned to the realms of celestial glory and breathed it not in My retreats above unto the hosts of holiness. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, Persian n.28)

It is that "breathed it not" which really confounds us. It is that delicacy of His keeping silent on our account, of His "desiring not" our shame. He would not advertise our faithlessness nor have our stupidity trumpeted before the angels. "And whenever the manifestation of My holiness sought His own abode," He reminds us, "a stranger found He there, and, homeless, hastened unto the sanctuary of the Beloved. Notwithstanding I have concealed thy secret and desired not thy shame" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, Persian n.27).

This sin-covering silence of God has emboldened us, and made us brazen. It has permitted us to persist in our follies to such a degree that we have

gone as far as assuming that God's silence, like the darkness of outer space, is synonymous with a vacuum. If and when we finally realize how plangent it is with sorrow on our behalf, how quiet with patient forgiveness, we may be even more ashamed than if we had been hauled up by the heels and whipped until we cried for mercy. As our understanding of this new Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh evolves, we begin to become unnervingly aware of a very dangerous, very mature kind of silence that lies between His Words.

NO ANSWER CAME THE STERN REPLY

A corollary to the silence of God's sorrow is the silence of His response. It is against that gong that we hear our follies reverberating a hundredfold; it is in that quiet echo that we register the hollowness of our own sounds. God's way of answering our urgent questions with silence is the most painful kind of all.

We are all familiar with that ominous silence that counters our insistent prayers, our anxious beseechings. We are well acquainted with those waves of silence that lap against the dry shores of our shrill demands. We expect a response that suits *our* criteria of logic, *our* perception of reality, *our* immediate needs, and are outraged by its absence. We hurl our indignant requests against the concave sky-blue shell of His ear and become frustrated at the mocking echoes that redound upon us. What we perceive to be the

implacable silence of God's response has provoked us to cynicism as well as to despair.

Indeed, most of twentieth-century literature has been an exploration the pointlessness of asking questions, in inadequacy as well as compulsion in our use of words. The characters of Vladimir and Estragon talk incessantly as they wait for the reply of Godot, which never fully satisfies even when it comes⁷; the Marabar caves in Forster's *A Passage to India* render all words equally meaningless, even as their echoes can be interpreted in a myriad different ways; Joyce has taken incoherence to such heights of creativity in *Finnegans Wake* that language has become a mockery of itself in the absence of any other meaningful game to play. The vacancy underlying words has become a way for contemporary artists to bear witness to our stoicism, and also to our folly as human beings. It sums up the existential as well as aesthetic dilemma of contemporary existence. But interestingly enough, in the Bahá'í Writings we not only explore the futility of asking questions but find confirming answers implicit in this silence.

According to the Báb, these silences are themselves ordained by God and, as such, are an expression of His Will. He states, "O Ye servants of God! Verily, be not grieved if a thing ye asked of Him remaineth unanswered, inasmuch as He hath been commanded by God to observe silence, a silence

which is in truth praiseworthy" (*Selections* 48). Why such a silence is "praiseworthy" is best explained by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who, with an ineffable lightness of touch, reminds us of our total dependence on that Will when He affirms that "He doeth as He doeth, and what recourse have we?" In the last analysis all our fury and frustration is a waste of breath because "He carrieth out His Will, He ordaineth what He pleaseth" (*Selections* 51).

The seeming non-response of God to our appeals is therefore sometimes a clear answer, had we the ears to hear it and the hearts to understand. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá continues to assert, "Then better for thee to bow down thy head in submission, and put thy trust in the All-Merciful Lord" (*Selections* 51). For if we listened to the resonance beneath this kind of silence we might realize that the demands we have been making, the requirements we have set, the logic by which means we seek to measure God's response can only reap disappointment at best, or bring us harm at worse. They echo with the folly of our demands. His silences, in this case, are a mercy to our own selves. They are the equivalent of pure compassion.

AT A LOSS FOR WORDS

Ironically enough, the knowledge of such silences can, in the last analysis, strike us dumb. When the ear of the spirit inclines in their direction and we begin to hear all that is in these silences of God, another wind stirs in the

⁷ See Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*.

soul, another note strikes the bone. “It behooveth you to remain silent before His Throne,” observes the Báb, “for indeed of all the things which have been created between heaven and earth nothing on that Day will be deemed more fitting than the observance of silence” (*Selections* 164).

For the silences as well as the words of God have a curious impact on the uproar in our heads. They can leave us at a loss for words. They can render us mute. When we listen to them, we hear something beyond the actual sounds and syllables. When we stop our ears to our own noises, some unspoken understanding is communicated to us that rises out of our darkness like a murmuring remembrance. As Bahá'u'lláh states in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*,

When the stream of utterance reached this stage, We beheld, and lo! the sweet savours of God were being wafted from the day-spring of Revelation. . . . It made all things new, and brought unnumbered and inestimable gifts from the unknowable Friend. The robe of human praise can never hope to match Its noble stature, and Its shining figure the mantle of utterance can never fit. Without word It unfoldeth the inner mysteries, and without speech It revealeth the secrets of the divine sayings. (59)

Once our human noises are momentarily hushed, once the voices we

contain are muted, we find our definitions dissolving, our languages disintegrating. All words tend toward self-destruction, but God destroys words absolutely in order to recreate them. His silence, too, absorbs all other sounds into itself and turns them into music: “Be ye not sad nor dejected on account of the disturbance and uproar of the people of desire and passion,” writes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. “Ere long the symphony of the Kingdom shall silence all the other noises” (*Tablets*, vol. 1, 223).

Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh urges the true seeker to free himself from all acquired meanings, to purge his heart of all idle fancies and false assumptions. He urges us to strip away the shadow of words that cloud our understanding of their spirit, for when “the mention of God hath become an empty name” and “His holy Word a dead letter” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 29), it is necessary to breathe a new creativity into it through the arteries of language.

When the connotations of words thicken with use and abuse, we react to their “shadows” merely and lose sight of their “spirits” altogether, as the Báb infers:

The reason for this command is that haply, in the Day of the Revelation of that supreme Truth, the feet of the people shall not falter upon the bridge, and that they shall not pronounce judgment against the Fashioner of their existence, adducing against Him the

very shadow of His verse in their heart, and rendering naught, and at once, all their inmost realities and deeds, without even perceiving it. (Persian Bayán 6:8; qtd. in Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart* 37)

And therefore must each new revelation cast aside the definitions of the old, like outworn robes. We must strip ourselves to seek for truth, not only humbled and in silence, but quite naked: “O brother,” Bahá’u’lláh writes in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*,

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. (158)

In the final analysis, this “new” nakedness is the only attire that is relatively imperishable on this side of the grave. Like silence, such a divestment of old garments is actually what renders us immortal. We may have imagined that writing words would eternalize us, but ironically enough, it is unadorned by words that we might live forever.

THE TOUCHSTONE

“Ponder this in thine heart” (*Gleanings* 46, 76; and *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 125, 149, 167), writes Bahá’u’lláh repeatedly, and “meditate” on the Word of God. The act of pondering, of meditating, has traditionally been depicted as a thoughtful one, an inward-turning one. It has implied a certain conjunction of body and mind that indicates poise, that implies a quiet control and a steadiness of concentration which is both physical and spiritual. In this state of inward and outward listening we reach for the touchstone of understanding. Sometimes, by grace, we attain it. And the thrill is eternal.

The well-known icon of the Western meditative tradition, that of a man contemplating a death’s head, contains its own inherent thrill. The mirroring of skulls, the eyeing of the hollow eyed has always hinted at the possible reversal of the roles. If Rodin’s statue *The Thinker* and Mona Lisa’s smile still hold their power over us, it is presumably because of this. When the observer becomes aware of being observed, a shudder passes through him. A perturbation seizes his mind. He is filled with dread that perhaps he is the one who is actually being read. That awareness is a step in the direction of true understanding.

Religion, like art, points toward that heightened self-awareness. By telling us to “ponder” and to “meditate” on the Word of God, Bahá’u’lláh is giving us the key to a new and hidden language.

For it seems that when God splits the stone tablets of His silence, His Word actually gives utterance to us. It reverses our position as speakers, as wordmongers, and forces upon us the uneasy recognition that we ourselves have been breathed forth, that we are the ones being interpreted, even as we speak. “Yea,” Bahá’u’lláh confirms, in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, “such things as throw consternation into the hearts of all men come to pass only that each soul may be tested by the touchstone of God, that the true may be known and distinguished from the false” (52).

Whenever multiple meanings are at work, language permits and delights in irony. And whenever words contain irony, they retain elasticity, they resist literalism and obfuscation. When language invites us to play games with perspective and scale, with appearance and reality, it keeps our minds and spirits alive, it jolts us out of our old habits. And the myriad silences contained between the words of God are perhaps the most creative use of irony in the world, for they force us to question all our assumptions, all our habits.

Bahá’u’lláh affirms that,

the Birds of Heaven and Doves of Eternity speak a twofold language. One language, the outward language, is devoid of allusions, is unconcealed and unveiled. . . . The other language is veiled and concealed, so that whatever lieth hidden in the heart . . . may be made manifest. This is the divine

standard, this is the Touchstone of God, wherewith He proveth His servants. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 254)

In a letter⁸ to the Universal House of Justice, the Research Department at the Bahá’í World Center notes, “[R]ecent scholars . . . assert that, within the Qur’án itself, the form of humour most prevalent is irony.” This irony it defines as “the perception of a clash between appearance and reality, between the ideal and what actually is.” Only when we respond to this divine irony—only when we are conscious of what is concealed and what is revealed—do we begin to grasp the fundamental purpose of the Word of God. As long as we cannot hear the silences between His words and the ironies in both, we will not recognize their echoes in ourselves. As long as we cannot see these multiple layers and simultaneous scales of significance, we will be deprived of their creative power. This Word and Its silent shadow, sifts and fashions and shapes us—It is the divine assayer of our souls.

Indeed, in order to prove this very truth to us, the Manifestations of the Word of God submit themselves to the most grievous ordeals and allow themselves to be harrowed by the greatest tests of all. “It is Thou, O my God, Who hast called me into being through the power of Thy might, and hast endued me with Thy

⁸ Memorandum titled “The ‘Humorist’” 12 Jan. 1997.

grace to manifest Thy Cause,” attests Bahá'u'lláh in one of His prayers. “Wherefore I have been subjected to such adversities that my tongue hath been hindered from extolling Thee and from magnifying Thy glory” (*Prayers and Meditations* 208).

What must it mean for these extraordinary Beings Who know better than anyone the impossibility of comprehending God's Word, to have to be the Ones Who utter it?

The domain of His decree is too vast for the tongue of mortals to describe, or for the bird of the human mind to traverse; and the dispensations of His providence are too mysterious for the mind of man to comprehend. His creation no end hath overtaken, and it... will continue to the “End that knoweth no end.” Ponder this utterance in thine heart, and reflect how it is applicable unto all these holy Souls. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 167)

When Bahá'u'lláh writes of the Word of God summoning Him to speech, the darkness from which It rises not only perturbs His rational mind but seizes upon Him, like an involuntary Will. “Had it been in my power,” He writes, “I would have, under no circumstances, consented to distinguish myself amongst men.” But when He chooses to hold His peace, “lo, the voice of the Holy Ghost, standing on my right hand, aroused me, and the Supreme Spirit appeared before my

face, and Gabriel overshadowed me, and the Spirit of Glory stirred within my bosom, bidding me arise and break my silence” (*Gleanings* 103). Although He calls on God “with a stammering tongue” and with an “afflicted pen” (*Prayers and Meditations* 8), were He to keep silent, He says, every hair on His head would vibrate with its music, each bone of His body would flute with its song, His very blood would sing: “Glorified art Thou, O Lord my God! My tongue, both the tongue of my body and the tongue of my heart, my limbs and members, every pulsating vein within me, every hair of my head, all proclaim that Thou art God, and that there is none other God beside Thee” (*Prayers and Meditations* 112).

Those Who are the Embodiments of His Names and Attributes not only endure the paradoxes implicit in God's mysterious Will, but contain them. The mysterious mingling of Their divine and human nature symbolizes the ultimate irony of God. What could be more perturbing than this duality? When people “discover suddenly,” as Bahá'u'lláh says in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, “that a Man, Who hath been living in their midst, Who, with respect to every human limitation, hath been their equal, had risen to abolish every established principle imposed by their Faith—they would of a certainty be veiled and hindered from acknowledging His truth” (74).

No wonder the Manifestations of God in every age pose the ultimate test for the human race: “Verily, God

caused not this turmoil but to test and prove His servants” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 51). We are perturbed by the nature of these living symbols and metaphors. We can barely understand heaven and earth, but “whatever lieth between them,” namely the Manifestations themselves, remains the ultimate enigma. These divine Embodiments speak only in veiled language about their dual nature. In the last analysis the Word of God offers no rational explanation to Their mystery, and we are left to respond in the silences, “inasmuch as the divine Purpose hath decreed that the true should be known from the false, and the sun from the shadow, He hath, therefore, in every season sent down upon mankind the showers of tests from His realm of glory” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 53).

And so, the final purpose of God’s silences is to test us. It is the touchstone whose ambiguities destroy and undermine our facile interpretations. It is a double-edged sword that has been tempered, like steel, in the fires of paradox. And the fact that these divine paradoxes, in turn, test our understanding may be implicit in Bahá’u’lláh words, in the *Ma’idiy-i-Asmani*, in which He anticipates a different “proof” in the next Dispensation than what we have been led to expect from those of the past. “As My previous Manifestation decreed that the proof of My Dispensation should be the revelation of divine verses,” He states,

We therefore . . . made Our verses testimonies for all to witness. . . . However, in this Dispensation, the one True God—Glorified be His Name—hath purposed that most of the believers who are wholly devoted to Him should speak in the language of divine verses. Therefore, we have ordained that a proof other than the revelation of divine verses be produced to vindicate the truth of the next Manifestation.” (Vol. IV, 93; provisional trans.)

Clearly the significance of words has been so democratized in this age that new proofs must be found to communicate the Primal Will to humankind. I do not know whether this is an indication that we will one day probe the silences of God in prose rather than verse, or whether my brother was prophetic, after all, in suggesting that in some future dispensation, a female Manifestation of God might appear, simply smile, and say nothing at all. But certainly we shall be tested by whatever is “other than the revelation of divine verses.”

And with that thought, I will for my own safety’s sake, “observe silence,” “look at the end of things,” and “renounce the world” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 156).

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