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'Abdu'l-Bahá and Ezra Pound's Circle

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Abstract
The beginning of the twentieth century saw the emergence in the West of new and revolutionary movements in both literature and religion. Viewing themselves as the harbingers of a new age, these movements frequently found expression in terms of a radical break with the past as well as a resurgence of dormant powers and traditions. Their paths frequently intersected: sometimes in well-publicized confrontations or much-discussed collaborations, just as often through fleeting personal contacts that were little noted by most of the world. This paper examines an example of the latter type of contact, albeit one that has extensive and fascinating ramifications. The event in question is the meeting between Ezra Pound, the famous American modernist poet, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Investigation of the contact 'Abdu'l-Bahá had with Pound reveals links between the Bahá'í Faith and a number of important avant-garde circles in the West, and thereby sheds light on hitherto unexplored areas of religious and literary history.

Résumé
Le début du XXe siècle a vu naître en Occident des mouvements nouveaux et révolutionnaires, tant dans le domaine des belles-lettres que dans celui de la religion. Ces mouvements, qui se voyaient comme les précurseurs d'un âge nouveau, se manifestaient souvent par une rupture radicale du passe ainsi que par la réémergence de pouvoirs et de traditions alors tenues en veilleuse. Leurs chemins bien souvent se croisaient cela se manifestait dans certains cas par des confrontations ou des collaborations notoires, mais cela pouvait aussi prendre la forme de brefs contacts personnels qui demeuraient peu connus de la plupart du monde. L'auteur se penche sur l'un de ces contacts personnels qui, bien que passe inaperçu, a néanmoins eu des répercussions à la fois étendues et fascinantes. II s'agit, en l'occurrence, d'une rencontre qui eut lieu entre Ezra Pound, le célèbre poète américain moderniste, et 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Un examen approfondi de la rencontre de ces deux êtres fail découvrir des liens entre la foi bahá'íe et un certain nombre de cercles avant-gardistes d'envergure en Occident, et met en lumière des parties de l'histoire religieuse et littéraire jusque-là inexplorées.

Resumen
El comienzo del siglo veinte se caracterizó por el surgimiento de movimientos nuevos y revolucionarios tanto en la literatura como en la religión. Considerándose ellos mismos como precursores de una nueva época, estos movimientos con frecuencia conseguían desarrollar sus propósitos al margen de un rompimiento drástico con lo del pasado o mediante el resurgimiento de poderes y tradiciones anteriormente en desuso. Ocasionalmente sus caminos se cruzaban, a veces en altercados ampliamente difundidos o en muy discutidas colaboraciones, o por últimas valiéndose de contactos personales considerados de poca importancia por el resto del mundo. Esta disertación estudia un ejemplo de este último tipo de encuentro cuyos resultados fueron extensos e interesantísimos. El acontecimiento referido es el encuentro del famoso poeta modernista norteamericano Ezra Pound con 'Abdu'l-Bahá. La investigación de la reunión que sostuvo

‘Abdu’l-Bahá con Pound trae a luz los vínculos entre la Fe Bahá’í y otras esferas de vanguardia importantes, iluminando sectores anteriormente no explorados de la historia religiosa y literaria.

The Bahá’í Teachings and the Intellectual Milieu of Modernism

Perhaps the most influential movement in literature and art in the first half of the twentieth century was that of modernism. Drawing on such intellectual precursors as Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, the modernists questioned many of the traditional modes of social organization, religion, and morality, as well as conceptions of the human self that were at the basis of Western culture. They experimented with new forms and styles of writing that would “render contemporary disorder, often contrasting it to a lost order that had been based on the religion and myths of the cultural past” (Abrams, *Glossary* 109). Although modernism was at its height following the First World War, its foundations were being laid from the early part of the century by avant-garde artists and authors who were undertaking, in Ezra Pound’s phrase, “to make it new” (quoted in Abrams, *Glossary* 109).

Certainly the most influential religious movement to come to the West during this early period in the rise of modernism was the Bahá’í Faith. From its early days, the Bahá’í Faith had attracted the attention of Westerners. As early as 1865, orientalists such as Comte de Gobineau, Lord Curzon, A.-L.-M. Nicolas and Edward Granville Browne began taking great interest in the development of the Bábí and later the Bahá’í Faith. In 1894, Ibrahim Kheiralla, a Syrian Bahá’í, settled in Chicago and began systematically to teach the cause he had espoused, achieving remarkable success. Although later he defected from the religion, many of those he first introduced to Bahá’í teachings came to be among the most devoted followers of Bahá’u’lláh and further spread the Bahá’í Faith to England and Canada.

By 1911, there were a number of Bahá’í communities in centers through much of Europe and across most of North America. However, it was ‘Abdu’l-Bahá who was instrumental in establishing the new religion in the West. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, recently released from prison, was finally able to respond to the Western Bahá’ís’ repeated appeals and embarked, despite his advanced age and broken health, on a three-year journey to Egypt, Europe, and North America.

He first arrived in London on 4 September 1911. After a stay of about a month, he went to Paris, where he stayed for nine weeks. He sailed to New York the following March and travelled from coast to coast during an eight-month tour. He arrived back in England in December, 1912, and proceeded to travel in Europe before returning home to Haifa on 5 December 1913.

During his extensive travels, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá met a great many socially prominent people. One of the most interesting and significant of these meetings, however, has until now gone without notice or comment. This is ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s meeting with American poet Ezra Pound (1885-1972) in London, on 28 September 1911. As one of the founders of the Imagist school of poetry, a champion of the modernist movement, and a patron of many important literary figures, Pound is recognized as one of the central figures in the twentieth century revolution in poetry. The lack of comment on his meeting with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is perhaps due to the fact that the meeting was an isolated incident which appeared to have little influence on subsequent events in the lives of either ‘Abdu’l-Bahá or Pound. However, Pound not only referred to the meeting, although briefly, in several letters, he also incorporated it into his major poetic work, *The Cantos*.

Ezra Pound met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on the latter’s first trip to England. This fact by itself would perhaps not be particularly significant were it not for a certain common ground between ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s message and some of Pound’s ideas. As a world religion, the Bahá’í Faith “upholds the

unity of God, recognizes the unity of His Prophets, and inculcates the principle of the oneness and wholeness of the human race" (Shoghi Effendi, *Faith* 8), a principle it seeks to realize through laws and teachings for the individual as well as an administrative order for society as a whole. However, like all religions, it also has strong mystic elements that deal with humanity's spiritual life and the operations of divine revelation in the world. This latter concern, with spiritual matters is shared to some extent by various occult movements, especially many that flourished at the turn of the century.

The Bahá'í Faith and Occult Movements at the Turn of the Century

Pound was deeply interested in the occult and became more intimately associated with it when he emigrated from the United States to England. Both his poetry and prose express, often in esoteric terms, his mystical views. This aspect of his thought has not been widely recognized and has received scholarly attention only recently. Many of the people and publications with which both Pound and 'Abdu'l-Bahá had some contact are, to varying degrees, related to occult circles.

One of the central concepts of the Bahá'í Faith, affirming the oneness of divine truth, is that of progressive revelation. In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "The religion of God is one religion, but it must ever be renewed" (*Selections* 52). The prophets of God are all mediators between God and humanity, and they have all taught the same essential truths. Through the passage of time, however, religions "change from their original foundation, the truth of the Religion of God entirely departs, and the spirit of it does not stay; heresies appear, and it becomes a body without a soul. That is why it is renewed" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 166). The Bahá'í Faith teaches that knowledge of God is available to all those who accept and obey the words of God as revealed through the divine religion for each age.

There are obvious parallels to this idea among occultists. One group which voiced a belief in a single truth that unites all cultures was the Quest Society. G. R. S. Mead, initially secretary to Madame Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophical Society, split with Annie Besant, Blavatsky's successor, and formed the Quest Society in 1910. He published many articles in *The Quest*, for instance those of Jessie Weston, which argued for the persistence of ancient traditions that had once been the expressions of divine revelation. Expressed in ancient times through ritual, but later suppressed and driven underground, these traditions still survive in secret, unknown to all but the initiate. Pound's "Psychology and Troubadours," first published in *The Quest* in 1912, articulates a similar position by maintaining that Provençal troubadours developed their own unofficial mysticism and safeguarded it against the oppressive rule of the Church by cultivating an esoteric tradition kept secret from all but a select few. The emphasis here is on the ecstatic experiences of individuals who are initiated into the inner mysteries of the occult. This is very different from the Bahá'í approach, which has no rituals and no initiation rites, secret or otherwise. Still the belief in a truth that survives or is renewed throughout history is certainly a point of agreement between the two groups.

The Quest welcomed "contributions which exemplify the investigation and comparative study of religion, philosophy and science as complementary to one another in aiding the search for that reality which alone can give complete satisfaction" (Mead, "The Quest" 290). Strangely, it made no mention of 'Abdu'l-Bahá during his stay in London, although harmony between science and religion and the investigation of truth were themes upon which he expounded frequently in his talks. There are, however, two interesting articles that appeared in *The Quest* just before 'Abdu'l-Bahá's arrival. One is an essay by Wellesley Tudor-Pole, entitled "The Passing of Major P.," which

discusses spiritual life, the ethereal body, and related mystical topics. What is of interest is that in September that year, Tudor-Pole was present at the City Temple, Holbom, where ‘Abdu’l-Bahá gave his first public address. He spoke in Persian and “the translation was afterwards read by Mr. W. Tudor-Pole” (*Christian Commonwealth*). Tudor-Pole had previously met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Egypt in 1910 and was later his host in Bristol. A devoted admirer, he later exerted every effort in his capacity as a major in the British army stationed in Palestine to ensure ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s safety during World War I.

Another article that appeared in *The Quest* in July 1911 was the record of a general meeting of the Quest Society held on 23 March 1911. The topic of the meeting had been “Can any great religion admit spiritual equality with other great religions?” The proceedings are fully recorded and show that spokesmen for the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim viewpoints were Claude G. Montefiore, Rev. Roland Corbet, and Syed Ameer Ali, respectively. All were progressive and open-minded exponents of their religious traditions and well known and respected in their fields.

Montefiore was among the speakers when nearly 500 people gathered at Passmore Edwards’ Settlement, Tavistock Place, on 29 September to hear ‘Abdu’l-Bahá speak of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings:

> He brought the light of guidance to the world. . . . He sought to destroy the foundations of religious and racial prejudice and of political rivalry. He likened the world of humanity to a tree, and all the nations to its branches and the people to its leaves, buds and fruits. (*‘Abdu’l-Baha in London* 37)

Afterwards, “Mr. Claude Montefiore . . . rejoiced in the growth of the spirit of unity, and regarded that meeting as prophetic of the better time to come” (*‘Abdu’l-Baha in London* 35). Ameer Ali met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s second visit to England when he spoke at the Woking mosque in Surrey on 18 January 1913. He was followed by Ali, “member of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, who paid Him high tribute” (Balyuzi, *‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 370-71). Corbet was also among those who called on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 285).

New Age was another literary magazine whose editor, A. R. Orage, had occult interests. He first started his magazine with financing from George Bernard Shaw and Lewis Wallace, both of whom had theosophical leanings. Pound, whose “Patria Mia” first appeared in *New Age*, was a regular contributor; the magazine was in fact his “principal source of financial support since 1911” (Surette, *A Light* 80). “Notes of the Week,” a regular column written by Orage himself, includes the following entry for 21 September 1911:

> Seeds of strange religions are wafted from time to time on our shores. But fortunately or unfortunately, they do not find the soil in us in which to flourish. . . . The latest to land in public is Bahaism, of which, indeed many of us have heard in private these many years. (484)

The comments coincide with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s arrival in London. It is clear that Orage had had some previous contact with the Bahá’í Faith although he makes no other mention of it in his column during the remainder of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s stay.

Beneath the sardonic tone of the comment is an undercurrent of respect as Orage continues to quote a Bahá’í teaching:

> We are told "A Bahai must take part in some work for the benefit of the community." From this we forecast less success in England for Bahaism than for Christian Science, let us say, that makes no such demands on the idle rich. (Orage, "Notes" 484)

The concluding prognostication, which perhaps explains the lack of further attention to Bahá'í ideas on Orage's part, is interesting for its inaccuracy. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was in fact enthusiastically welcomed by large numbers of people in England, and many publications noted his presence and quoted from the principles he enunciated.

The *Times* of London, for instance, printed an announcement of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's arrival on 6 September 1911, two days after his arrival. The *New York Times* had already published several articles about his impending journey to England, including a full-page report on Bahá'í history on 2 July and a description of 'Abdu'l-Bahá together with his photograph on 24 September. In the following months, and again during 'Abdu'l-Bahá's second visit in early 1913, two English reviews carried at least four lengthy accounts of various features of Bahá'í history and teachings.

Newspaper Coverage of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Visit

Contemporary Review begins its article, titled "Bahaism: The Birth of a World Religion," with a quotation from 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "There is one God; Mankind is one, and the foundations of religion are one" (Johnson, *Bahaism* 391). The writer proceeds to give a detailed, and for the most part accurate, history of the religion of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, and then goes on to summarize its teachings with special emphasis on its ultimate aim, the spiritual unification of humanity.

Another journal which gave prominent coverage to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's message was *Fortnightly Review*, to which Pound, as well as other literary figures such as Roger Fry, Hilaire Belloc, Thomas Hardy, and Ford Maddox Ford, were contributing in the same period. The earliest article, "Abbas Effendi: His Personality, Work and Followers" (June 1911) by E. S. Stevens, is based partly on the author's personal experiences during a visit to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's household in Palestine at the turn of the century. In the same year, Stevens also published *The Mountain of God*, a novel "which revolved around the lives of the Bahá'í community in the Haifa- 'Akka area. . . . 'Abdu'l-Bahá himself, although appearing only once in the book in person, pervades the whole book by the influence that he exerts on the characters" (Momen, *Bábí and Baha'i Religions* 50).

A second article, appearing in April, 1912, in the same volume as Pound's "Canzone: Of Angels," is Constance E. Maud's impressions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

> In the house where he and his entourage were staying, came a constant stream of all sorts and conditions of men and women. Christians of every denomination, Buddhists of every nationality, Theosophists, Zoroastrians and Mahometans, Agnostics and Gnostics. To all he spoke some individual message, and to their varied questions he gave a simple, direct, and quite spontaneous answer. . . . Abdul Baha possesses an amazing power of going straight to the core of men and things. (Maud, "Abdul-Baha" 708-9)

The last article, also by Maud, concerns Tahirih, "The First Persian Feminist," one of the Báb's earliest disciples and a poet "gifted not only with exceptional beauty, but with intellectual gifts" (Maud, "First Persian Feminist" 1176). An eloquent and fearless expounder of the Báb's

teachings, Tahirih proclaimed his inauguration of a new religious dispensation by appearing unveiled before a company of the Báb's followers. Before her martyrdom in the midst of the wave of persecution that engulfed the Bábí community, she is reported to have declared, "You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women" (quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 75). She thus became an emblem of the Bahá'í principle of the equality of the sexes, a principle to which 'Abdu'l-Bahá frequently referred in his talks.

Another publication that paid great attention to 'Abdu'l-Bahá was the *Christian Commonwealth*, edited by Albert Dawson. The unofficial organ of the City Temple, it reported in full 'Abdu'l-Bahá's address at that church. R. J. Campbell, the Congregationalist pastor of the City Temple from 1902 to 1915, "placed the distinguished visitor in his own chair" and, addressing the large congregation, said, "We have a visitor in the pulpit whose presence is somewhat significant of the spiritual drawing together of East and West." 'Abdu'l-Bahá then stepped forward and "with considerable animation, his voice rising and falling as in a rhythmic chant," spoke:

> Today the light of truth is shining upon the world in its abundance. . . . The banner of the Holy Spirit is uplifted, and men see it, and are assured with the knowledge that this is a new day. . . . This is a new cycle of human power. (*Christian* 13 Sept. 1911)

A week later, the *Christian Commonwealth* once again gave full details, on its front page, of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's address at St. John's, Westminster, at the invitation of Archdeacon Wilberforce. "Man all over the world is seeking for God," said 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "but the Reality of Divinity is holy above all understanding." Expounding on the Bahá'í belief in God as an incomprehensible Essence who can only be known through divine Manifestations, he continued:

> How can the temporal and phenomenal comprehend the Lord of Hosts? . . . The perfect man, the Prophet, is one . . . who has the purity and clearness of a perfect mirror—one who reflects the Sun of Truth. . . .Therefore men have always been taught and led by the Prophets of God. The Prophets of God are the mediators of God. (*Christian* 20 Sept. 1911)

On 30 September 1911, 'Abdu'l-Bahá also met with the Theosophical Society at its new headquarters at the invitation of Annie Besant, its president. After words of welcome by A. P. Sinnett, 'Abdu'l-Bahá commended "the eagerness of the Society in its search for Truth" (*'Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 26) and delivered an address on the distinctive features of the Bahá'í teachings. The text of this talk is quoted at the end of the article by H. Johnson in *Contemporary Review*, cited above, under the title "A short summary of the teaching of Bahá'u'lláh specially contributed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá."

Pound's Meeting with 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Shortly before this, on 22 September 1911, Ezra Pound had written to Dorothy Shakespear, his future wife, that "they tell me I'm likely to meet the Bahi ['Abdu'l-Bahá] next week in order to find out whether I know more about heaven than he does. Whatever the decision, I bet I can give him points on 'Helsewhere'" (*Letters* 63). A week later, he wrote Margaret Cravens, a friend who lived in Paris, "I met the Bahi yesterday, he is a dear old man. I wonder would you like to meet

him, he goes to Paris next week. I'll arrange for you anyhow & you can go or not, as you like" (*Ezra Pound and Margaret Cravens* 90). On 6 October, he wrote Margaret again:

> The Bahi—Abdul Baha, Abbas Effendi, or whatever you like to call him, is at the Dreyfus Barney's . . . and any one interested in the movement can write and see him there by appointment. Its [*sic*] more important than Cezanne, & not in the least like what you'd expect of an oriental religious now. At least, I went to conduct an inquisition & came away feeling that questions would have been an impertinence. The whole point is that they have *done* instead of talking, and a persian movement for religious unity that claims the feminine soul equal to the male, & puts Christ above Buddha, to the horror of the Theosophists, is worth while. Even if a lot of silly people do get mixed up in it. (95)

The change in attitude is significant and representative of many responses to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's personality. Pound goes from arrogant prejudgment to respect and admiration, seemingly in spite of himself. His tone remains slightly dismissive, but the admission of genuine surprise at the progressive beliefs of an "oriental religious" and of awe at 'Abdu'l-Bahá's presence indicates the extent of the influence 'Abdu'l-Bahá exerted on even those bent on inquisition. Pound's understanding of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's message, as he recounts it in this letter, is more or less correct as far as it goes, although it is neither complete nor profound as indeed it cannot be based on a single interview. It is instructive to compare some of Pound's assertions with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's recorded remarks. For instance, Pound mentions the fundamental purpose of achieving unity and refers to the equality of the female and male souls, a topic 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressed repeatedly in his talks and letters: "in the sight of Bahá, women are accounted the same as men, and God hath created all humankind in His own image. . . . men and women alike are the revealers of His names and attributes, and from the spiritual viewpoint there is no difference between them" (*Selections* 79–80).

The next observation regarding Buddha, although doubtless appealing to Pound as it entails the discomfiture of the Theosophists, whom he seems to view as "silly people," is nevertheless inaccurate. In speaking of Buddhism, 'Abdu'l-Bahá expressed the Bahá'í belief that all religions come from the same divine source. In this respect, "The real teaching of Buddha is the same as the teaching of Jesus Christ." However, he also explained that in the course of time Buddhism, like other religions, has strayed away from its original teachings so that "if you look at the present practice of the Buddhist religion, you will see that there is little of the Reality left" (*'Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 63). Characteristically, Pound mentions only the part of the comments that corresponds to his own views.

It is interesting, however, to note that before meeting him, Pound seems to have considered himself, in the letter to Dorothy, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá's equal or superior in knowledge of the other world. After the meeting, however, he concedes 'Abdu'l-Bahá's superiority. The admission, revealing in any case, is all the more significant if we take Pound's initial claim seriously. Pound's first response is in many ways typical of his approach to religion and makes his later comments on 'Abdu'l-Bahá perhaps more understandable. Demetres Tryphonopoulos writes in an article on *The Cantos* that "Pound's 'religious' ideas form a mosaic out of elements selected from a wide variety of pagan mystery religions and occult movements. . . . Pound nowhere takes the step of attempting to organize his religious ideas into a coherent system" ("The Cantos" 9). In his approach to 'Abdu'l-Bahá he chooses elements that suit his own predilections but ignores or misunderstands

the rest. Although he concedes that the Bahá'í Faith is worthwhile, and praises the Bahá'ís for having *"done* instead of talking," he cannot see the Bahá'í Faith as a whole. 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke on a variety of topics to the diverse people who came to see him. He discussed the power of God and true spirituality, Christ and Buddha, education, healing, art, world peace, and a universal language. 'Abdu'l-Bahá fitted his utterances to the capacity and interests of his audiences, but, contrary to what Pound may have thought, all he said was part of a coherent religious system whose parts are organically related and must be understood in relation to each other.

The failure to see them as such is not peculiar to Pound of course. Many others, including occultists, who met 'Abdu'l-Bahá were happy to applaud his vision of the unity of all religions and incorporate parts of it into their own philosophies. But they treated it as an eclectic collection of beliefs and customs and not as what 'Abdu'l-Bahá said it is, namely "the teachings of the Lord God, teachings which constitute the very life of humankind" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 52-53).

Pound, who did not take the Baha'i Faith as a whole, reverts to his condescending attitude in a 1913 article on Rabindranath Tagore in *The New Freewoman*. In praising Tagore as an artist, he insists that be is "not to be confused with that jolly and religious bourgeois Abdul Baba" ("Rabindranath Tagore" 187). He devotes three columns to Tagore because he is a poet and not a religious teacher, because Pound can take his work and give it "a certain place in world-literature" (188) without having to take on a value system, something he would have to do if he similarly praised 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Pound's Canto XLVI

The meeting with 'Abdu'l-Bahá apparently made a great enough impression on Pound for it to emerge several decades later in *The Cantos*. Pound's great poetic work, *The Cantos* were begun during World War I, but successive volumes continued to be issued for the rest of his life. As a voyage of exploration of the modern world in relation to the cultural past, these poems draw on and adapt many sources, including Homer's *Odyssey*, the works of Confucius, and medieval and Renaissance Christian doctrinal writings. In Canto XL VI, Pound quotes an anecdote which he attributes to 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

> Said Abdul Baha: "I said 'let us speak of religion.'
> "Camel driver said: I must milk my camel.
> "So when he had milked his camel I said 'let us speak of religion.'
> And the camel driver said: It is time to drink milk.
> 'Will you have some?' For politeness I tried to join him.
> Have you ever tasted milk from a camel?
> I was unable to drink camel's milk. I have *never* been able.
> So he drank all of the milk, and I said: let us speak of religion.
> 'I have drunk my milk. I must dance.' said the driver.
> We did not speak of religion." Thus Abdul Baha
> Third vice-gerent of the First Abdul or whatever Baha,
> the Sage, the Uniter, the founder of a religion,
> in a garden at Uberton, Gubberton, or mebbe it was some
> other damned suburb, but at any rate a suburban suburb . . . . (242–43)

Canto XLVI is one of many devoted to "exposure or ridicule of businessmen, bankers, economists," a favorite topic with Pound in his later years (Surette, *A Light* 95). The Canto is particularly important in its "general summing-up of the economic lesson taught by *The Cantos"* (Surette, *A Light* 95), a lesson based on the theories of C. H. Douglas's Social Credit, which condemned the organized robbery by banks and which saw underconsumption and mismanagement of money as the causes of unemployment and waste, and ultimately of war. Pound's economic views gradually gave rise to his political and racial extremism, as he and Douglas failed "to convince any significant element of the community of the justice and truth of their views" (Surette, *A Light* 82).

The appearance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in this context may seem inexplicable at first. But Pound seems to draw a parallel between himself and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The camel driver refuses to discuss religion with 'Abdu'l-Bahá because he is preoccupied with his own concerns. In the end, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "Sage" and "Uniter" though he is, cannot convert the camel driver. Similarly, Pound who has found an economic vision on which he bases his other views cannot convince anyone else of its validity. The reaction he commonly gets is "Wouldn't convert me, wdn't HAVE me converted" (*Cantos* 242).

The portrait of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, despite its flippancy, is basically sympathetic and as respectful as Pound can manage to be. Pound did not interest himself in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's message beyond expressing approval of its unexpected modernity, but he was sufficiently impressed by him to identify his position with respect to an unbelieving world with his own. The comparison, however, is self-serving on Pound's part. There is no indication in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's recorded talks that he uttered any anecdote that could be construed as the story of the camel driver. Moreover, the depiction of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as a frustrated religious teacher without an audience is completely at variance with the well-established fact that people of all kinds thronged to his presence and sought to listen to him both at home in Palestine and during his Western travels.

The Bahá'í Community and Avant-Garde Circles

Pound's second letter to Margaret Cravens discloses another possible connection between him and the Bahá'ís in London and Paris. The Dreyfus-Barneys he mentions are Hippolyte Dreyfus and his wife Laura Barney, both of whom were among the earliest Western Bahá'ís. Dreyfus learned Persian and Arabic in order to translate Bahá'í writings; he also wrote a book, *Essai sur le Bahaisme*. Barney, a sculptor and painter from a family of artists and scholars, is best remembered for her compilation of *Some Answered Questions*, informal talks given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in response to her questions on a variety of themes and fundamental tenets of the Bahá'í Faith.

Laura Barney was also the sister of Natalie Barney, a writer who held a famous salon in Paris which "attracted, for 60 years, most of the great literary figures" including Pound, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Rainer Maria Rilke, Ernest Hemingway, and many others (Lorusso, "Afterword" 164). Her long association with Pound was one of her most important literary connections. Together, they devised "Bel Esprit," a project for financial patronage of promising writers: "The idea was Pound's; the name and money were Natalie's" (Lorusso, "Afterword" 164). T. S. Eliot, chosen to be the first recipient, declined and the venture failed, but the literary relationship between Pound and Barney continued. Although Natalie Barney knew of the Bahá'í Faith and had met Bahá'ís through her sister and her mother, she showed no interest in it (Gail, *Summon* 49–54). It is possible, and indeed probable, however,

that her circle may have learned something of the Bahá'í ideas through her family who were also well known in Parisian artistic circles.

A final interesting connection between Pound's circle and the Bahá'í community is through a contributor to *The New Freewoman* (later *The Egoist*), a magazine to which Pound contributed frequently and that was later edited by Eliot. Two poems, "Eve" and "The Plain Woman," published in the first two issues of the magazine (June and July, 1913), as well as other works in *Century* and *Current Opinion*, were written by Horace Holley. Holley had become a Bahá'í in 1911. Soon after, he and his wife, then living in Italy, heard of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's arrival at Thonon-les-Bains, France, and left immediately to meet him. Holley describes his first meeting on 29 August thus:

> I saw . . . a stately old man, robed in a cream-coloured gown, his white hair and beard shining in the sun. He displayed a beauty of stature, an inevitable harmony of attitude and dress I had never seen. . . . In 'Abdu'l-Bahá I felt the awful presence of Bahá'u'lláh. . . . we were given unusual opportunity of questioning the Master, but I soon realized that such was not the highest or most productive plane on which I could meet Him. My questions answered themselves. I yielded to a feeling of reverence which contained more than the solution of intellectual or moral problems. (*Religion* 232–33)

Two volumes of Holley's verse, *The Inner Garden* and *The Stricken King*, were published in the years before the War, and *Creation: Post Impressionist Poems* appeared in London in 1914. His books on the Bahá'í Faith include *The Modern Social Religion* (1913), *Bahá'í: The Spirit of the Age* (1921), and *Religion for Mankind* (1956), as well as the first comprehensive compilation of Bahá'í writings in English, entitled *Bahá'í Scriptures* (1923). A long-time secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, he was, in 1951, appointed by Shoghi Effendi as a Hand of the Cause of God.

As Holley was the founder and director of the Ashur Gallery of Modern Art and his wife was an artist, they "enjoyed the entree to many interesting circles of artists and intellectuals" (*Bahá'í World* 13:851). In all likelihood, he associated with other poets and writers of the period and may even have known Pound, although there is no evidence of such acquaintance. But the careers of the two men represent two divergent reactions to contact with the same force.

Pound, despite a momentary sense of awe, ultimately dismissed both 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the religion he promulgated. The inclusion of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the list of the "blasted" in Wyndham Lewis's *Blast* bears witness to the fame he had achieved in London society (the rather cryptic list also includes Henri Bergson, Besant, and Tagore) but also indicates the adoption of a sarcastically superior pose by the compilers of the list, one of whom was Pound. By contrast, Holley, who at first also thought it "possible to encompass the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh by reducing it to a formula or confining it within a well-turned phrase," came to realize that "I myself was to be encompassed, re-oriented, remoulded in all the realms of being. For religion in its purity reveals God, and only God can reveal man to himself' (Holley, *Religion* 9).

'Abdu'l-Bahá's influence on Ezra Pound may have been limited in terms of the latter's subsequent development, but his impact on the countries he visited was considerable. His journey was most timely: many in the West were beginning to recognize and articulate truths that Bahá'u'lláh had revealed some fifty years previously: 'Abdu'l-Bahá's journey established the foundation on which the Bahá'í administrative order was to be raised and led to the establishment

of the Bahá'í Faith worldwide, so that it is now the second most widely spread religion in the world *(Encyclopaedia Britannica Book of the Year 1992*). Those who came into contact. with 'Abdu'l-Bahá inevitably responded to him in their own different ways, ranging from wholehearted acceptance to varying degrees of admiration and respect, to occasional cases of misunderstanding and rejection. In general, however, the following comment in the *Christian Commonwealth* upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá's second visit to England in January, 1913, is an apt evaluation of his presence there: "London has rarely sheltered a more significant and impressive. personality than the leader of the Bahai movement."

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