

formal in tone and that were in answer rank as the master literary stylist of the to an individual's private questions, Bahá'í Faith in the English language, in his role as Guardian of the Bahá'í in addition to being the Revelation's Faith, one could not really class any unique Guardian, his choice, use of, of this correspondence as "private," and adaptations to this literary form since his answers to any questions are significant to Bahá'ís both now and ways constituted the authoritative in- in the future. The purposes of this pa- terpretation of Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Ab- per are to investigate the new style of du'l-Bahá's teachings. Thus, "epistle," the epistle, to examine the roots of its with its more public and formal con- development, and to demonstrate thar notations, suits the nature of Shoghi elements of the form have been modi- Effendi's communications much better fied to accommodate the great vision of than does "letter" with its chatty and Shoghi Effendi, architect of the World private connotations, especially since Order of Bahá'u'lláh.

in the twentieth century the latter term has come to be associated only with the

1 This a slightly revised version of familiar letter.

an essay originally published in The Vision In the Guardian's usage, the former

of Shoghi Effendi: Proceedings of the As- type of communication might be clas-

sociation for Bahá'í Studies Ninth Annual sified loosely as an "epistolary essay."

Conference, November 2-4, 1984, Ottawa, This is the Guardians most striking Canada.

10 The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 31.4 2021

contribution to English letters. The In the case of Shoghi Effendi, his

relation between letter and essay here elegant English prose style reflects

is tailor-made for the Guardian's pur- perfectly his station as

Guardian of the
pose. The “essay” aspect allows for
the teachings
breadth of subject matter, use of his-
adherents in
torical analysis, a world-encompassing
en-
perspective, and a scholarly, definitive
When
treatment of the issue at hand. Yet, the
materials
direct nature of the address, often in-
Centre
timate in tone, as well as the striking
of the Bahá’í Faith on Mount
Carmel,
blend of formal and highly informal
mod-
levels of rhetoric—perhaps a reflection
classical world
of the Guardian himself—make these
because of their enduring
qualities. His
choice of English prose style is
letters tremendously powerful on the
as time-
level of personal appeal. less and as enduring, as
meticulously
Shoghi Effendis choice of the more
fashioned and as majestic in the
realm
of words as those architectural
formal epistle form is wholly befitting
models
to the style of his writing. Again, refer-
are in the realm of physical
structures.
Bearing in mind Holman’s
ring to Holman for a working defini-
of style, the reader sees that
definition
of style, the reader sees that
it is impos-
sible to change even one word of
rangement of words in a manner which
the
Guardian’s communications and
at once best expresses the individuality
retain
of the author and the idea and intent in
the identical meaning. Rúhíyyih
Khá-
num Rabbani, in *The Priceless*
his mind. . . . Style is a combination
Pearl,
describes the conciseness and
of two elements: the idea to be ex-
density
of his style, a style lofty enough
pressed, and the individuality of the
to

author.” Holman goes on to say: carry the complex ideas that he had to communicate to the Bahá’í world. She says, “In his translations of the diction or to alter the phrasing of Bahá’í writings, and above all in his own compositions, Shoghi Effendi set the same thing; for what the reader a standard that educates and raises the receives from a statement is not cultural level of the reader at the same alone what is said, but also cer- time that it feeds his mind and soul with- tain connotations which affect his thoughts and truth” (Rabbani 197). For Shoghi Effendi, then, style was not consciousness from the manner in which the statement is made. And merely an affected use of language; it from this it follows that, just as no was his vehicle for rendering the divine wo personalities are alike, no two teachings into a definitive and accessi- ble language for growing numbers of styles are actually alike. (514) English-speaking believers around the world who urgently required inspira- virtues of the great English stylists. In tion and direction. the translations of Bahá’u’lláh prayers, one senses the influence of that The roots of Shoghi Effendi’s fine- Renaissance model of style, the great ly honed English style must lie in the King James version of the Bible. This King original Persian and Arabic languag- ing to a more archaic style on the turn- of Shoghi Effendi reflects his es of the Revelation, the power and part of Shoghi Effendi reflects his beauty of which are exemplified in spect for the elegance of great re- the writings of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Ab- du’l-Bahá. The delicacy and allusive- ean English and also makes use of the most scholarly example of religious role as the first media of God’s most writings rendered into English.

recent Revelation, and their strength as work, the communicators of God's new laws and principles for the spiritual well-being and development of humankind noted can be best understood and appreciated Gibbon's by native Arabic- and Persian-speaking Bahá'ís. These, too, were Shoghi Effendi's first languages. Yet Shoghi Effendi was chosen and trained by his 'Abdu'l-Bahá to translate the major sacred writings of the Bahá'í Faith into English. It was to this end, he himself said, that he was educated at Oxford. Shoghi Effendi was uniquely endowed with the talents for this monumental task of translation, not only steeped in the original writings but also possessing an exquisite sense of language and the ability to convey its shades of meaning. It is obvious that the requirements of translation, with the inherent necessity of fixing the exact meaning of the text for the Western believers, so as to eliminate any possible ambiguity in interpretation, would certainly leave their mark upon the style of the Guardian's original works.

In Shoghi Effendi's original the style and technique of Edward Gibbon and Thomas Carlyle exert influence. Rúhíyyih Khánum has the Guardian's fondness for History of the Decline and Fall of Roman Empire, and it was not content alone that Shoghi Effendi admiration. She records, "It was own pet bible of the English and often he would read to me from it, interrupting himself with exclamations such as 'Oh what what a command of English; what ing sentences'" (Rabbani 38). Gibbon's penchant for lengthy, anced sentences and his stylistic of building a paragraph that cannot be broken apart without serious the meaning of the whole are also apparent in the writings of Guardian. A brief passage taken Gibbon's examination of the early history of the Christian church in Roman Empire will serve to indicate comparable aspects of style. Gibbon writes:

In addition to his appreciation for

Persian and Arabic style, Shoghi Effendi possessed an ear finely attuned to the

The promise of divine favour, instead of being partially confined

The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 31.4 2021

to the posterity of Abraham, was blessing,” and “a

duty,” “inestimable

universally proposed to the free-Deity” all

benevolent but all-powerful

man and the slave, to the Greek the

of which bear great resemblance to

and to the barbarian, to the Jew and to the Gentile. Every privilege that could raise the proselyte

usage of the Guardian two-hundred years later.

The

Trevor-Roper’s introduction to

from earth to heaven, that could the

History of the Decline and Fall of

exalt his devotion, secure his happiness, or even gratify that secret

Roman Empire points out that in

Gibbon

tion to syntactical expertise,

pride which under the semblance style

combined “beneath a majestic

of devotion, insinuates itself into equal

and the appearance of ease, an

the human heart, was still reserved and

mastery of the new ‘philosophy’

for the members of the Christian An exam-

the old ‘erudition’” (viii).

church; but at the same time all erudition

ple of this philosophy and

mankind was permitted, and even the

is evident in Gibbon’s passage on

solicited, to accept the glorious when he

early miracles of Christianity,

distinction, which was not only proffered as a favour, but imposed

states:

as an obligation. It became the most sacred duty of a new convert

The duty of an historian does not call upon him to interpose his

priority to diffuse among his friends and im-

vate judgment in this nice and

relations the inestimable blessing which he had received, and to

portant controversy; but he ought not to dissemble the difficulty

of

adopting such a theory as may

warn them against a refusal that rec-

would be severely punished as a
with
criminal disobedience to the will
proper
of a benevolent but all-powerful
of
Deity. (92) defining with precision the
limits
of that happy period, exempt from
One notes, in the first sentence, the list-
we
ing of balanced prepositional phrases
appearing in pairs of opposites, a syn-
(110)
tactical technique designed to demon-
strate the truth of the universality of
and
Christianity. In the second sentence,
broad-
multiple verb phrases are embedded
eighteenth-century
in the first of the two major clauses,
reason-
while the second major clause quali-
through-
fies and elaborates upon the first. The
final sentence of the quotation includes
solidly
vocabulary usage such as “most sacred
Order
The Epistolary Style of Shoghi Effendi
of Bahá’u’lláh, Shoghi Effendi clearly
present evils
outlines the historical perspective of
the rise of the Bahá’í Faith. He writes:
Awake, ye noble Workers, war-
Should we look back upon the
past, were we to search out the
Gospel and the Qur’án, we will
will
readily recognize that neither the
Christian nor the Islamic Dispen-
sations can offer a parallel either
to the system of Divine Econo-
my so thoroughly established by
Bahá’u’lláh, or to the safeguards

concile the interest of religion
that of reason, of making a
application of that theory, and
error and from deceit, to which
might be disposed to extend the
gift of supernatural powers.
Shoghi Effendi’s philosophy
erudition were, perforce, much
er than that of the
Gibbon, but the technique of
able and thorough scholarship
out his epistles shows how Shoghi
Effendi built upon Gibbon’s
laid foundations. In The World
13
attain their salvation from
through work, follows:
riors in the one true war: all this
must be remedied. It is you who
are already half-alive, whom I
welcome into life; whom I will
conjure in God’s name to shake
off your enchanted sleep, and live
wholly! Cease to count scalps,
gold-purses; not in these lies your
or our salvation. Even these,

if

which He has provided for its preservation and advancement.

(20)

all laws of the bucaniers, if you

From this point, the Guardian proceeds with historical analysis of the development,

ment of Christianity and Islam, demonstrating their deviations from the original teachings of their divine Founders. brief

Certainly Gibbon's call for a reasoned Eternities,

examination of religion is answered you

here. Thus, not only in style but also in are

approach, Gibbon served as one major you

model for Shoghi Effendi.

Nineteenth-century historian, man of letters, and stylist, Thomas Carlyle was also admired by the Guardian. least

Again, the style is complex, reflecting the complexity of thought present in the writer himself. Carlyle's power not

of rhetoric was perhaps his most important

talent as far as Shoghi Effendi those

was concerned, and for an example of this power it is instructive to examine a paragraph of the "Captains of Industry" chapter in the philosophical history

Past and Present. Carlyle's rallying the air of

cry to his fellows, that they arise and this

14

The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 31.4 2021

brief passage is representative of much early Victorian writing. Content aside, however, Carlyle's literary techniques

you count only these, will not be left. Let bucaniering be put far

from you; alter, speedily abrogate

would gain any victory that shall endure. Let God's justice, let

nobleness and manly valour, with more gold-purses or fewer, testify themselves in this your

Life-transit to all the

the Gods and Silences. It is to

I call; for ye are not dead, ye

already half-alive: there is in

a sleepless dauntless energy, the

prime-matter of all nobleness in

man. Honour to you in your kind.

It is to you I call: ye know at

this, That the mandate of God to His creature man is: Work! The future Epic of the World rests

with those that are near dead,

with those that are alive, and

that are coming into life. (166)

Carlyle had no way of knowing the true significance of that final

written in 1843, but certainly

expectancy and prophecy found in

East or West to achieve such ascendancy as shall deprive her of that spiritual primacy with which

of exhortation, caution, praise, and promise are apparent in passages of the Guardian's writings as well. Witness by the following from the conclusion of his letter "America and the Most Great Peace," included in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*: tage which the love and wisdom of a departed Master have conferred Fellow-believers in the American continent! Great indeed have been your past and present achievements! Immeasurably greater are the wonders which the future has in store for you! The Edifice your sacrifices have raised still remains to be clothed. The House which must needs be supported by the highest administrative institution your hands have reared, is as yet unbuilt. The provisions of the chief Repository of those laws that must govern its operation are thus far mostly undisclosed. The capacities of people; both, in a sense, tem- wishes are to be fulfilled, must be raised in your own country has yet and to be unfurled. The Unity of which that standard is to be the symbol the is far from being yet established. The machinery which must needs incarnate and preserve that unity is a not even created. Will it be America, will it be one of the countries of Europe, who will arise to assume the leadership essential to the shaping of the destinies of this troubled age? Will America allow she has been invested and which she has thus far so nobly retained? Will she not rather contribute, a still further revelation of those inherent powers that motivate her life, to enhance the priceless upon her? Her past has been a testimony to the inexhaustible vitality of her faith. May not her future confirm it? (Shoghi Effendi 94)

The same basic rhetorical stance is taken by the writers in both of these lengthy passages; the authors are seeking to move their audiences to action. Both overtly challenge their audiences to respond to their calls; both praise their audiences, Shoghi Effendi for the Americans' accomplishments in the past and Carlyle for the inherent

per their praise, Carlyle by cautioning the workers not to be "bucaniers" Shoghi Effendi by listing the tasks still lie ahead. Carlyle, too, looks to future, but he lacks the specificity of vision that Shoghi Effendi expresses. This lack gives Carlyle's exhortation tentative air, on the whole, while that of the Guardian radiates confidence in its challenge to the American community.

A comparison of Carlyle, Gibbon, and Shoghi Effendi not only reveals the

Guardian but also shows their points of friends,” “friends and
fellow-heirs of the grace of
difference. Certainly, the scope of the Bahá’u’lláh,” “friends
Guardian’s vision was beyond that of and fellow-defenders of the
Faith of Bahá’u’lláh,” and
Carlyle, and while this breadth of vi- ing and tender appellations.
numerous other lov- Throughout the letters, he
sion may be more a legacy of Gibbon, the troops of his followers
who wrote not only history, as Hugh around
rallies him, giving the
Trevor-Roper points out, but also “uni- tation of events, yet
versal history” or “philosophic histo- in the numbers of believers
authoritative interpre- ing the turmoils of the age, as
ry” (viii). Still, there are further differ- following example:
including himself friends! Can our eyes be so
ences. Gibbon wrote the history of a fail to recognize in the anguish
undergo- and
civilization long dead, where historical turmoil which, greater than in
in the er country and in a manner
interpretation was made easy because dented in its history, are now
“Dearly-beloved the American nation . . . ?”
of the era’s remoteness. Shoghi Ef- Effendi 79). Many times the eyes
dim as to the average Bahá’í were
fendi, however, used this technique of Shoghi Effendi’s eyes, possessing
and that
historical interpretation and analysis to sweeping perspective with which
any oth- he
clarify the significance of the clouded, and his predecessors is the nature of
unprece- was endowed as Guardian, were
dent ever-changing events that were taking
afflicting place around him as he wrote. Aston-
(Shoghi ishingly, these writings still read as if
of they were written only yesterday.
“so dim,” but

nev- rhetorical address. Of course, in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the rhetorical stance of the writer was in his let- conventionally formal, and although Order” there might occur the occasional ad- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, dress to the “gentle reader,” the distancing of writers from their audience was a rhetorical device designed to of enhance the authority of the authors over their addressees. Shoghi Effendi completely reverses this form of can address. Throughout his writings are allu- scattered numerous intimate address- earth- es to the communications’ recipients, and tur- such as the “fellow believers” of unregenerate the passage quoted earlier, “beloved increasingly co-workers,” “fellow laborers in the Divine Vineyard,” “dearly-beloved

16 The Journal of Bahá’í Studies 31.4 2021

At the close of his communications, he signs simply as “your brother and Corinthians, co-worker” or “your true brother,” his numerous other name given simply as “Shoghi” rather these than the more formal “Shoghi Effendi” also that one might well expect from the Christians appointed head of a world religion. It only is a mark of the Guardian’s humility

er dimmed. Another example of Guardian’s including himself rest of the Bahá’ís occurs ter “The Goal of a New World where, in speaking of he states:

How well we, the little band His avowed supporters who lay claim to have recognized the Light that shone within Him, still remember His repeated sions, in the evening of His ly life, to the tribulation moil with which an humanity was to be afflicted. (29)

New Testament of the Bible. Paul’s epistles to the Romans, the the Thessalonians, and groups are prime examples of communications. Other apostles addressed groups of early in the epistle form. It was their means of communicating with

scattered groups of believers, to encourage them, to clarify what they perceived Christ's teachings to be, to achieve enduring victories that he exhorted people to live by their new beliefs, and to go out and teach others. The rank and file, much like a general, were the same objectives with which Shoghi Effendi sat down to write his letters to the Bahá'í world. These marching to the front lines with his important and obvious difference in the which Shoghi Effendi sat down to write his letters to the Bahá'í world. The import- ant and obvious difference in the that he is willing to put his words into action, not merely to write academic cases is that Shoghi Effendi possessed divine authority in his interpretations of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, while the apostles had no definitive indicative of the Guardian's desire to authority and incorporated their personal ideas inspire to action. He could conceivably into the small body of Christ's have written straight essays, nor direct- teachings. In so doing, they may have diluted ly addressing anyone, but the purpose the strength and changed the intention of his communication was always to of move his audience to deeds, not mere- the original Word of God. ly to inspire them with his words. To The epistles of Christianity, then, while providing an early example this end, the epistle form with its direct of communication, are not suitable address is uniquely suited. It is diffi- cult for the recipient of a letter (be it els to which one may turn for explain- ing Shoghi Effendi's choice of a nation or an individual) to miss the this form. Infinitely more rewarding is the purport of a document that bears the re-

a

recipient's name at the beginning, while turning to the tablets of Bahá'u'lláh

a formal essay written in the third person and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The English trans-

son can easily be put out of mind once lation of one of Bahá'u'lláh's most

read. comprehensive writings is, in fact,

Historically, the epistle has been the titled Epistle to the Son of the Wolf,

vehicle for teachings in former reli- addressed as proof of His teachings to

gions, notably Christianity. One thinks the son of the eminent Muslim leader

immediately of those written by the who was responsible for the execution

Apostles of Jesus and included in the of two devoted and innocent Bábís.

The Epistolary Style of Shoghi Effendi 17

Numerous others of Bahá'u'lláh's to analyze extensively the global chal-

works, such as The Seven Valleys and lenges confronting Bahá'ís. Historical

The Four Valleys, are addressed to perspective on the Bahá'í Faith, was

leading intellectuals, and his tablets to possible by Shoghi Effendi's time, as

the kings and rulers of the world pro- well, and played a large part in the

vide an important example for Shoghi Guardian's messages. The sense of

Effendi, dealing directly as they do urgency as an effect of the Guardian's

with the problems and challenges of use of direct address is also a result of

the immediate future. The many, more the convergence of his historical anal-

intimate personal addresses of 'Abdu'l- ysis and his world-encompassing per-

Bahá serve as models for the render, spective of the future.

understanding, and intimate aspects of This same sense of urgency lies behind another method of

Shoghi Effendi's letters. Still, 'Abdu'l- communication employed by the Guardian

and for

or Persian. In Shoghi Effendi's own language which he adapted the English letters to the Bahá'í world, humanity to suit his purpose. Whenever a matter received for the first time in its history was too urgent for conveyance via letter, or whenever Bahá'ís did not arise in response to his direction, the Guardian would send a cable. In composing The differences between Shoghi Effendi's communications and those of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá are merely pared it, majestic cables, he did not abandon his epistolary style; he many. Significantly, the contents of eliminating connectives unnecessary the Guardian's letters are much more to the meaning but retaining always his unmistakable dignity of language. concerned with the practical aspects of building the Administrative Order of the Bahá'í Faith, a project which was his Shoghi Effendi was never dominated by form or convention in advanced primarily in the West, and communications. Rather, he adapted particularly in North America. For this ed and used form and convention (as any good craftsman uses tools) purpose, English was more functional to accomplish the task before than Persian or Arabic. Also, during him—the building of the Administrative Shoghi Effendi's lifetime there existed Bahá'u'lláh. It is the means to disseminate such letters the enduring influence of the illuminating to note the Guardian's style in communications widely and efficiently to the rapidly growing number of English-speaking believers. Because of improvements Universal House of Justice since its es- tablishment in 1963. In continuing in worldwide communications, as well the same use of epistolary and the as the spread of the Bahá'í Faith, the Guardian was able to give much more initiated by the Guardian, in its blend- ing of formal and intimate up-to-date and comprehensive reports

language,

of the global progress being made and in its dignified yet loving tone,

18 The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 31.4 2021

dual historical and futuristic perspective, and in its world-encompassing yet personal scope, this second “twin pillar” of the Administrative Order has, in of

turn, upheld the standard toward which all Bahá'í institutions must strive. assurance-

While it is difficult to choose one passage that exemplifies all of these features, the opening sentences of the 1979 Naw-Rúz message from the from

Universal House of Justice indicated the similarities of style. “Dearly-loved de-

Friends,” the Institution writes: glorifying

Bahá'u'lláh, the Prince of Peace, The decline of religion and moral restraints has unleashed a fury of chaos and confusion that already bears the signs of universal anarchy. Engulfed in this maelstrom, the Bahá'í world community, pursuing his great

with indefeasible unity and how

spiritual force its redemptive mission, “ever-advancing

and

tion of economic, social and civil life which afflicts its fellow men throughout the planet. (¶ 1)

ample assurance of victories to come if we but follow the path of His guidance. He rewards our humble efforts with effusions

grace which bring not only advancement to the Cause but

ance and happiness to our hearts, so that we may indeed look upon our neighbors with bright and shining faces, confident that

our services now will eventuate that blissful future which our

scendants will inherit,

the Redeemer of Mankind. (¶ 11)

The features seen in these messages are indeed the legacy bequeathed to us by the beloved Guardian, who not only gave to the Bahá'í World

vision but also set the example of

to carry forward this

civilization” in language, style,

form worthy to be its medium.

This passage reflects the lofty style and world-encompassing vision of the Universal House of Justice, while the tenderness also apparent in the Guardian's writings can be seen in the concluding paragraph of the 1984 Ridván message to the Bahá'ís of the world:

Beloved friends, the bounties and
protection with which the Blessed
Beauty is nurturing and sheltering
the infant organism of His new
world order through this violent
period of transition and trial, give
The Epistolary Style of Shoghi Effendi

19

Works Cited

- Bahá'u'lláh. Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, trans. Shoghi Effendi. 3d ed. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988.
- . The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys, trans. Marzieh Gail, 3d ed. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1973.
- Carlyle, Thomas. "Captains of Industry," In *Prose of the Victorian Period*, ed. William F. Buckler. Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1958.
- Gibbon, Edward. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, abridged and edited by Hugh Trevor-Roper. Twayne Publishers, 1963.
- Holman, C. Hugh. *A Handbook to Literature*, 3d ed. Bobbs-Merrill, 1972.
- Rabbani, Rúhíyyih. *The Priceless Pearl*. UK Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2000.
- Shoghi Effendi. *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, 2d ed. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1993.
- Trevor-Roper, Hugh. Introduction. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, by Edward Gibbon. Twayne Publishers, 1963.
- Universal House of Justice. *Naw-Rúz 1979 Message to the Bahá'ís of the World*. Bahá'í Reference Library. bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/#19790321_002
- . *Ridván 1984 Message to the Bahá'ís of the World*. Bahá'í Reference Library. bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/#19840421_001
- The Vision of Shoghi Effendi: Proceedings of the Association for Bahá'í Studies Ninth Annual Conference, November 2-4, 1984, Ottawa, Canada*. Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1993.

— The Epistolary Style of Shoghi Effendi (Used by permission of the curator)