

Perfection and Refinement: Towards an Aesthetics of the Bab

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The Bab was the title taken by Sayyid `Ali Muhammad Shirazi (1819-1850) when he began a religious movement in Iran in 1844. Over the next 6 years, this movement was to convulse Iran. In the first place, the movement spread rapidly throughout Iran with the formation of Babi groups in most major Iranian cities and many villages too. It met, however, hostility from the religious leaders of Shi`i Islam, the predominant form of Islam in Iran. Within eight months of the start of the movement, senior Shi`i and Sunni clerics were calling for the death of the founder of the movement and anyone who was spreading it.¹ For the first four years, the opposition to the movement was confined to religious debate and denunciations from the pulpit. In 1848, however, with the accession to the throne of a new shah, Nasiru`d-Din Shah, and the installation of a new Prime Minister, the religious leaders succeeded in getting the state involved in the conflict on a military level. There ensued three major armed conflicts in which militia and the national army surrounded groups of Babis. After besieging them for months, the Babis were finally, in one case, defeated militarily and, in two cases, given false assurances of amnesty and then massacred. The Bab himself, after three years of imprisonment, was executed by firing squad in 1850 at the height of these upheavals.²

As a result of these three conflicts and a further severe round of persecution that erupted in 1852 after a failed attempt on the life of the shah by a small group of Babis, the Babi movement was driven underground. It was to re-emerge years later in the 1870s as the Baha'i movement. The Bab had prophesied the coming of another even greater religious figure called "He whom God would make manifest". In 1863, privately to a small group of Babis and, from 1866, more publically, Mirza Husayn `Ali Nuri, who took the title Baha'u'llah (1817-1892), claimed to be this figure and his followers were known as Baha'is. An estimated 95% of Babis became Baha'is and, although a small number of Babis have survived to the present day and some of them have had a significant impact on Iranian society, the movement as a functioning community effectively ended in the 1870s.

The Babi movement may seem a very unpromising place to look for inspiration for the arts or a system of aesthetics. It was after all a community that was severely persecuted during the short course of its existence. It never succeeded in establishing a stable community that could operate freely; it therefore never had the opportunity to promote and patronize the arts in the way that other religions have done. There was certainly never a Babi-inspired school of art and one would be hard pressed even to name any Babi artists.

What I hope to show is that despite the apparently unpromising circumstances there is

¹ See Moojan Momen, "The Trial of Mulla `Ali Bastami: a combined Sunni-Shi`i fatwa against the Bab." *Iran: Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies* vol. 20 (1982) pp. 113-43.

² Nabil [Zarandi]. *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabil's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970; Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran 1844-1850*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989.

potential material for inspiring the artist in both the life and writings of the Bab. This potential has not thus far been actualized but since the Bab is considered a co-founder of the Baha'i Faith, it is probable that Baha'i artists in the future may gain inspiration from this material. In this paper, I divide the arts into three major divisions: the plastic arts, those arts produced by using materials that can be moulded or changed in some way, such as painting, sculpture, architecture, wood- and metal- working, pottery, etc.; the performing arts, those arts where artists use their own body to express themselves, such as dance, theatre, and the performance of music; and the composing arts, that which artists produces in their mind and then transfer to paper, such as literature, both poetry and prose, and the composition of music.

I will deal a little with the literary qualities below but, although it is obviously of great importance in considering the Bab as an artist, I will not be dealing at length with the Bab as a composing artist in this paper, partly because it has already been dealt with in a masterly fashion by Todd Lawson.³ Rather I will concentrate on the other two areas, the plastic arts and the performing arts. In this paper I will concentrate on three main points: some of the writings of the Bab have implications about the nature of the material with which those who are in the plastic arts work. The second area that I want to explore concerns the performing arts: the Bab himself as a performance artist and the nature of some of his writings as pieces that are intended to be performed as much as read. The third area that appears to me to have relevance to artists whether engaged in the plastic arts or the performance arts is the concept of refinement that comes across very strongly in both the person and the writings of the Bab.

1. The Bab and the Composing Arts

The Bab produces a vast mass of this category of the arts in the form of a large number of writings, most of which have not even been properly examined and catalogued as yet. He was known to produce his writings in a rapid, fluent manner which amazed those who witnessed it. For example on one occasion in the presence of the Governor of Isfahan, he wrote a work of 2,000 verses (about a third of the length of the Qur'an, which had taken Muhammad forty years to reveal) in a single evening (see below). It was not just the rapidity and quantity of what the Bab produced that attracted people, it was also the literary qualities and the content. The rhymes and rhythm of the text, the vivid imagery evoked, and the rich intertextuality all combined to produce a range of works which inspired a large number of his contemporaries. In this literary output, the Bab did what every great creative artist does – he took what was known and familiar and he presented it to us in a new way that made us see in it what we had never seen before – what he created was both familiar and radically new. For example, in his his first book after the declaration of his mission, the *Qayyum al-Asma*, he took the two most central and sacred elements of the Islamic world, the Qur'an and the Arabic language, and he moulded these into a new creation,. It was both familiar in that it was recognizably the Arabic language that he used and the whole book has the literary structure of the Qur'an and uses innumerable passages of the Qur'an. And yet it is radically different in that the Bab feels free to break the rules of Arabic grammar and to create new words and he weaves his own words in between those of the Qur'an so as reveal a radically new meaning to the words of the

³ See Todd Lawson, *Gnostic Apocalypse and Islam: Qur'an, exegesis, messianism, and the literary origins of the Babi Religion*, London and New York: Routledge, 2011; Todd Lawson, "Interpretation as Revelation: The Qur'an Commentary of Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad Shirazi, the Bab," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an* (ed. A. Rippin), Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1988, pp. 223-253.

Qur'an – in all it was a new creation. He was in effect saying to Muslims that although they had been reading the Qur'an for a thousand years, they had never really understood the deeper meanings of that book. The composing artistry of the Bab is well brought out by Todd Lawson:

For the Bab it seems that the sacred text represents a kind of musical score or even a scale (*maqam*) which in good eastern style is meant to be improvised upon. It is the stunning quality of his improvisation that impressed his audience. The Bab's minute attention to the text, the desire to encounter the charisma of the holy word by literally deconstructing it, is remarkably intense.⁴

Muslims believe, based on a verse of the Qur'an, that the Qur'an, since it was the Word of God, is inimitable. By producing a book that is so obviously in imitation of the Qur'an, he was sending a clear message to Muslims; no mere human being could produce such a work. Both by implication and explicitly in the text, he was asserting that this was Divine revelation, in effect claiming to be of the same station as the prophet Muhammad (for in the Islamic worldview, only prophets can reveal the words of God); while at the same time his apparent claim was to be only the agent of the Hidden Imam. Thus his work could be read at a number of different levels according to the receptivity of the reader.

Incidentally, the reaction to this work of the Bab was not dissimilar to the reaction that occurs when any artist produces a radically new work, the reaction is initially mostly hostile: most decry it and say it is not art at all, some say that even my child can produce better art than this, while others adduce base motives to the production of such a work; only a few recognize the true genius of the work at first. The Bab received exactly the same reaction to his writings: most decried them, they were scandalized, some said even my child can write better Arabic than this, while others attributed base motives to the Bab. Only a few recognized and appreciated it; only a few could look beyond the scandalous impact of the work and understand what lay behind this; only a few had a vision broad enough to put their understanding of reality aside and appreciate the new reality that was being presented to them.⁵

2. The Writings of the Bab and the Plastic Arts

The writings of the Bab contain some statements about inanimate material objects that appear to accord with the way that artists in many native and primal traditions view the world. For the Bab (and Baha'u'llah) everything in the physical world manifests one or more of the names and attributes of God and it is through this that the gift of existence has been bestowed upon it by God. This manifesting of the names and attributes of God is not all at the same

⁴ Todd Lawson "Qur'an Commentary as Sacred Performance," in *Iran im 19 Jahrhundert und die Entstehung der Baha'i Religion* (ed. by Johann-Christoph Burgel and Isabel Schayani), Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1998, pp.145-58, see p. 152.

⁵ This section of the paper owes a great deal to the work of Todd Lawson who has not only brought out some of the meaning of the Bab's *Qayuum al-Asma*, but he has also helped us to understand the poetics of the Bab; see Lawson, *Gnostic Apocalypse and Islam* and Lawson, "Interpretation as Revelation".

level, however. The Bab describes how there is an ascent of matter from earth to stone to crystal; and when the stone turns into crystal, it manifests the name of God "the Eternal":

The fruit of this command is that when the return of All [Things] is approaching its manifestation, it glorifies God inasmuch as the element earth is mentioned therein; and the highest point of the ascent of 'earth' is the lowest point of 'stone' - till that terminates in the highest degree of purity, which is crystal, whereupon the name 'the Eternal (*samad*)' is manifest in it.⁶

The Bab, in several places in the Persian Bayan, states that perfection in anything is when it manifests the names and attributes of God most perfectly. And the Bab gives examples of this *B* for example the perfection of a stone is when it is polished and becomes a crystal. He calls this state of perfection of the stone the "paradise of the stone":

No created thing shall ever attain its paradise unless it appeareth in its highest prescribed degree of perfection. For instance, this crystal representeth the paradise of the stone whereof its substance is composed. Likewise there are various stages in paradise for the crystal itself . . . So long as it was stone it was worthless, but if it attaineth the excellence of ruby *B* a potentiality which is latent in it *B* how much a carat will it be worth? Consider likewise every created thing.⁷

In many places in the writings of the Bab "paradise" is defined as being near to God or in the Presence of God. And so, the Bab states that there is a yearning in all matter to achieve its state of perfection, which is its paradise *B* because it is in the state of perfection that 'All Things' can attain to the Divine Presence:

. . .there is no doubt that All Things attain to the Presence of God in whatever is the highest state of perfection that it is possible for them to achieve.⁸

As well as the example of a stone yearning to be a crystal, the Bab gives the example of a piece of paper upon which some words have been inscribed. The paradise of that paper is to be adorned with gold illumination and patterns, as was the custom with calligraphy in Iran. And it is in relation to this point that the Bab lays a weighty responsibility on owners of such a text and on artists. He says that any person who has the ability to bring a thing to its state of perfection and fails to do so is to be held accountable for their failure:

[W]hoever possesseth power over anything must elevate it to its uttermost perfection that it not be deprived of its own paradise. For example, the paradise of a sheet of paper on which a few excellent lines are inscribed is that it be refined with patterns of gold illumination, adornment, and excellence that are customary for the most exalted parchment scrolls. Then the possessor of that paper hath elevated it to its utmost

⁶ Persian Bayan, vahid 5, chapter 12. Adapted from the translation of E.G. Browne in Moojan Momen (ed.), *Selections from the Writings of E.G. Browne* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1987), pp. 369-70.

⁷ Persian Bayan, vahid 5, chapter 4. Translated in *Selections from the Writings of the Bab*, pp. 88-9; cf. E.G. Browne in Momen (ed.), *Selections from the Writings of E.G. Browne*, p. 89.

⁸ Persian Bayan, Exordium, p. 3. Provisional translation by the author.

degree of glory.⁹

The task of the artist is thus to elevate the materials that he or she works with to the highest state of their perfection. The Bab himself was an artist in that he produced calligraphy of great beauty and technically of the highest standard. He also liked to design his calligraphy so that it was often produced in the form of a five-pointed star, which was call "The Temple" (*haykal*) or in a circular pattern (*dá'irih*); prayers for men were written in the form of the *haykal* and those for women in the form of the *dá'irih*. The Bab also produced talismanic forms of calligraphy that were designed for symmetry and beauty and he gives the instructions for the creation of such forms in his writings. In the society in which the Bab lived, calligraphy was considered the highest of the arts. The Bab therefore calls upon his followers to make copies of his writings in as beautiful a manner as possible and gives detailed instructions about this, as in the following example:

That which remains amongst the people from the Tree of Truth [i.e. the Bab] is His words, and the spirits attached to them. Therefore the more they strive to preserve, honour, and exalt His Words, the more will these words be manifest in their spirits. Even small epistles must be bound . . . for [the Bayan] must not become like the Qur'an, fragments of which are sold in every corner of the mosques in an unseemly manner¹⁰ . . . And to whatever extent an effort is made in elevating the production of this [copy of the Bayan], in making its weight as light as possible, in the grandeur of the calligraphy and the illumination of its leaves, the more loved by God it is than something that is produced to a lower standard. It is not appropriate that notes be made in the margins of it . . . The summary of what has been said in this chapter is this that the Bayan belonging to each person should, in his own domain, be incomparable . . . and it is not permissible that it be in anything other than the most beautiful of calligraphy.¹¹

This exalted task given to artists to produce work of the highest quality carries with it a heavy responsibility that if they fail to live up to, they are held accountable. For example, the passage above that calls upon a person having some lines of calligraphy to beautify this to the best of his ability continues thus:

Should he know of a higher degree of refinement and fail to manifest it upon that paper, he would deprive it of its paradise, and he would be held accountable, for why hast thou, despite the possession of the means, withheld the effusion of grace and favour?¹²

⁹ Persian Bayan, Vahid 4, Chapter 11. Translated in Nader Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart* ([Waterloo, ONT]: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2008, p. 255.

¹⁰ The Qur'an is divided into 30 parts, call *juz'* (plural, *ajzá*), which are often sold separately for the use of students and devout.

¹¹ Persian Bayan, Vahid 3, chapter 14, pp. 97-8; provisional translation by the author, using part of the translation of this by E.G. Browne in Momen (ed.), *Selections from the Writings of E.G. Browne*, p. 347.

¹² Persian Bayan, Vahid 4, Chapter 11. Translated in Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart*, p. 255.

This is a very interesting statement of the Bab and I think it is of the utmost significance for artists (especially those that work with materials), craftsmen (or should that now be craftspeople?) or artisans and even labourers. For the Persian Bayan lays upon everyone who produces anything the responsibility to produce that thing in the most perfect way possible or to be held accountable for failing to do so:

It is forbidden to people to cause anything that is defective to appear if they have the power to perfect that thing. For example if someone were to build a house and not bring it to whatever perfection it is capable of achieving, then there will not be an instant that the angels will not calling out to God for his punishment, even the atoms of that building will also do this. For every thing within its own limits desires to attain to the highest point of its limits. And if a person has the ability to do this for it but does not, then he will be held responsible by it.¹³

Thus the Bab conceives of every thing in creation as having a spirit and being a manifestation of one or more of the names of God. The spirit of each thing yearns for the perfection that it is capable of within its due limitations because perfection is the paradise of each thing, and paradise is being in the Presence of God. And so each thing yearns for its paradise. Human beings are capable of helping each thing towards its paradise by perfecting its qualities. This idea obviously has wide implications but artists can perfect each type of material that they work with by rendering it to be as beautiful as they can possibly make them. Artisans and labourers can work with materials to bring the things they create to the perfection that those things crave. If they fail to do this and create things that are less perfect than they could make them, then they are held responsible.

The Bab's book, *Kitab al-Asma*, the Book of Names, carries this line of thought one stage further when, in discussing the name of God "the most perfect" (*al-atqan*), he points out that in trying to bring all things to a state of perfection, an artist or craftsman or any other human being is replicating the work of God, who brought into being the whole of creation in a state of perfection. The work of the human being becomes then a work of God:

Say! We verily have perfected Our handiwork in the creation of the heavens, earth, whatever lieth between them, and in all things; will ye not then behold? . . . Perfect ye then your own handiwork in all that ye produce with your hands working through the handiwork of God. Then would this indeed be a handiwork of God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting. Waste ye not that which God createth with your hands through your handiwork; rather, make manifest in them the perfection of industry or craft, be it a large and mass product or a small and retail one. For verily one who perfecteth his handiwork indeed attaineth certitude in the perfection of the handiwork of God within his own being.¹⁴

However, in all this, the Bab does not lay a burden on the artist and artisan that is beyond their capacity. In copying the writings of the Bab for example, he states:

It is not permitted to anyone to write a single letter of the Bayan except in the most beautiful of handwritings. 'Most beautiful' here means the best that each individual is

¹³ Persian Bayan, Vahid 6, chapter 3, p. 192 (provisional translation by the author).

¹⁴ *Kitab al-Asma*, INBA 29:621-25; translated in Saeidi, *Gate of the Heart*, p. 316.

capable of; not beyond that, but not less than that either. This is so that the spirit that is attached to every letter of the Bayan may be raised to the highest level that is possible in this contingent world within its limitations such that nothing may be seen among the believers in the Bayan except that that thing be in the highest state of perfection possible for it.¹⁵

While we should strive towards producing things in the most perfect state that we are capable of achieving, we should also recognize our limits and not be anxious if we fail to achieve complete perfection nor should we put ourselves into distress while striving in this path. The Bab continues the above passage by limiting his injunctions that we should seek to produce perfection in our handiwork:

However, all this is on the condition that one keeps within one's capacity, not that one should put oneself in hardship on account of anything. For God desires not to look upon a believer in grief or distress. No! Rather everyone should carry out these obligations according to their ability.¹⁶

Thus the Bab clearly has a great deal to say to those engaged in the plastic arts, challenging them to regard their work as a sacred act of bring material things to a state of their perfection.

3. The Bab and the Performing Arts

The writings of the Bab are composed in such a manner that they invite one to recite them aloud rather than just to read them to oneself. Much of his writings, especially his Arabic, is written in the literary style known as *saj`*, which is usually translated as rhyming prose. This translation does not fully reflect this literary form as some may imagine that this means that there is rhyme but no rhythm in the verses. In fact there is both rhyme and rhythm present. The only reason that it is not possible to call it poetry, in the classical literary meaning of this word, is the fact that the rhyme and rhythm do not follow any uniform or regular pattern and there are short passages of prose linking parts of the text. The writings of the Bab also contain other literary devices. There is much alliteration in the text. Most of the *Qayyum ul-Asma*, the first work composed by the Bab after he declared his mission, for example rhymes with the ending "-an". Both rhyme and alliteration can be discerned in the following verse from the last chapter of this book. The translation of this verse is as follows:

O People of the Realm of the Unseen! Listen to my call from this illumined moon, the face of which I did not wish to be eclipsed by the countenance of this Youth who is of both the East and the West, whom you will find in every tablet as a concealed secret recorded upon a line, written in red, which has, in truth, been hidden around the Fire.

The last part of the verse "in every tablet . . ." can be transliterated thus in order to pick up the rhyme ending in "-an" and the alliteration of "s" and "t":

¹⁵ Persian Bayan, Vahid 3, chapter 17, p. 103, provisional translation by the author.

¹⁶ Persian Bayan, Vahid 3, chapter 17, p. 103, provisional translation by the author. Cf translations of part of this passage by E.G. Browne in Momen (ed.), *Selections from the Writings of E.G. Browne*, p. 349 and by Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart*, pp. 317-8.

*fi kulli l-alwáh sirran mustasirran
`ala 's-satr musattaran
`ala 's-satr al-muhammir
qad kána bi'l-haqq hawl an-nár mastúran.*¹⁷

Passages of this book go even beyond this and appear to be purely for performative effect. In Chapter 108 of the book, the Surat adh-Dhikr (the Surah of the Remembrance), there is a passage that is introduced with the following words:

O people of the Lights! Listen to my call from this bird that is singing, raised in the atmosphere of heaven in accordance with the melody (*`ala al-lahn*) of David the prophet.

What follows is almost untranslatable and it is difficult to make sense of it. The following is an attempt to translate it:

To me, to me is the judgement of the two waters (*al-má'ayn*).
And to me, to me is the judgement of the two airs (*al-hawá'ayn*) in the two worlds.
And to me, to me are four of the two letters in the two names.
And to me, to me are four of the two airs in the two lines from the two secrets.
And to me, to me is the bearer of the Throne of seven and one (*sab `i wáhidí* or *wa ahadí*).
And to me, to me are the eight heavens, narrated and concealed.
And to me, to me is the judgement of the two first lights upon the two mountains.
And to me, to me is the judgement of the two shining lights (*al-nayyirayn*, sun and moon) on the two last lines from those two inner depths (*al-batnayn*).
And to me, to me is the judgement of the two heavens concerning the eight of the Bab, in this Báb there are two Báb's.
And to me, to me is the judgement of the two earths concerning the seven of the Báb by the two letters.
And to me, to me is the command and the judgement and there is no God but He, our Lord alone. He has no partner and He is God the Exalted, the Great.¹⁸

If we read the passage in the original Arabic, however, we form the impression that the Bab is trying to convey something of the actual melody of the "this bird that is singing, raised in the atmosphere of heaven in accordance with the melody of David the prophet"; he is imitating the sound of the bird in the Arabic words. Here is the transliteration of the first four lines:

*illayya illaya hukm al-má'ayn
wa illaya illaya hukm al-hawá'ayn fi'l-ardayn
wa illaya illaya arba `al-harfayn fi'l-ismayn*

¹⁷ Qayyum al-Asma, Surah 111, vv. 25-26. Photocopy of manuscript completed 28 Jamádi I, 1261 (4 June 1845) written in a neat *naskh* hand by Muhammad Mahdí ibn Karbalá'í Sháh Karam for Mulla Husayn Bushru'í and sent by him through Mirza Habibu'llah Cháhí to "Sarkár Amír" (possibly the Amir of Qá'inát). Entered Iranian National Baha'i Archives, Rabí` al-Awwal 1298, INBA vol. 3, f. 447.

¹⁸ Qayyum al-Asma, Surah 111, vv. 39-40. Same manuscript as previous note, ff. 224-5. Provisional translation by the author.

wa illaya illaya arba` al-hawá'ayn fi's-satrayn min sirrayn

If this assumption is correct, then we can say that this text may have been intended as much for recitation as study, in that several elements of it are clearly intended to be heard rather than read. It is thus a performative text as much as a cognitive one. It is as much meant to be experienced as understood. The same can be said for many other passages of the writings of the Bab. Many of them are clearly intended to be chanted in a mantra-like fashion.

In studying the life of the Bab, one cannot escape the conclusion that the Bab was himself a composing artist (in that he produced literary works as noted above), a plastic artist (in that he produced calligraphy as noted above) and a performing artist.¹⁹ There are many stories recorded about the Bab that testify to his artistic temperament. He is recorded as composing his writings at great speed and as he was writing, he would chant what he was composing in an enchanting and melodious voice. On occasions he did this in the presence of others and the effect is said to have been mesmerizing, leading some to declare their belief in the Bab simply from having witnessed the speed of composition and the beauty of what was composed as well as the performance of the Bab in composing it. One of the most important occasions on which the Bab composed in public was at the home of the Imam-Jum`ih of Isfahan, the highest Muslim religious leader in the most important seat of religious learning in Iran, and with a crowd of learned scholars and religious leaders looking on:

One night, after supper, the Imam-Jum`ih, whose curiosity had been excited by the extraordinary traits of character which his youthful Guest had revealed, ventured to request Him to reveal a commentary on the Surih of Va'l-`Asr [a chapter of the Qur'an]. His request was readily granted. Calling for pen and paper, the Bab, with astonishing rapidity and without the least premeditation, began to reveal, in the presence of His host, a most illuminating interpretation of the aforementioned Surih. It was nearing midnight when the Bab found Himself engaged in the exposition of the manifold implications involved in the first letter of that Surih . . . The Bab soon after began to chant, in the presence of His host and his companions, the homily with which He had prefaced His commentary on the Surih. Those words of power confounded His hearers with wonder. They seemed as if bewitched by the magic of His voice. Instinctively they started to their feet and, together with the Imam-Jum`ih, reverently kissed the hem of His garment. Mulla Muhammad-Taqi-y-i-Harati, an eminent mujtahid, broke out into a sudden expression of exultation and praise. "Peerless and unique," he exclaimed, "as are the words which have streamed from this pen, to be able to reveal, within so short a time and in so legible a writing, so great a number of verses as to equal a fourth, nay a third, of the Qur'an, is in itself an achievement such as no mortal, without the intervention of God, could hope to perform. Neither the cleaving of the moon nor the quickening of the pebbles of the sea can compare with so mighty an act."²⁰

There are many similar accounts of the effect that the Bab had on other occasions on which

¹⁹ On the Bab as a performance artist, see Todd Lawson "Qur'an Commentary as Sacred Performance".

²⁰ Nabil [Zarandi], *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabil's Narrative* (trans. and ed. Shoghi Effendi, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970) pp. 201-2.

he composed his writings.²¹ The net effect of the poetics of his writings, their contents and the performance of them by the Bab produced a remarkable effect on many who experienced it. As Todd Lawson has commented:

The scriptural tradition to which the Bab belonged heard not only the Prophet [Muhammad] in the words of the Holy Book [the Qur'an], but also the chorus of the remaining thirteen members of the Family of God, the Infallible Immaculates [Fatimah and the twelve Imams]. . . It is suggested that this chorus was made present during the Bab's improvisation upon the Quranic score before an initially sceptical but eventually receptive audience. The charismatic content of the text was released in the musical explosion as an affective charge. The sensibility was one in which beauty of expression and other aesthetic considerations were seen to supplement the actual or discursive meaning being expressed – the one was a vehicle for the other.²²

Perhaps also revealing of the artistic temperament of the Bab was an episode that occurred in Urúmiyyih. The Bab was being taken from his prison in Chihriq in north-west Iran to Tabriz the provincial capital, in order to be interrogated. Although he was a prisoner of the government, no-one could restrain the enthusiasm of the crowds that pressed to see him as he entered the city. He was taken to the governor's court. Among those in the audience at the court was an artist Aqa Bala-Big Naqqash-bashi (the chief painter). The following is an account of what then happened as recounted by Aqa-Bala Big himself years later:

The people of Urúmiyyih . . . flocked, day after day, to the governor's residence to see the Báb. One of them was Aqá-Bálá, the Chief Painter. He told Varqá, all those years later, that on his first visit, as soon as the Báb noticed him, He gathered His `aba [cloak] round Him, as if sitting for His portrait. The next day He did the same. It was then that Aqá-Bálá Bag understood it to be a signal to him to draw His portrait. On his third visit, he went to the residence of Malik-Qasim Mirzá [the governor] with the equipment of his art. He made a rough sketch or two at the time, from which he later composed a full-scale portrait in black and white.²³

The Bab as a performing artist was restricted by the social conventions of his environment to chanting as he composed his writings, but even this limited performance had a great effect on those who witnessed this.

4. The Concept of Refinement

The word “refinement” is used in English to mean fineness of taste, or thought or elegant and cultured manners; it has connotations of upper class life. However, here in this next section, I am using it with a somewhat different meaning. The Arabic and Persian adjective *latíf* is given a wide range of dictionary definitions including, thin, delicate, gentle, light, polite, refined, graceful and witty. The associated noun *latáfat* has a parallel set of meanings. In

²¹ See for example, [Zarandi], *Nabil's Narrative*, pp. 174-6, 202-3.

²² Todd Lawson “Qur'an Commentary as Sacred Performance,” p. 158.

²³ Hasan Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá'is in the Time of Bahá'u'lláh: with some Historical Background* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1985), p. 87.

Islamic mysticism, however, it has been used to denote that point at which the physical becomes so refined and delicate that it becomes spiritual. For this reason, Shoghi Effendi translates the word in various contexts translates it as light and untrammelled, subtle, subtle, pure, discriminating, and ethereal. It is this word that I will translated as “refinement” in this section.

Perhaps no other word is more distinctive of the Bab than this word. He himself embodied it. Those who met the Bab commented upon his delicate and dignified appearance and character. Dr Cormick, an Anglo-Irish doctor who met him described him thus: "He was a very mild and delicate looking man, rather small in stature and very fair for a Persian, with a melodious soft voice, which struck me much . . . In fact his whole look and deportment went far to dispose one in his favour."²⁴ Lady Sheil, the wife of the British minister resident in Tehran in the time of the Bab wrote: "Bab possessed a mild and benignant countenance, his manners were composed and dignified, his eloquence was impressive, and he wrote rapidly and well."²⁵

The Bab, in line with the above-mentioned use of the word in Islamic mysticism, seems to have regarded this word as signifying the closest that physical reality can come to spiritual reality. As physical reality ascends and becomes closer to spiritual reality, it loses its qualities of thickness, denseness and impurity *B* all signified by the word *katháfat* (adjective *kathíf*) *B* and acquires the qualities of delicacy, purity and refinement *B* all signified by the word *laṭáfat*. Thus the two concept of *katháfat* (*kathíf*) and *laṭáfat* (*laṭíf*) are contrasted and opposed to one another. Human beings should in their spiritual progress lose the qualities of the former and acquire the qualities of the latter. The word *laṭáfat* is from the same root in Arabic as *lutf* which means "grace". And so the Bab says that the appearance of refinement in the world is out of the Grace of God

For whatever refinement (*laṭáfat*) appears in the world is from the bounty of a drop from the ocean of his Grace (*lutf*).²⁶

The Bab therefore calls upon his followers to acquire this characteristic. He says for example that: "Nothing in the Bayan is more loved by God than purity, refinement and cleanliness."²⁷ And in another place that: "In this religion, no other command is as firmly enjoined as that of refinement."²⁸

There are laws regarding purity in most religions. Islam had a large number of things that

²⁴ Edward G. Browne, *Materials for the Study of the Babi Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1918), pp. 260-62, quoted in Moojan Momen, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions 1844-1944: some contemporary western accounts* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981), p. 75.

²⁵ Lady Sheil, *Life and Manners in Persia*, p. 178, quoted in Momen, *Babi and Baha'i Religions*, p. 75.

²⁶ Persian Bayan vahid 5, chapter 7, p. 162. Provisional translation by the author.

²⁷ Persian Bayan, vahid 5, chapter 14. Provisional translation by the author. Cf translation in *Selections from the Writings of the Bab*, p. 80.

²⁸ Persian Bayan, Vahid 6, chapter 3, p. 192. Provisional translation by the author.

were regarded as making a person ritually impure (blood, animal hair and bone, silk clothing, gold and silver vessels, dogs, anything touched by infidels, etc.), such that if one were to come into contact with them, one would not be fit to say the prayers, until a ritual ablution had been performed. The Bab cancelled most of these ritual causes of impurity²⁹ and instead substituted a number of laws that are more in line with modern concepts of purity and impurity, such as requiring a person to bath every four days, that soiled and sweaty clothes should be changed, that tobacco not be used and so forth.³⁰ He says moreover that "it is desirable that the believer should use pleasant scents and perfume."³¹

Most of the laws of the Bayan are related in some way to the coming of He whom God shall make manifest, the figure prophesied by the Bab. The law regarding purity and refinement is no exception in this regard:

This command [of purity and refinement] is only so that on the Day of the Manifestation of God, no-one should present themselves before God in a state other than that of refinement such that that which is displeasing to God should not appear from them. Therefore in the Bayan whatever veils one from refinement has been forbidden.³²

But the Bab did not just mean physical purity and refinement. He also indicated the necessity of the qualities in the spiritual sense. For example he calls upon his followers not to be like Muslims and maintain an outward purity. Indeed, if it were just physical cleanliness that were meant, then Christians would be superior to Muslims in this respect:

O people of the Bayan! Be not like the people of the Qur'an who purify their outward bodies so carefully with water, but do not purify their Essential [inner] Bodies with the water of Unity, for no heart in which there is love of aught other than God is pure. Were it otherwise no nation is externally more clean than Christians. Similarly at the time of the appearance of He whom God shall make manifest, you should purify yourself through belief in him, for otherwise, even if you immerse yourselves a thousand times in water each day, it would not fulfill the obligation of purity. You should take the utmost care neither to be veiled from the outer, nor from the inner reality, you should hold to both to the utmost perfection. So also with the believer, naught can render him impure. The command to purity is solely so that people should be so trained as to the state of refinement and purity that no soul should detect anything repulsive within themselves let alone that others should detect it . . .³³

In the last chapter of the Persian Bayan, the Bab summarises all of his injunctions on purity and cleanliness, saying that all things have a purification in the knowledge of God and all are

²⁹ See, for example, the cancellation of the prohibition on silk clothing, gold and silver in the Persian Bayan vahid 6, chapter 9.

³⁰ Persian Bayan vahid 8, chapter 6; vahid 9, chapter 7.

³¹ Persian Bayan vahid 6, chapter 2. Provisional translation by the author.

³² Persian Bayan vahid 8, chapter 6. Provisional translation by the author.

³³ Persian Bayan vahid 6, chapter 2. Provisional translation by the author.

purified by the mention of God if they become believers in Him whom God shall make manifest. This purification must encompass in turn the heart, the spirit, the soul and body, such that:

. . . cleanse thine ear from hearing aught but the mention of God, and thine eye from seeing, thy breast from witnessing, thy tongue from speaking, thy hand from writing, thy knowledge from understanding and thy heart from settling upon, and similarly all of your faculties so that you may be nourished in the pure paradise of love. Haply you may recognize He whom God shall make manifest with a purity loved by Him.³⁴

The connection between art and the concept of refinement becomes clearer as we move from Western art, to Middle Eastern art and on to Chinese and Japanese art where this quality become paramount. To what extent does the Bab's desire to bring purity and refinement to the world find resonance with art?

Conclusion

Of course everything that has been mentioned above that the Bab writes about the arts can be related to the arts of Iran. The striving for perfection and refinement can be seen in many of the arts such as the drawing of Persian miniatures and the crafts that produce cloths, tiles, bronzeware and copperware and many other finely made objects. Rhyme and rhythm are seen, of course, in Persian poetry, that plays a much larger role in Iranian culture compared to many other cultures. Nevertheless, the concerns that the Bab highlights in relation to the arts seem to relate to artists of other cultures also.

It seems to me that in what he writes about the spirit within material things yearning for perfection and the work of the artist and craftsperson being to enable a thing to reach its perfection, its paradise, the Bab approaches the ideas in many native or primal religions, such as that of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia and the native peoples of the Americas, that also consider that all objects have a spirit or soul and that human beings must enter in a correct relationship with all the things that surround them. And so I would ask: to what extent does the injunction of the Bab to work with materials in order to bring these to the highest level of perfection that these things are capable of achieving accord with the way that native artists and craftspeople engage in their work?

Similarly in relation to the performing arts, the concept that I have put forward in this paper that the Bab was concerned with both content and form in his writings; the idea that his works are intended to be both cognitive and affective, to appeal to both the heart and the mind, to be both for reading and performance opens up a discourse with most of those in the performing arts. In particular, although some may consider it a trivialization and diminution of the works of the Bab, I would like to put forward that the suggestion that the Bab's concern with the rhyme and rhythm and even the musicality of his writing seems to approach the patterns and musicality of much African speech and song, as manifested for example in rap music.

The third area that I have written about in this paper is that of the concept of refinement.

³⁴ Persian Bayan vahid 9, chapter 10, p. 327. Provisional translation by the author.

While it is true that this concern reflects much of the history of Iranian art, I think it also opens up a discourse with the arts of the Far East, China and Japan, which are also very much concerned with this same area of refinement and attempt to approach the boundary where the physical becomes so refined as to merge into the spiritual.

There are many ramifications of these concepts deriving from the person and writings of the Bab. One could look for example at the concept of the desire of the Bab for everything to be clean and pure in relation to the present problems with environmental pollution. Also to a great extent, this ethos of bringing things to their perfection and of refinement has been taken forward by the Baha'i Faith. It seems to me that when Baha'is build buildings and gardens at the Baha'i World Centre and the Houses of Worship, that are the utmost state of beauty, they can be said to be helping the stones and the plants on those sites to achieve their paradise - for they are then manifesting the name of God "the Beauteous".

While spiritual communion with God and with each other is very good, the Baha'i teachings are asking us to take this one step further and build a paradise on earth (the "Kingdom of God on earth") and that is something that certainly involves a transformation of the relationship of human beings with one another but it also involves a transformation of their relationship with the rest of the created world *B* it involves them in trying to bring beauty and perfection to all of the world, the human world and the world of nature.

In the same section of the Kitab al-Asma as the one quoted previously, discussing the name of God "the most perfect", the Bab composes a prayer in which he reiterates the point that in producing handiwork that is as perfect as possible, the action of a human being is a reflection of the action of God. He then goes on to ask God to educate the people of the Bayan that they may produce only what manifests the utmost perfection – it may be said to be a prayer for artists. He says that in this way, human beings can build the earth anew:

O my God! Thy handiwork hath always been complete, all-encompassing, perfect, and unfailing, and it will always continue to be perfect, unfailing, complete, and all-encompassing. . . . Thou hast commanded Thy servants, from the beginning that hath no beginning, till the end that hath no end, to produce handiwork with the utmost perfection, for this is verily the reflection of the perfection of Thy handiwork Educate then, O my God, the people of the Bayan in such wise that no product may be found amongst them but that the very utmost perfection of industry shall be manifest therein. . . . For verily Thou hast desired, by this law, to build the earth anew by virtue of Thy glorious handiwork through the hands of Thy servants.³⁵

Furthermore, the Bab states that this endeavour to bring all things to a state of perfection and refinement is a way of attracting people to the Babi religion:

Thus, just as today the letters of the Gospel are distinguished amongst other communities in the art of ornament, the believers in the Bayan should likewise reflect in their handiwork naught but perfection within the limits of each endeavour, in such wise that a faithful believer in the Bayan in the East of the earth should be beloved in his station on account of his beauty and the beauty of all that he possesseth. And this is the most mighty path for attracting the people of other religions to the true Cause of

³⁵ Kitab al-Asma, INBA 29:626; translated in Saeidi, *Gate of the Heart*, p. 316.

the all-merciful God.³⁶

Thus artists and artisans are encouraged to perfect their handiwork and so to become well-known on account of this, thereby attracting people to the Babi religion.

³⁶ Persian Bayan vahid 3, chapter 17; translated in Saeidi, *Gate of the Heart*, p. 317.