

The Role of the Feminine in the Bahá'í Faith*

Ross Woodman

* This paper was presented as the Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture at the Association for Bahá'í Studies Twentieth Annual Conference, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

Abstract

This article will propose a non-gendered understanding of the terms “Masculine” and “Feminine,” in which the terms refer to two completely interdependent forces or energies at work within the Manifestation as the Revealer of the Word, as well as throughout the creation including the human individual. It will then focus upon the unprecedented role of the Feminine in the Bahá'í Faith, particularly as it corrects the oppositional imbalance between the Masculine and the Feminine in the Adamic cycle. A close examination of Bahá'u'lláh's address to Carmel as his consort or New Jerusalem bride and the role played by the Maid[s] of Heaven in his Revelation, will stress the importance of what Bahá'u'lláh in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* calls “the brides of inner meaning” who issue unveiled from a new revelation of the Word. Understanding the importance of the Feminine in its nuptial union with, rather than subordination to, the Masculine may, one hopes, lead to a deeper understanding of what it now means to be created in the image and likeness of God.

Résumé

L'auteur propose une compréhension asexuée des termes «Masculin» et «Féminin,» selon laquelle les termes font référence à deux forces ou énergies complètement interdépendantes qui opèrent dans la Manifestation en tant que le Révélateur de la Parole, ainsi que dans toute la création, y compris dans la personne humaine. L'auteur se penche ensuite sur le rôle sans précédent du féminin dans la foi bahá'íe, et particulièrement comment ce rôle redresse le déséquilibre provenant du rapport oppositionnel entre le masculin et le féminin dans le cycle adamique. L'auteur, en examinant attentivement la tablette que Bahá'u'lláh adressait au Carmel, qu'il décrivait comme son épouse ou comme la mariée de la nouvelle Jérusalem, et en examinant l'importance du rôle des servantes du paradis de Sa révélation, démontre l'importance de celles que Bahá'u'lláh, dans le *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, appelle «les mariées de la signification intérieure» qui émergent, dévoilées, d'une nouvelle révélation de la Parole. L'auteur espère qu'une compréhension de l'importance du féminin considéré dans son union nuptiale avec le masculin, plutôt que dans un rapport de subordination avec lui, entraînera une meilleure compréhension de ce que signifie maintenant être créé à l'image et à la ressemblance de Dieu.

Resumen

Esta disertación propone una comprensión, desprovista de género, de los términos Masculino y Femenino, donde estos se refieren a dos fuerzas o energías interdependientes que obran dentro de la Manifestación de Dios en su carácter de Revelador de la Palabra y también por entre toda la creación incluyendo al individuo humano. De seguido enfocara sobre el rol sin precedentes de lo Femenino en la Fe Bahá'í, particularmente donde corrige el desbalance entre lo Masculino y lo Femenino en el ciclo Adámico. Una examinación a fondo del discurso de Bahá'u'lláh a la Montaña Carmelina como su consorte o a la novia de la Nueva Jerusalén unido al rol que sostiene la Doncella del Cielo en su revelación, hará resaltar la importancia de lo que Bahá'u'lláh en el *Kitáb-i-Íqán* llama, “las novias de significado recóndito” que surgen sin velo de una nueva revelación de la Palabra según esta comprensión. Comprender la importancia de lo Femenino en unión nupcial en vez de subordinado a lo masculino, encaminara hacia una comprensión mas profunda de lo que significa ser creado en la imagen y semejanza de Dios.

The ambiguous status of the Feminine in the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition is well known. Eve, as both the mother of humankind and temptress in league with the Devil, archetypally encompasses this ambiguity. With the advent of the Feminist Movement in this century, particularly in the post-Second World War period, this ambiguity has been subjected to a close critical scrutiny that reflects a radical shift toward a position of equality between the sexes in Western society. The Bahá'í affirmation of equality, an equality that may be compared to the

two wings of a bird which are essential to its flight, would appear to ground in Revelation the equality that Feminism is now fighting to achieve for women around the world.

With this difference, however: the equality revealed by Bahá'u'lláh is not based upon women's enjoying in society the same position as men, as if the position of men were the divine standard by which the position of women should be measured. The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh embraces a new relationship between the sexes in which, in the words of Bahá'u'lláh's "Tablet of Wisdom," "These two are the same, yet they are different." In the context of this quotation, Bahá'u'lláh is describing the coming into being of the world of existence through what he calls "the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient." "These two are the same," he writes, "yet they are different" (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 140).

In focusing upon the role of the Feminine in the Bahá'í Faith, I wish to distinguish the term Feminine from the gendered word *female*. Feminine is, in this sense, what Bahá'u'lláh calls in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* a "symbolic" term, a term that releases the Feminine from the limitations of a biological characterization and, as we shall see, opens it to its larger spiritual meaning. While in addressing the Feminine, especially as the Maid of Heaven and as Carmel, Bahá'u'lláh makes use of images of biology and of sexual attraction, which both serve as manifestations of the spiritual, manifestations that are essential if what in itself is invisible is to be rendered visible. In Bahá'u'lláh's tablets, biology is a symbol of the spiritual, a symbol, which, if robbed of its spiritual focus, reduces the divine Creation itself to a demonic parody of its meaning.

Nowhere is this demonic parody of the divine Creation more evident than in the reduction of the female to her biology, a biology that, literally interpreted, cuts her off from its spiritual meaning. As a result, the female remains bound to her body as if by divine decree, denied in her binding the mental dimensions of creativity that from time immemorial have been far too exclusively identified with the male. Nowhere has the nightmare of her bodily imprisonment been more powerfully expressed than in the poetry of William Blake, a poetry that enacted in England a vision of Christ's Return at the same time that in Persia "that Luminous Star of Divine guidance," (Nabíl, *The Dawn-Breakers* 1) Shaykh Ahmad, was preparing the way for the coming of the Báb. "They told me," cries one of Blake's Daughters of Albion in his "Visions of the Daughters of Albion,"

that I had five senses to inclose me up.
And they inclos'd my infinite brain into a narrow circle.
And sunk my heart into the Abyss, a red round globe hot burning
Till all from life I was obliterated and erased.
Instead of morn arises a bright shadow, like an eye
In the eastern cloud: instead of night a sickly charnel house. (Plate 2:31–36)

In this "sickly charnel house," which Blake calls "the marriage hearse," the Daughter of Albion describes herself as "bound/In spells of law to one she loaths," all night turning "the wheel of false desire," her longings awakening

her womb
To the abhorred birth of cherubs in the human form
That live a pestilence & die a meteor & are no more. (Plate 5:25-29)

Exploring at length the consequences of reducing the symbolic language of God to a purely literal or bodily meaning, Bahá'u'lláh concludes his argument in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* with a verse from the Qur'án that is equally as powerful as those lines above from Blake: "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] (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 257). "Know verily," Bahá'u'lláh explains, "that the purpose underlying all these symbolic terms ..., which emanate from the Revealers of God's holy Cause, hath been to test and prove the peoples of the world; that thereby the earth of the pure and illuminated hearts may be known from the perishable and barren soil" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 49). When the literal level is isolated and set adrift from its larger spiritual meaning, "the earth of the pure and illuminated hearts" is reduced to "perishable and barren soil." For Blake, the "perishable and barren soil" becomes London's "midnight streets" where he hears "the youthful Harlot's curse" that "blasts the new-born Infant's tear/And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse" ("London" 13–16). Blake is here referring to infants who were born blind as a result of their harlot-infected syphilitic fathers, a curse that in Blake's day became the counterpart of the AIDS plague in our time.

Nowhere is the dismissive reduction of the woman to her body more evident than in the negative relations between the sexes throughout the Adamic cycle. A reader of an earlier draft of this article argued that in my emphasis upon the symbolic I had largely ignored what she called "the inequitable treatment of women by men." "The reality is," she wrote, "that we do not live in a 'symbolic' world." My point is that we do live in a symbolic

world. Every human action is endowed with a mental content which transforms its literal meaning into a symbolic event that contains within it a dimension of reality unknown to the mineral, vegetable, and animal worlds. We are, whether we know it or not, what the philosopher Ernst Cassirer has called symbol-making animals. As a result, particularly in this century, we have turned biology into a religion; sexuality has become a form of worship, idealized as the life force or, viewed in terms of its more blindly compulsive operations, what Blake saw as a death force in disguise. The relations between the sexes have, in the abuse of women and in the obvious inequities imposed upon them, continued to unveil the dark underside of an idealized romantic image of women, a dark underside that no amount of idealization has in the past managed to contain because its containment was at the same time repression.

The “inequitable treatment of women by men,” I suggest, is in large measure at once a fear and a worship of women’s biology, of the creative power operative in their bodies, which more and more women now wish to claim as their own to do with as they will. Until we have relocated this fear and worship by transferring it to the Feminine as it is operative in Bahá’u’lláh’s Tablets, men, I suggest, will continue to treat women in an inflated manner (either idealized or demonized) even as, schooled in this treatment, women will continue to treat themselves.

I do not believe I am avoiding what may be called Feminist issues by focusing upon the symbolic. I am, I hope, facing these issues more directly and positively by viewing them in the light of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation, which is to say, in the light of the divine Creation itself. In the resistance of Feminists to the omnipotence of biology, I see a commitment to a symbolic life that the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh has opened to them. The creativity literally enacted in the woman’s body is a creativity that Bahá’u’lláh in his relationship to the Maid of Heaven identifies with God’s divine act of creation. Shelley, an English poet announcing in the early decades of the nineteenth century the time of the Return, also identifies the biology of the woman’s body with the divine act of creation as that act is repeated in the finite mind of the artist. “[A] great statue or picture,” he writes in his *Defence of Poetry*, “grows under the power of the artist as a child in the mother’s womb; and the very mind which directs the hands in formation is incapable of accounting to itself for the origin, the gradations, or the media of the process” (504).

As a symbolic enactment of the divine process of creation, the biology of the female body carries within it a spiritual understanding of the Feminine. In many of Bahá’u’lláh’s Tablets, the Feminine thus becomes the voice of Revelation itself as, for example, in the guise of the Maid of Heaven, it announces to Bahá’u’lláh in the *Síyih-Chál* the station to which God has called Bahá’u’lláh.

Involved in this reading of the Feminine in the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh is an interpretation of the biblical myth of Eden, that, as a result of a new understanding born of humanity’s coming of age, perceives the Revelation of Adam as what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls “embryonic” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 124). In viewing it as “embryonic,” the infantile justification of the Masculine fear of the Feminine that characterizes biblical relations between Adam and Eve is removed at its divine source so that, in the words of Bahá’u’lláh, its “entire creation hath passed away! Nothing remaineth ...” (*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* 29).

The greatness of the change in the relations between the sexes wrought by Bahá’u’lláh is thus evident in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s account of the meaning of the story of Adam and Eve, an account in which Eve is presented as the infant soul of Adam unable to digest the knowledge of good and evil. The depth of this change from Eve as the infant soul of Adam to the Maid of Heaven as the announcer of the station of Bahá’u’lláh can be further measured by Bahá’u’lláh’s declaration that “none among the Manifestations of old, except to a prescribed degree, hath ever completely apprehended the nature of this Revelation” (quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent of Divine Justice* 77). For this reason, Bahá’u’lláh boldly asserts, “These are the days in which God hath proved the hearts of the entire company of His Messengers and Prophets, and beyond them those that stand guard over His sacred and inviolable Sanctuary ...” (quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 79).

In proving “the hearts of the entire company of His Messengers and Prophets,” Bahá’u’lláh is opening the hearts of humankind to an influx of “heat” (Bahá’u’lláh’s word) or energy so great that, as in the gradual maturing of the Feminine from Eve to the Maid of Heaven in their relationship to the Manifestation, it radically changes our understanding of the relations between the sexes. What we are now experiencing as a soul reality is what, using a chemical metaphor, may best be described as a new compound, which is to say, a new creation. In the passing away of the old creation, we are witnessing the painful disintegration of an unhealthy relationship between the sexes, a relationship that no longer works, other than self-destructively.

One measure of the disintegration and recreation of the relationship between the sexes is to be found in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s account of Adam and Eve. In the figure of Eve as the feminine soul in the early stages of its progressive revelation, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that the Christian doctrine of Original Sin, the eating of the fruit of the forbidden tree, is applicable only to these early stages. Eve, however, has (throughout the Adamic cycle) undergone a long process of gradual, though incomplete, transformation: as the Old Testament Sophia or Wisdom of

God; as Mary, the mother of Jesus; as Fátimih, the daughter of Muhammad. Now, however, with the completion of the Adamic cycle of preparation, Eve, in her earthly coming of age as the Maid of Heaven and as Carmel, becomes the spiritual bride of Bahá'u'lláh, thereby completing a union left incomplete in the relations between Adam and Eve. As the unveiled feminine face of God, her human embodiment may be glimpsed in the unveiled face of Táhirih at the Conference of Badash̄t.

In describing this coming of age in the Revelation of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá abrogates entirely the ancient doctrine of Original Sin identified with the Feminine, thereby restoring humanity to a nature from which it had remained separated throughout the Adamic cycle, a separation that constituted a radical inner split between the physical and spiritual worlds, the body becoming the enemy of the soul, engaging it in a state of perpetual warfare. In the healing of that split, the earth itself becoming the footstool of God and Carmel the throne of God, a radical transformation has occurred within the soul itself, within, that is, our very conception of the Feminine. Indeed, so radical is the transformation that, "verily," Bahá'u'lláh declares, "We have caused every soul to expire by virtue of our irresistible and all-subduing sovereignty." No sooner, however, had he caused "every soul to expire" than he "called into being a new creation, as a token of Our grace unto men" (*Gleanings* 29–30).

It is this expiration and new creation of very soul that constitutes the spiritual ground for a new understanding of the Feminine, an understanding upon which the equality of the sexes as revealed by Bahá'u'lláh now depends. Just how radical this continuing dissolution and recreation of the soul is can be seen in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's dismissal of the dogma of Original Sin—of Eve as the temptress of Adam—as what 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls "absolute injustice and complete predestination." "Would," 'Abdu'l-Bahá asks, "the justice of God have allowed these enlightened Manifestations [Moses, Noah, Joseph, John the Baptist], on account of the sin of Adam, to find torment in hell until Christ came and by the sacrifice of Himself saved them from excruciating tortures? Such an idea is beyond every law and rule, and cannot be accepted by any intelligent person" (*Some Answered Questions* 125–26).

What "cannot [now] be accepted by any intelligent person" was, however, throughout the Christian dispensation, accepted by almost every "intelligent person." Milton, for example, begins *Paradise Lost*, the greatest Christian epic in the Protestant tradition, by announcing as his subject Original Sin and its consequences. "Of man's first disobedience," he writes, invoking the Holy Spirit as his Muse,

and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
Sing Heavenly Muse. (I:1–5)

At its climax in the ninth book, Milton, in Eve, focuses upon the "mortal taste" of the forbidden tree. Eve's eating of its fruit is the collapse of God's creation:

...her rash hand in evil hour
Forth reaching to the Fruit, she pluck'd, she eat:
Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat
Sighing through all her Works gave signs of woe,
That all was lost. (IX:780-84)

So pervasive now is the recognition of the breakdown of the relations between the sexes that many people have concluded that marriage is no longer a viable institution. Indeed, given the alarming divorce rate (one-half of North American marriages now end in divorce), many now focus upon a so-called good divorce, in which the sexes participate in the proceedings of the divorce settlement at each of its intricate levels with the same ritual solemnity that once accompanied the marriage settlement. Divorce has now achieved a certain secular sanctification as if, in the achievement of an amicable divorce, the couple were unconsciously obeying a divine fiat announcing the passing away of an entire creation whose energy is now exhausted. Indeed, by unconsciously affirming by their divorce Bahá'u'lláh's announcement, "Lo, the entire creation hath passed away," the warring sexes now enter, in however bewildering a way, a new reality, the meaning of which they cannot as yet discern because they see in it not the presence of God but the absence.

When, however, Bahá'u'lláh declares that of the entire creation "nothing remaineth," he is quick to add "except My Face, the Ever-Abiding, the Resplendent, the All-Glorious" (*Gleanings* 29). In their unconsciousness of

the Face of God revealed in Bahá'u'lláh, the sexes in their separation must now attempt to embrace the “Nothing” that “remaineth” after an entire creation has passed away. The first philosopher to embrace this “Nothing” announced by Bahá'u'lláh was Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*, published in 1882. In it, a madman lights his lantern in the midday sun and runs into the marketplace looking for God. “Whither is God,” he cries. “I will tell you,” he exclaims to the astonished passers-by going about their business:

We have killed him—you and I. All of us are murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? (146)

To be left “straying as if through an infinite nothing” feeling “the breath of empty space” wonderfully describes the pervasive state of anxiety that accompanies what Bahá'u'lláh decreed as “the time for the destruction of the world and its people” (quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent of Divine Justice* 81). Those who partake of this anxiety as Nietzsche, moving toward madness, experienced it, know the Resurrection only as Judgment. They partake of the oneness of humankind only in and as its absence, as a loss of relationship to themselves, to their partners, to each other, to society, and to God. In this mental environment all unions, whether at the individual, the familial, the tribal, the national, or the international levels, are impossible. Attempts to forge them are doomed not only to fail but also to produce their opposite—chaos rather than creation. “This is the dead land/This is the cactus land,” writes T.S. Eliot, one of the most revered twentieth-century poets, in “The Hollow Men,”

Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man's hand
Under the twinkle of a fading star. (39–44)

In this condition of divine extinction, Nietzsche argues, our only alternative is to invent ourselves and live within our fictions. Confirming what Nietzsche asserts, Bahá'u'lláh declares in his “tablet of Ahmad”: “For the people are wandering in the paths of delusion, bereft of discernment to see God with their own eyes, or hear His Melody with their own ears” (*Bahá'í Prayers* 211–12). Nietzsche's dead God was a God preserved in ecclesiastical alcohol, who, in Bahá'u'lláh's account of the world's religions, is what remains of the heat and energy of past dispensations when they are subjected to the absolute control of the leaders of religion: “Leaders of religion, in every age,” Bahá'u'lláh boldly declares in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, “have hindered their people from attaining the shores of eternal salvation, inasmuch as they held the reins of authority in their mighty grasp” (15). “Notwithstanding the divinely-inspired admonitions of all the Prophets, the Saints, and the Chosen ones of God, enjoining the people to see with their own eyes and hear with their own ears,” he writes again, “they have disdainfully rejected their counsels and have blindly followed, and will continue to follow, the leaders of their Faith” (164–65). The tyranny of their leadership, blinding the eyes of the people to the Face of God and deafening their ears to the Melody of God, is what may be called the perversion of the Masculine, a perversion that contains within it the massacre of the Feminine, which is to say the patriarchy that Feminists condemn.

“Whoso beholdeth Me with an eye besides Min own will never be able to know Me” (quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 77), declares Bahá'u'lláh. Whoever, that is, views Bahá'u'lláh through the clerical eyes that rule and will continue to rule previous dispensations, whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, will be unable to experience the revolution in consciousness Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation has wrought. That revolution in consciousness, I suggest, resides in a new consciousness of the Feminine in its nuptial union with the Masculine. In this union in Bahá'u'lláh, they so inform and infuse each other that their difference is now a manifestation of their sameness. In declaring that his Revelation is “the eye to past ages and centuries” and “a light unto the darkness of the times” (quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 79), Bahá'u'lláh has invited us to look at the past in an entirely new perspective and to discover in his Revelation the eternal light that once again shines in the darkness, though, once again, “the darkness comprehends it not” (John 1:5).

The darkness that “comprehends it not” is the darkness of ecclesiastical power. Ignoring entirely the Manifestations of God in whose name they blasphemously rule, these powers of darkness demanded that the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh submit themselves to their decrees even as they had subjected to their rule the Manifestation they appeared to serve. Because God was once and forever incarnate in Christ, any Prophet, including Muhammad, who

appeared after Christ, was by their dogmatic decree an impostor. Because Muhammad was the Seal of the Prophets, any self-declared Prophet who broke that Seal was a blasphemer. In the name of God, God must remain divided in Self, in unity and oneness, lest, by simply being, God take from the leaders of religion what Bahá'u'lláh calls their "lust of leadership" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 15), which is to say, their lust of power.

"It is clear and evident," Bahá'u'lláh writes again and again throughout the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*,

That whenever the Manifestations of Holiness were revealed, the divines of their day have hindered the people from attaining unto the way of truth. To this testify the records of all the scriptures and heavenly books. Not one Prophet of God was made manifest Who did not fall a victim to the relentless hate, to the denunciation, denial, and execration of the clerics of His day! Woe unto them for the iniquities their hands have formerly wrought! Woe unto them for that which they are now doing! What veils of glory more grievous than these embodiments of error! By the righteousness of God! To pierce such veils is the mightiest of all acts, and to rend them asunder the most meritorious of all deeds. (165–66)

The piercing of the veils, rendering them asunder, is the release of the Feminine from the tyranny of the Masculine when willfully and perversely isolated from the Feminine. Bahá'u'lláh describes this release of the Feminine from the tyranny of the isolated Masculine as "the mightiest of all acts" and "the most meritorious of all deeds" because the enslavement of the Feminine is the enslavement of the Word itself by those who are the "embodiments of error." The enslavement of the Feminine is the rejection of Progressive Revelation as the ceaseless unfolding of the Word.

In distinguishing the Feminine from female, thereby releasing it from the limitations of gender and identifying it with the energy or force operative within the masculine Word as what Bahá'u'lláh calls its "inner meaning," we may argue that the Feminine in consort with the Masculine is present and operative throughout the entire creation. This creation, offspring of the Word, of *Be* and *It Is*, of the Masculine *Be* and the Feminine *It Is*, is a creation that reaches in humankind its highest perfection, its most subtle and refined form. The creation as existence itself, declares Bahá'u'lláh in his Tablet of Wisdom, arises out of what he calls "the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient" (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 140). These two forces, which, though "different," are the "same," are the supreme sign of the existence of God within existence itself, an existence operative within nature as evolution and within humankind as the perfection of nature in and as Progressive Revelation. Progressive Revelation, that is, is the human form of evolution, a form nascent within its earlier mineral, vegetable, and animal stages as the entelechy or purpose of evolution. Progressive Revelation, therefore, is evolution itself from its earliest stages to its highest, an evolution that is recapitulated and potentially extended in every single human being. The Feminine as the "recipient" of the active force is present as the evolution of life itself as, on the biological level, that life is contained and recapitulated in the development of the embryo in the womb. The Feminine is that biology understood symbolically rather than literally.

To become conscious in Bahá'u'lláh's writings of what each of us is, of what as progressive evolution each of us contains, is to become conscious of not only what the Feminine is now but also what it now means to be created in the image and likeness of God. In addressing through the Feminine each and every individual in this day, Bahá'u'lláh is addressing humanity in its entirety through every stage of its existence from its conception as a single cell, which like the atom contains the sun, to its present state, and beyond its present state into the eternity of its existence in all the worlds of God. More than that, the development of the individual from its conception metaphorically repeats the entire process of Progressive Revelation from Adam to Bahá'u'lláh. As the recipients of the divine Word, we are Adam in Eden, understood as the womb of the mother; we are Noah and the flood, understood as the breaking of the waters that hurled us down the birth canal into a new land, the greeting parents understood as the dove bearing the olive branch. As we follow in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* our continuing evolution beyond Noah to Jesus and Muhammad and thence to the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, who are our coming of age, we enter a City of Certitude that contains as fulfillment the promise of Eden and the meaning of Adam's exile. In that city we glimpse, beyond what our consciousness can as yet contain, an infinity of meanings that Bahá'u'lláh describes as seventy and one—seven being the number of completion upon which God set a seal and the one being the infinity that opens beyond it.

Calling upon us to release ourselves from a purely biological history that takes us from the maternal cradle to an equally maternal grave, a history that keeps us wrapped in the dense veils of our paltry egos whose illusory ambitions are forever threatened with defeat, Bahá'u'lláh thus exhorts us, "Suffer not yourselves to be wrapt in the dense veils of your selfish desires, inasmuch as I have perfected in everyone of you My creation, so that the excellence of My handiwork may be fully revealed unto men" (*Gleanings* 143).

The “excellence of [God’s] handiwork” is “revealed unto men” whenever anyone of us consciously acknowledges its active presence in us, whenever, that is, we recognize that we are the recipients of the active force, which, though different from us, is the same. “O My Servants!” declares Bahá’u’lláh,

Could ye apprehend with what wonders of My munificence and bounty I have willed to entrust your souls, ye would, of a truth, rid yourselves of attachment to all created things, and would gain a true knowledge of your own selves—a knowledge which is the same as the comprehension of Mine own Being. (*Gleanings* 326–27)

My purpose, then, in focusing upon the role of the Feminine in the Bahá’í Faith is to bring us to a conscious apprehension of the “wonders of [God’s] munificence and bounty” within each and every one of us. The Feminine that I am addressing may therefore be described as the inner Feminine at work in each of us, both men and women, even as it is present throughout the creation.

If we think of God as “He” as distinct from “She” as, indeed, Bahá’u’lláh in addressing God as “He” invites us to think, we should realize that Bahá’u’lláh is not identifying God with the male sex. Like the Feminine which is not female, the Masculine is not male. In his Tablet of Wisdom, as in so many other Tablets, Bahá’u’lláh identifies the Masculine with the Word of God whose essence is forever hidden and unknown save as God chooses to reveal it to a consciousness capable of receiving it, which is to say, through the conscious Feminine released by Bahá’u’lláh into its full consciousness as what Bahá’u’lláh calls the “recipient” of the “active force.” “Know thou, moreover, that the Word of God—exalted be His glory,” Bahá’u’lláh writes,

is higher and far superior to that which the senses can perceive, for it is sanctified from any property or substance. It transcendeth the limitations of known elements and is exalted above all the essential and recognized substances. It became manifest without any syllable or sound and is none but the Command of God which pervadeth all created things. It hath never been withheld from the world of being. It is God’s all-pervasive grace, from which all grace doth emanate. It is an entity far removed above all that hath been and shall be. (*Tablets* 140–41)

The Word of God is never final, never sealed. The Feminine as its “inner meaning” keeps it open. The masculine struggle to seal it, to reject its ceaseless coming to birth, is the work of the perverted Masculine in the grip of “Leaders of religion” who are in this sense the abortionists of the Word.

If we identify the Masculine as the Word whose essence remains forever veiled in God’s immemorial being and ancient eternity, we may identify the Feminine as the progressive unveiling of that Word in time, which is to say as its Progressive Revelation. So long as the Masculine and Feminine are viewed in some sort of ambiguous relationship, if not active warfare, then, as humanly interpreted in the Adamic cycle, the Masculine in its perverted form is viewed as struggling to inhibit the work of the Feminine. In its perverted form, the Masculine would silence God by declaring Revelation sealed, rather than open, final rather than progressive, absolute rather than relative. It would, that is, silence what may be called the Feminine Voice of God. Eternity in love with the productions of time becomes Eternity warring with the productions of time, God becoming finally and forever incarnate in Christ or sealed forever in Muhammad. The lamentation of Carmel, the grief of the húrís, indeed the physical death of the Maid of Heaven, testify to the ceaseless patriarchal crushing of the Feminine by a priestly understanding of the Masculine, a crushing which on the human plane my correspondent described as “the overwhelming evidences of inequitable treatment of women by men.”

“Separation from Thee, O Thou Source of everlasting life,” declares Carmel to Bahá’u’lláh, “hath well nigh consumed me, and my remoteness from Thy presence hath burned away my soul” (*Tablet of Carmel* 10). Descending to the Bábí community, contending within itself about the Báb’s true successor who stood within their midst, the Maid of Heaven in Bahá’u’lláh’s Tablet of the Holy Mariner “uttered within herself such a cry that the Celestial Concourse did shriek and tremble” Finally, in the midst of murderous contention over a successor, “she fell upon the dust and gave up the spirit.” “Thereupon,” the Tablet continues:

the maids of heaven hastened forth from their chambers, upon whose countenances the eye of no dweller in the highest paradise had ever gazed....They all gathered around her, and lo! they found her body fallen upon the dust.... And as they beheld her state and comprehended a word of the tale told by the Youth, they bared their heads, rent their garments asunder, beat upon their faces, forgot their joy, shed tears and smote with their hands upon their cheeks, and this is verily one of the mysterious grievous afflictions— (*Bahá’í Prayers* 228–29)

If, I suggest, Feminists could hear this cry of the maids of heaven, they would hear the true voice of their own feelings, a voice that contains within it on the highest possible level of meaning everything they rebel against and profoundly desire.

“What pen can recount the things We beheld upon Our return!” writes Bahá’u’lláh in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* of the contention in the Bábí community upon his return from his two-year voluntary exile, a contention symbolically embodied in the Tablet of the Holy Mariner:

Two years have elapsed during which Our enemies have ceaselessly and assiduously contrived to exterminate Us, whereunto all witness. Nevertheless, none amongst the faithful hath risen to render Us any assistance, nor did anyone feel inclined to help in Our deliverance. Nay, instead of assisting Us, what showers of continuous sorrows, their words and deeds have caused to rain upon Our soul! Amidst them all, We stand, life in hand, wholly resigned to His will; that perchance, through God’s loving kindness and His grace, this revealed and manifest Letter may lay clown His life as a sacrifice in the path of the Primal Point, the most exalted Word. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 251–52)

Bahá’u’lláh standing, life in hand, ready to lay down his life as a sacrifice in the path of the Báb, stood surrounded by numberless maids of heaven who, in the Tablet of the Holy Mariner, pleaded in the inner ears of the demoralized Bábís for their recognition of Bahá’u’lláh. Standing amidst the divided Bábís, Bahá’u’lláh was in the company of the maids of heaven, the chief of whom had accompanied him to the prison in Tehran where in dream she announced to him his station. What, then, the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* as revelation reveals is the inner Feminine, the “Brides of inner meaning” issuing in streams from Bahá’u’lláh’s pen to unveil to the true believer all that remained concealed within the Bible and the Qur’án. Not for nothing, therefore, Bahá’u’lláh tells us that

whoso reciteth, in the privacy of his chamber, the verses revealed by God, the scattering angels of the Almighty shall scatter abroad the fragrance of the words uttered by his mouth, and shall cause the heart of every righteous man to throb. Though he may, at first, remain unaware of its effect, yet the virtue of the grace vouchsafed unto him must needs sooner or later exercise its influence upon his soul. Thus have the mysteries of the Revelation of God been decreed by virtue or the Will of Him Who is the Source of power and wisdom. (*Gleanings* 295)

The Feminine is the scattering “fragrance of the words” that causes the heart of the Masculine “to throb.” The “mysteries of the Revelation of God” are the “mysteries” of the Feminine which constitute the inner life of Revelation, even as it describes the inner life of the divided Bábís who, in their failure to recognize Bahá’u’lláh as the One announced by the Báb, were cut off from the Feminine descending in droves into their midst as the húrís or maids of heaven. The recognition of Bahá’u’lláh, that is, lay in the operations of the Feminine as the inner meaning of the Revelation of the Báb. As unveiled in the Báb’s inspired commentary on the Súrih of Joseph, understood as the declaration of his station in which the melody of his voice was accompanied by the rhythmic motion of his pen, this inner meaning lay in the reunion of the lost and betrayed Joseph with his father Jacob, a reunion that allegorically anticipates the unveiling of Bahá’u’lláh to the entire world.

In the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, Bahá’u’lláh therefore describes the Feminine as “the Brides of inner meaning” who “hasten forth, unveiled, out of their mystic mansions [of the Word], and manifest themselves in the ancient realm of being” (175–76). The Word, that is, progressively reveals its multiple meanings in time until, with the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh, the union of the Word with its seventy and one meanings is made universally manifest, first in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* and then in Bahá’u’lláh’s Tablets and Laws. As Bahá’u’lláh explains in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, residing within the Masculine Word lie the seventy and one Feminine meanings to be revealed when the Qá’im arises. “Thus it is recorded,” Bahá’u’lláh declares: “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’” (255).

Though as Revelation all “the Brides of inner meaning” stand unveiled before Bahá’u’lláh, he is in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, because of the limitations of the maternal uncle whom he is addressing, unable to share their unveiling with him. “Notwithstanding all that We have mentioned,” Bahá’u’lláh therefore explains,

how innumerable are the pearls which have remained unpierced in the shell of Our heart! How many the húrís of inner meaning that are as yet concealed within the chambers of divine wisdom! None hath yet approached them; húrís, “whom no man nor spirit hath touched before.” (70–71)

And, then, not having yet released as Revelation all that still remained veiled in the Word, Bahá'u'lláh adds:

Notwithstanding all that hath been said, it seemeth as if not one letter of Our purpose hath been uttered, nor a single sign divulged concerning Our object. When will a faithful seeker be found who will don the garb of pilgrimage, attain the Ka'bih of the heart's desire, and, without ear or tongue, discover the mysteries of divine utterance? (71)

In this account of the “faithful seeker,” Bahá'u'lláh gently reprimands the Báb's maternal uncle who attained the presence of Bahá'u'lláh at the explicit invitation of Bahá'u'lláh on his way back from his pilgrimage to the holy shrines of Shí'ih Islam. He came as an unbeliever, armed with questions which Bahá'u'lláh asked him to present in written form, requiring as he did both ear and tongue to discover “the mysteries of divine utterance.”

The discovery of “divine utterance” without “ear or tongue” in a realm beyond the reach of the senses locates that “utterance” in an invisible and inaudible realm that only the symbol can touch, thereby opening the sensible to the supersensible. What is open to every eye and ear, in what my correspondent described as the “overwhelming evidences of the inequitable treatment of women by men,” is a symbol of the invisible. It opens, that is, to the cry of the Maid of Heaven, a cry that is, in this divine Day, the true voice of Feminism.

“Heard melodies are sweet,” declares Keats in his “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” as he attends closely to the piper depicted on the silent urn,

but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore ye soft pipes, play on,
Not to the sensual ear, but more endear'd
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone. (11–14)

For the “faithful seeker,” Bahá'u'lláh explains in the Tablet of Wisdom, the Word becomes “manifest without any syllable or sound ...” (*Tablets* 141). In that silence, like the silence of Keats's urn, the difference between the Masculine and the Feminine becomes not difference but identity, what Christians with reference to the sacrament of marriage call “one flesh,” one creation generated by the “heat” of the “interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient.” The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is the consciousness of this divine marriage as what Bahá'u'lláh calls the “new creation,” a new creation that in the final chapters of the Bible “com[es] down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” even as in the marriage Tablet of Carmel, Carmel is adorned to meet Bahá'u'lláh.

Bahá'u'lláh describes the unknowable state of nothingness that exists in the moment between the passing away of one dispensation and the inauguration of a new one as the state of the Creator without a creation. In this state, the Creator remains the unknowable essence within which the Masculine and Feminine have not yet been differentiated so that as differentiated entities they do not exist. God is in essence completely undifferentiated into Masculine and Feminine; the differentiation that allows us to know and worship God in and as Revelation is a differentiation into Masculine and Feminine without which God remains completely inaccessible and unknown. “Masculine” and “Feminine” are the terms of mediation by which God becomes known to us and in us, even as, during Bahá'u'lláh's imprisonment in the Sýyih-Chál, Bahá'u'lláh becomes known to himself in dream through the Maid of Heaven. “Verily,” she declared, “We shall render Thee victorious by Thyself and by Thy Pen. Grieve Thou not for that which hath befallen Thee, neither be Thou afraid, for Thou art in safety” (*Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 21). God reveals godhood through and in the Feminine, which is the form of the creation itself.

To isolate the Masculine and Feminine from each other, the “active force” from “that which is its recipient,” to fail to recognize that, though “different,” they are “the same” is to reject the divine creation itself by treating creation as the scene of perpetual conflict with a masculine tyranny at one pole and a feminine anarchy at the other. To embrace difference as “the same” is to embrace paradox as opposed to contradiction, thereby uniting what in the past has remained tragically separated.

Nowhere is this separation more apparent than in the rejection of Progressive Revelation as the continuous and ceaseless Feminine unfolding of the Masculine Will of God through an unending procession of Messengers in which the divine marriage of the Masculine and the Feminine has taken place. Not until the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, however, was this inner marriage, or what in alchemy is called the *hieros gamos*, fully unveiled. In what may be called the Marriage Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, which celebrate Bahá'u'lláh's spiritual union with the Maid of Heaven and Carmel, the “heat” or energy required for a mutation of human consciousness is released. The resulting mutation that is our consciousness of the oneness of God and the creation may thus be described as the spiritual offspring of the nuptial union of the Masculine and the Feminine within the Manifestation.

Addressing those who identify the unknowable essence of God with God's Messengers, Bahá'u'lláh, embracing paradox rather than contradiction, boldly declares: "Were any of the all-embracing Manifestations of God to declare: 'I am God,' He, verily, speaketh the truth, and no doubt attacheth thereto." To which, however, Bahá'u'lláh immediately adds: "And were any of them to voice the utterance, 'I am the Messenger of God,' He, also, speaketh the truth, the indubitable truth" (*Gleanings* 54). For Bahá'u'lláh these two statements are not, in their relative human context, contradictory. Though different, they are the same in the knowable realm of creation. Therefore, were the Manifestation to declare "I am God," the God whom the Manifestation claims to be is the God of creation, of revelation, as distinct from the God who remains forever unknown even to the Manifestation. Creation itself is contained within the unknowable essence of God. God's essence is the mystery of creation, the mystery of life itself.

Because Revelation (as our consciousness of God) is forever unfolding, it remains (as the unfolding of the eternal in space and time) bound to the relativity of space and time as well as to the absoluteness of the eternal that transcends them both. Indeed, the binding of Revelation to the relativity of space and time is such that the decrees of the eternal as they unfold in space and time may be broken or left unfulfilled as if the eternal itself were answerable to time. The institution of the Guardianship as one of the two pillars of universal justice is a contemporary example, the Guardian in his untimely death leaving no will and testament and therefore no successor. The God who in the station of the Manifestation is progressively unveiled in space and time is a God for whom the conditions of space and time may play a largely unforeseeable part, even initially to the Manifestation.

Bahá'u'lláh identifies this unveiling of the Word in space and time, including its sometimes unforeseeable outcome in which a divine decree is not fulfilled, with the "Brides of inner meaning" whose unveiling depends upon their human reception. If, therefore, a divine decree is left unfulfilled, it is because the Brides found no adequate human receptors for their "inner meaning." "I personally am convinced," writes Rúhíyyih *Khánúm*, the widow of Shoghi Effendi, in *The Priceless Pearl*: "that the main reason the heart of the Guardian was sufficiently undermined physically for it to stop in 1957 was because of the unbearable strain thirty-six years of interminable struggle with a series of Covenant-breakers had placed upon it" (123). Addressing himself to this "unbearable strain," Shoghi Effendi cabled the Bahá'ís after the death of a brother-in-law who had broken with the Covenant that "time alone will reveal extent havoc wreaked this virus violation injected fostered over two decades..." (123). Time, as the unfolding of the havoc wreaked by a spreading viral infection, radically influences and even changes the decree of the Manifestation, Revelation itself being dependent for its efficacy upon its human reception, though God in essence remains completely independent of it. The Feminine as the "recipient" in time and space of the "active force," at once "different" from it though "the same," suffers in a profoundly human way the "havoc" of time, a "havoc" wreaked by the rejection of the "active force" by those who were the most intimately connected to it by family ties.

It is, I suggest, to the Tablet of the Holy Mariner that one must turn to find in the lament of the maids of heaven the paradigm of the grief of Rúhíyyih *Khánúm* over the treatment of the Guardian by the members of his own family. "He goes on," she writes in her diary between 1940 and 1945,

"but it is like a man in a blizzard who cannot sometimes even open his eyes for the blinding snow." "He is like a man whose skin has been burned off ... it is a miracle he can keep going." "I feel sure the tide will turn. But oh, never, never to find Shoghi Effendi as he was! I don't think anything in this world will ever be able to efface what these last years have done to him! Time is a great healer but it cannot remove scars." "It seems it is all irretrievably broken." (124)

If, as I have argued, the role of the Feminine resides in the progressive unveiling of the Will of God in time, intimately connected to that role, which is the role of Progressive Revelation itself, is the heart-felt articulation of the agony of its rejection, the cry that arises out of the havoc wreaked by the denial that decimated the direct descendants of Bahá'u'lláh, leaving the Guardian in the end with a heart broken beyond repair. The feminine cry of that broken heart is the cry of Rúhíyyih *Khánúm* as the true Bride of the Guardian's "inner meaning," an "inner meaning" that she continues to this day to unveil in the creative eloquence of a grief that opens into a "fathomless mystery" in which it becomes joy, light, and mercy. None, declares Bahá'u'lláh, can penetrate that mystery save God, who declares that "Man is My mystery, and I am his mystery" (*Gleanings* 177).

If, as instructed by Bahá'u'lláh, we can cling to the paradox of the station of the Manifestation without slipping into contradiction, what opens to us is the "fathomless mystery" that remains inviolate. Again and again, Bahá'u'lláh suggests, it is grief itself that lovingly guides the soul to this "fathomless" place beyond the reach of human violation, a place no knowledge can penetrate or vision take in, a place where "calamity" is finally unveiled as "providence," "death" as the "messenger of joy." "O Salman!" Bahá'u'lláh declares, "The door of the knowledge

of the Ancient Being hath ever been, and will continue for ever to be, closed in the face of men. No man's understanding shall ever gain access unto His holy court" (*Gleanings* 49). What is closed is at the same time open. Though the door remains forever closed to a knowledge of the transcendent God who is "immensely exalted beyond every human attribute" (*Gleanings* 46), God's presence nevertheless remains. The Gate is open. "No vision taketh in Him, but He taketh in all vision ..." Bahá'u'lláh yet again declares (*Gleanings* 47). To be taken in by the Unknowable, the "Creator without a creation," is to embrace our own nothingness before the unknowable God, and in that nothingness recognize all that we in the sight of God are. Nothingness opens to everything. "Were the eye of discernment to be opened," Bahá'u'lláh writes with reference to the Prophet's communion with God,

it would recognize that in this very state, [the Prophets] have considered themselves utterly effaced and non-existent in the face of Him Who is the All-Pervading, the Incorruptible. Methinks, they have regarded themselves as utter nothingness, and deemed their mention in that Court an act of blasphemy. For the slightest whispering of self within such a Court is an evidence of self-assertion and independent existence. (*Gleanings* 55)

What, on the human plane, constitutes the Masculine as the symbol of the transcendent and eternal (God as "He") is this degree of detachment from all earthly things, including our knowledge of all earthly things. The supreme function of the Masculine as distinct from the Feminine resides, I suggest, in the seventh valley described by Bahá'u'lláh as the state of "True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness." However paradoxical it may at first appear, the detachment that characterizes the seventh valley as a state of "True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness" requires an intensity of passion that, as fire, as the union of the Masculine and Feminine, burns away all the veils that separate the true believer from God. "For when the true lover and devoted friend reacheth to the presence of the Beloved," Bahá'u'lláh declares of the final Valley, "the sparkling beauty of the Loved One and the fire of the lover's heart will kindle a blaze and burn away all veils and wrappings. Yea, all he hath, from heart to skin, will be set aflame, so that nothing will remain save the Friend" (*Seven Valleys* 36). Bahá'u'lláh here wonderfully describes the "heat" that generates in humankind the crown of God's creation as the ultimate reunion of the Majnún of love with his lost Laylí. Precisely in the ultimate state of "True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness," which is the supreme symbol of the Masculine, one confronts within oneself the "mystic bride of inner meaning enshrined within the chambers of utterance in the utmost grace and fullest adornment" (*Kitáb-Íqán* 140). The true Masculine, that is, is always already operative in relation to the Feminine: the one is never in reality absent from the other. Indeed, in the ultimate reach of a mystical consciousness, the one is the other.

Enacting within Bahá'u'lláh, within, that is, the movement of the "Most Exalted Pen" (*Gleanings* 27), the reunion of the Masculine and Feminine (the Majnún of Love with his lost Laylí), Bahá'u'lláh, addressing Carmel, unveils the inner process of Revelation as that process gives birth in us to a new consciousness. No previous Manifestation has brought humanity so close to the spiritual source of creation itself, so close to the Burning Bush that Moses described at a distance from himself, so close, indeed, that Bahá'ís are obliged to entreat God in their Long Obligatory Prayer by Moses' own words: "Here am I." "And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt," Exodus records.

And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I.

And he said, Draw not nigh hither; put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground. (Exodus 3:3-5)

In the light of this distance ("Draw not nigh hither") one may well conceive the shock received by the Tribunal at Tabriz when the Báb declared to the 'ulamá, "I am but the Tree [the Burning Bush] on Sinai" (quoted in Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 389). "Step out of Thy holy chamber, O Maid of Heaven, inmate of the Exalted Paradise!" declares Bahá'u'lláh to his Bride: "Drape thyself in whatever manner pleaseth Thee in the silken Vesture of Immortality, and put on, in the name of the All-Glorious, the brodered Robe of Light" (*Gleanings* 282-83). One cannot help but think here of Tahirih, the true pilgrim who, without the aid of ear and eye, reached the Ka'bih of her heart's desire, draped herself in the white silken vesture of her wedding garment, and went forth to unite in martyrdom with her Beloved. In the inmost reaches of her soul, she was known to Bahá'u'lláh before Bahá'u'lláh had unveiled to mortal ears his Tablet of Carmel. "Hear, then," Bahá'u'lláh continues, "the sweet, the wondrous accent of the Voice that cometh from the Throne of Thy Lord, the Inaccessible, the Most High. Unveil Thy face, and manifest the beauty of the black-eyed Damsel, and suffer not the servants of God to be deprived of the light of Thy shining countenance" (*Gleanings* 283). At the Conference in Badasht in 1848, long before Bahá'u'lláh unveiled his

Tablet of Carmel, Táhirih, as if in obedience to Bahá'u'lláh as the divine Bridegroom, unveiled her face and manifested the beauty of her black eyes. Though Bahá'u'lláh would not suffer the Bábís at Badash^t to be deprived of the light of her shining countenance, so great was that light that some, unable to endure it, left the Bábí Faith, one of them cutting his throat in horror. “Intone, then,” Bahá'u'lláh continues, addressing Carmel, “before the face of the peoples of earth and heaven, and in a most melodious voice, the anthem of praise, for a remembrance of Him Who is the King of the names and attributes of God. Thus have We decreed Thy destiny” (*Gleanings* 283). For three days before her martyrdom, Táhirih, isolated in her chamber under house arrest, fasted and chanted the praise of her Beloved (Nabíl, *Dawn-Breakers* 624), praise that contained within it the voice of the new Feminine released into consciousness under the guidance of Bahá'u'lláh at the Conference of Badash^t.

In Táhirih, the Maid of Heaven found an earthly home, Táhirih becoming in her life and in her poetry the paradigm of the conscious Feminine, a model which Feminists might well emulate as, in pursuit of political and social goals, they remain too often deprived of the spiritual energy of a new Revelation upon which those goals to be truly global and truly human must now rest.

The “destiny” of the Feminine is to serve as the Voice of Revelation. The Feminine resides in the poetry of the Word, the grief and exaltation of the Word, the “melodious voice” of the Word, the “silken vesture” of the Word, the “brodered Robe” of the Word, the scattering “fragrance” of the Word. This is in no sense to suggest that the Feminine is the mere decoration of the Masculine; it is rather its “inner meaning” as the mystic bride of the Masculine. Nowhere in the tablets of Bahá'u'lláh is this more evident than in Bahá'u'lláh's address to the mystic bride as Carmel who descends from Heaven as the bride of the New Jerusalem, God's kingdom on earth.¹

Thus in the Tablet to Cannel, Carmel comes forth upon the slopes of the Mountain of God arrayed in the robe of her nine terraces that flow down to the Bay of Haifa, her brodered folds teeming with flowers and fountains. “Haste thee, O Carmel,” cry “the voices of all created things, and beyond them those of the Concourse on high for lo, the light of the countenance of God, the Ruler of the Kingdom of Names and the Fashioner of the heavens, hath been lifted upon thee.” “Seized with transports of joy, and raising high her voice,” Cannel replies,

“May my life be a sacrifice to Thee, inasmuch as Thou hast fixed Thy gaze upon me, hast bestowed upon me Thy bounty, and hast directed towards me Thy steps. Separation from Thee, O Thou Source of everlasting life, hath well nigh consumed me, and my remoteness from Thy presence hath burned away my soul.” (*Tablet of Carmel* 4–10)

(One need only to have seen the battered condition of the slope of the Mountain of God before the Guardian began the work of its transformation to understand the separation that consumed Carmel, the remoteness that burned away her soul.) “All praise be to Thee,” Carmel continues in her response to Bahá'u'lláh,

for having enabled me to hearken to Thy call, for having honored me with Thy footsteps, and for having quickened my soul through the vitalizing fragrance of Thy Day and 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 lo 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.

To which Bahá'u'lláh replies:

Render thanks unto Thy Lord, O Carmel. The fire of thy separation from Me was fast consuming thee, when the ocean of My presence surged before thy face, cheering thine eyes and those of all creation, and filling with delight all things visible and invisible. Rejoice, for God hath in this Day established upon thee His throne, hath made thee the dawning-place of His signs and the day spring of the evidences of His Revelation. (*Tablet of Carmel* 12–28)

The Eternal identified as Masculine assumes in time a Feminine form. Without this Feminine form—the form of the creation itself—the Masculine would remain veiled or hidden within itself, what Bahá'u'lláh describes as a Creator without a creation, creation being the progressive revelation of the Creator, the Eternal in time, which is to say, the Feminine as the temporal form of the Eternal.

In the Persian *Hidden Words*, Bahá'u'lláh announces the unveiling of the Feminine as the unveiling of Fátimih, the *Hidden Words of Fátimih* being the original title of the work. According to tradition, Fátimih, the daughter of Muhammad, wife of the first Imám, and mother of the succeeding Imáms, will stand unveiled on the

bridge Sirát on the Day of Judgment announcing in her unveiling the resurrection of humankind. Thus in his *Hidden Words*, Bahá'u'lláh is in reality announcing through and in the Feminine his own station as the Manifestation of God for this Day. His announcement is his unveiling of the “mystic and wondrous Bride.” “The mystic and wondrous Bride,” he concluded in the Persian *Hidden Words*,

hidden ere this beneath the veiling of utterance, hath now, by the grace of God and His divine favor, been made manifest even as the resplendent light shed by the beauty of the Beloved. I bear witness, O friends! that the favor is complete, the argument fulfilled, the proof manifest and the evidence established. (*Hidden Words* 51–52)

In Bahá'u'lláh's unveiling of the Feminine, the prophetic cycle ends and the eternal truth emerges as proof manifest and evidence complete. In the proof manifest and evidence complete resides in the Bahá'í Faith the newly emerged, the newly exalted, role of the Feminine as the divine energy of the Word driving it as Progressive Revelation to its earthly fulfillment beyond which, still unveiled, remain infinite worlds of God stretching from a beginning that has no beginning to an end that has no end. Precisely, I suggest, in this earthly unveiling of the Feminine in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, the human soul has in this day bound itself to the divine process of creation. United with that process, the soul as newly created by Bahá'u'lláh has consciously entered here on earth an eternal world that is not subject to death, a divine springtime that can know no winter.

Contemplating, at the instigation of the Maid of Heaven, the glories of this new day that has no precedent in the past, Bahá'u'lláh becomes so inebriated by the effect of the words of God upon him that “His Pen can move no longer” (*Gleanings* 35). In the stilling of his pen we too must cease. With these words Bahá'u'lláh concludes his tablet: “No God is there but Me, the Most Exalted, the Most Powerful, the Most Excellent, the All-Knowing” (*Gleanings* 35).

The “Me” is Bahá'u'lláh's recognition of his station as both God and the Messenger of God. In this silencing act of recognition toward which the entire “Divine Springtime” tablet mounts to release a power unmatched by any previous Revelation, the differentiation into Masculine and Feminine is transcended. What we are privileged to glimpse in “No God is there but Me” is Bahá'u'lláh alone in the presence of God, a presence in which his “Pen can move no longer.” Only the God who dwells in an unknown and unknowable realm beyond creation, who transcends the dynamic differentiation into Masculine and Feminine, can by an act of the divine will both abrogate “the entire creation” and call into being “a new creation as a token of Our grace unto men” (*Gleanings* 29–30). “Nothing remaineth except My Face” (*Gleanings* 29), understood as the unveiling of the station of Bahá'u'lláh as the Face of God, opens to the contemplative inner eye a station that in all previous dispensations necessarily remained hidden, even, at least “to a prescribed degree” (quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 77), from the Manifestations themselves. The Face of God that remained veiled is the face of the Feminine that is now at last unveiled. The unveiled Feminine Face of God—Fátimih standing unveiled on the bridge Sirát on the Day of Resurrection—thus becomes, when symbolically understood in its seventy and one meanings, the defining feature of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

Notes

1. In 1890, Bahá'u'lláh visited Haifa on four different occasions. During one of these visits, Bahá'u'lláh pitched his tent in the vicinity of the Carmelite Monastery, and there revealed the Tablet of Carmel. In the Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition, God's Feminine Consort is called Shekinah, from the Hebrew shakan (to pitch one's tent) (Armstrong, “A God for Both Sexes” 70).

Works Cited

- 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Some Answered Questions*. Comp. and trans. Laura Clifford Barney. 4th ed. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981.
- Amanat, Abbas. *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Bábí Movement in Iran, 1844–1850*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989.
- Armstrong, Karen. "A God for Both Sexes." *The Economist* 341.7997 (21 December 1996): 65–70.
- Bahá'í Prayers: A Selection of Prayers Revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. 4th ed. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991.
- Bahá'u'lláh. *Kitáb-i-Íqán* [The Book of Certitude]. Trans. Shoghi Effendi. 2d ed. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1950.
- . *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*. Trans. Shoghi Effendi. 3d ed. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988.
- . *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Trans. Shoghi Effendi. 2d ed. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976.
- . *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1939.
- . *The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys*. Trans. Marzieh Gail with A. K. Khan. 3d ed. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978.
- . *Tablet of Carmel*. Centenary Edition. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1992.
- . *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. Comp. Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice. Trans. H. Taherzadeh et al. 2d ed. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988.
- Blake, William. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Ed. David Endman. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1982.
- Eliot, T. S. *Selected Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 1944.
- Keats, John. *The Poems of John Keats*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978.
- Milton, John. *The Student's Milton*. Ed. F. W. Patterson. New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1933.
- Nabíl-i-A'zam. *The Dawn-Breakers*. Trans. Shoghi Effendi. New York: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1932.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Philosophical Writings*. Ed. Reinhold Grimm and Caroline Molina y Vedia. New York: Continuum Publishing, 1995.
- Rúhíyyih Rabbani. *The Priceless Pearl*. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969.
- Shoghi Effendi. *Advent of Divine Justice*. 4th ed. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984.