

The Silences of God: A Meditation

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The Silences

Resuman

El impacto de la Palabra de Dios ha

of God:

dominado la historia de la

religión

y nuestra definición de la madurez

A Meditation

en evolución de la humanidad.

Sin

embargo, en una edad en que el poder

de las palabras ha sido sistemáticamente

BAHIYYIH NAKHJAVANI

erosionado y la ortodoxia del

lenguaje ha

sido cuestionada, podría ser que nuestra

consciencia acerca del silencio de Dios sea

Abstract

esencial en moldear nuestras

selecciones

The impact of the Word of God has dom-

individuales y al definir

nuestras historias

inated the history of religion and our defi-

colectivas. Este ensayo explora

algunas

nition of the evolving maturation of hu-

de las maneras en que el

silencio Divino

mankind. But in an age in which the power

es inferido en los escritos de

Bahá'u'lláh

of words has been systematically eroded

y ofrece una meditación sobre

cómo el

and the orthodoxy of language has been

mismo juega un rol vital en

ayudarnos a

questioned, it may be that our awareness

entender Sus palabras.

of God's silence is essential in shaping our

individual choices and defining our collec-

"The silence of the unsaid,"

according

tive histories. This essay explores some of

to John Berger, "is always

working

the ways that Divine silence is inferred in

surreptitiously with another

silence,

the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and offers a

which is that of the

unsayable. What

meditation on how it plays a vital role in

is unsaid one time," he continues, "can

helping us understand His words.

be said on another occasion. But the

unsayable can never be said—unless

Resumé

L'influence du Verbe de Dieu a dominé maybe in a prayer."1 The
 Argentinian
 l'histoire de la religion et notre définition writer Borges, who was blind,
 believed
 de l'évolution de l'humanité vers sa that to have a word for
 "silence" at all
 maturité. Mais, à une époque où le pouvoir was an aesthetic event, if
 not actual-
 des mots subit une érosion systématique ly a prayer. And if speech
 was to be
 et où l'orthodoxie du langage est remise "right" according to the poet
 W. B.
 en question, notre conscience du silence Yeats, it might only be "after
 long si-
 de Dieu pourrait bien jouer un rôle lence." That may be why Hamlet
 died
 déterminant dans l'orientation de nos with the words, "The rest is
 silence"
 choix personnels et de notre expérience on his lips, after four and a
 half hours
 collective. Dans le présent essai, l'auteur
 of talk, in spite of which critics of the
 explore certaines allusions au silence
 play have been chattering about what
 divin que nous trouvons dans les écrits de
 he meant for the past five centuries.
 Bahá'u'lláh et il propose une réflexion sur
 la façon dont ce silence joue un rôle vital 1 Preface to Timothy
 O'Grady, I Could
 dans notre compréhension de Sa Parole. Read the Sky.
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And in keeping with the words of po- the assumptions of our predecessors
 ets and other tragic heroes, my broth- regarding these huge vacuities. And
 in
 er once told me that he wondered the end, as Eliot says, "And what
 there
 when God might one day send us a is to conquer / . . . has already
 been
 Manifestation of His Silence—"Just discovered / Once or twice, what
 there
 for a change," he added, "because we is to conquer has already been
 discov-
 never seem to listen to His words." ered / Once or twice, or several
 times,
 But I am going to ignore all this good by men whom one cannot hope / To
 advice. Despite Bahá'u'lláh's warning emulate" ("East Coker," v., ll.

11-14).2

that "[t]he essence of true safety is to observe silence [and] look at the end like of things" (Tablets 156), I shall take con- the risk of speaking about the impact constellations. of God's silences on us and of writing about how His words can, and perhaps must, ultimately render us mute. universe, God's silences have always pre-empted our words. Poets have can tried to fill them. Philosophers have time. sought to question them. Theologians traditional- of all cloths have attempted to define Holy their dazzling darknesses. The history on of religion itself, like the science of words cosmology, is as thick as the spangled fundamental night sky with the silences between reli- the stars. Sometimes these gaps have the been seen as challenges to our aware- They ness, creative challenges that enable us infallible to aspire to seek that wholeness we call to "truth." At other times, they have been interpreted as contradictions in the its world and in ourselves, incongruities lives. It that can never be resolved and that Revelation remind us of the endlessness of hu- broken, mility. We have all failed, by and large,

We have invariably misunderstood. But perhaps all our theologies, our ancient astrologies, have been structured on fictitious Perhaps our attempts to understand the wheeling mysteries of God have been built, like the Ptolemaic in ignorance of these subtle black holes in our understanding, which only be filled gradually, and over The study of religion has ly been based on meditations of Scripture. But perhaps a meditation the silences between these holy will bring us closer to the unity underlying our faiths. All gions are equally concerned with interpretation of Divine silence. all direct our attention to its mysteries and claim to hold the key its understanding. They all caution us, too, about impact, about its import on our is recorded, in The Book of that, after the seventh seal was God withdrew into His silence for

the
 to gauge these breathless immensities. length of half an hour. It must
 have
 We have either repeated each other's been the most unbearable half hour
 errors in different languages or have in all creation. A single moment
 more
 disagreed with them using different and the universe would have
 imploded.
 metaphors, or we have simply echoed 2 Quartet no. 2 of the Four
 Quartets.
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 Certainly it was sufficient to render are invalidated, our suppositions
 swept
 the angels mad. But there is much to aside, our institutions and
 ideologies
 be learned from that brief half hour. all undermined by the impact of
 It is a reminder that, contrary to what He has told us. His
 utterances,
 received opinion, God is not actually moreover, are not only brief but
 long
 all that voluble. He does not, generally term in their effects—so vast
 that they
 speaking, waste words. His messages stretch beyond the grasp of human
 are brief; His silences much longer minds; so dense and packed with
 than His passages among us. In fact, meaning, so gnomic and enigmatic in
 His reticence is as significant as His their import that it takes
 millennia
 Revelation—both contain secret to unpick the knots, break open
 the
 wisdoms, mysteries that require our seals, and understand them. He
 comes
 deepest meditation. among us intermittently, traces His
 Indeed, if we compare the book Will briefly on our human shores, and
 of Revelation with the book of leaves us measuring His tracks in
 the
 Creation, there appears at first glance sands for centuries.
 to be considerably more surplus in "In My presence amongst you,"
 the latter. Whether due to human writes Bahá'u'lláh, "there is a
 wisdom,
 obtuseness or some graver mystery, and in My absence there is yet
 another,
 God's words tend to double up, like inscrutable to all but God, the
 Incom-
 puns or reversible clothing, and seem parable, the All-Knowing"
 (Kitáb-i-
 to serve more than one purpose at a Aqdas ¶53, 39). A sigh from the

An-
time. They reach beyond evolutionary cient of Days can cause each atom
to
utilitarianism, like wonder, like beauty, acquire its own unique and separate
or, as Nabokov noted, like a butterfly's character. A breath from His lips
can
wings. Perhaps this is another meaning set the fires of hell ablaze and
open
of divine economy: the exquisite paradise before men's eyes. Meaning
is
capacity of God's silences to resonate blasted into a thousand pieces by
one
with the alternative meanings of His syllable from Him, and words,
stripped
words. naked by the stroke of His Pen, are
When He does speak, His sent scuttling into the world, like
intervention in human affairs is not monks shorn of their old habits. We
only creative but destructive, too. live and die as He breathes through
We are revived by the breeze of His our collective histories. For He is
the
presence: we are restored, resurrected, Cleaver, the Ravager, the Inflictor
of
rendered vivid to our selves whenever Trials. He is the supreme Love and
the
He passes by. But our lives are Slayer of lovers, all in one.
simultaneously reduced to rubble by
the resonance of His comings, the
echo left by His goings: our theories
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THE DEATH OF WORDS 'Tis all in pieces, all coherence
gone,
End-of-the-world vocabulary strikes All just supply, and all
relation...."
an ominously repetitive note in the ("The Anatomy of the World,"
human ear. We are fatally familiar ll.205-14)³
with it. We have heard it all before. But
although we like to believe that each At the start of the twentieth
of these turning points in history is century, Yeats, too, described a
collapse
hyperbolically unique and each end of significance as well as of
society; he
absolute, no resurrection is entire, no brooded over the demise not only
of
rebirth final. We seem to be afflicted, as Ireland, but of all civilization:
a species, by an inclination toward the
supremacy fallacy, that fatal propensity Things fall apart; the centre

to imagine ourselves chosen to be the
 cannot hold;
 first or doomed to be the last, to assume
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the
 we are unique and believe ourselves to
 world,
 be the only. But beginnings and ends
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed,
 have always involved re-interpretation.
 and everywhere
 Turning points in human history have
 The ceremony of innocence is
 invariably coincided with inquiries
 into language and a questioning of drowned
 words. Clichés have to die in order for ("The Second Coming." ll.3-6)⁴
 poems to be reborn.
 And we do not even need God to And one of the characteristic
 tell us this, because poets have done nightmares of our own times is to
 find ourselves standing on ground zero
 so over and over again. John Donne of
 of language itself. Not only have
 not only bore witness to the end of an
 culture and tradition given way over the
 epoch in the seventeenth century, but
 course
 to the breaking of a poetic tradition, of two world wars and their
 rumbling
 the shattering of meter, the revolution consequences, but the very
 foundation
 of rhyme: of words has been eroded. Writers
 in
 the Western literary tradition have
 And new philosophy calls all in been pondering this collapse for the
 doubt, past two centuries. We cannot talk
 The element of fire is quite put
 out, 3 Norton Anthology of English
 Literature
 The sun is lost, and th'earth, and (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), Vol.
 B,
 no man's wit pp. 1293-94.
 Can well direct him where to look 4 Norton Anthology of English
 Literature
 for it. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), Vol.
 F,
 p. 2036.
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mean our ends. And since our ends are rarely consummations "devoutly to be wished" but rather a consequence that does not always promise with 5 Set to music by Benjamin Britten, Op. 27. privately printed 1941, published One of the distinctions of this Dispensation may be that Bahá'u'lláh has York: Boosey and Hawkes, 1942. Quartets."

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invited us to think about the golden silences of God as well as the unsullied summoning silver of His Words. He has drawn our attention to their reciprocity. Perhaps there are as many lessons to be learned from the former as there is guidance implicit in the latter. It may even be that we can only understand the fundamentals of His Covenant in the relationship between the two. No one can speak and listen simultaneously. Words require silence to be heard. Even the least significant of speech, uttered at the most primary level of communication, depends on the assumption that someone is listening. And this is a fundamental law, of an absolute prerequisite for communication, which we ignore to our cost, and it is one of the crucial lessons we learn from silence in this Dispensation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá confirms this principle in Paris Talks when He observes, "Bahá'u'lláh says there is a sign [from

power of silence. We may be missing the point by not listening.

GOLD AND SILVER

6 The first of the "Four

the Sovereign, the Mighty, the All- Praised" (¶ 115, 61), He is

us to enter into that primary

Once the listening soul steps into

sacred space, attunes itself to the

membrance of God, and implores His forgiveness, we become receptive to understanding the Word of God, but only if we give it our undivided attention. And if we are to attend to

the meanings implicit in the Word of God, the purest silence is required.

But it is hard to hear the Voice

the Ancient of Days in the middle of the cacophony of daily life. We are surrounded by noise: the vapid

of political campaigns, the rumble

collapsing ideals, the grunts of

and howls of greed on every side.

If we catch His accents behind the uproar, we are lucky. Shoghi Effendi vividly describes this challenge

the metaphor of light and darkness:

"Amidst the shadows which are

God] in every phenomenon: the sign of the intellect is contemplation and the sign of contemplation is silence, because it is impossible for a man to do two things at one time—he cannot

history" both speak and meditate" (174).

Silence is therefore essential for understanding. When Bahá'u'lláh the

writes in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, "Blessed silenc-

is he who, at the hour of dawn, cen- an-

tring his thoughts on God, occupied were

with His remembrance, and suppli- God's

cating His forgiveness, directeth his the

steps to the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár and, would

entering therein, seateth himself in and

silence to listen to the verses of God, The Silences of God

Mysteriously, slowly, and resistlessly God accomplishes His silences.

design, though the sight that an

meets our eyes in this day be the Revelation;

spectacle of a world hopelessly entangled in its own meshes, ut- words.

terly careless of the Voice which, for a century, has been calling it to God, and miserably subservi- necessity

ent to the siren voices which are attempting to lure it into the vast abyss. (Promised Day 116)

conceived institutions, He has freed us to We would never have reached the last of these subsidiary clauses had we not

increasingly gathering about us," he writes, "we can faintly discern the glimmerings of Bahá'u'lláh's unearthly sovereignty appearing fitfully on the horizon of

(World Order 168).

And the counterpoint between what we see and what we hear, between

shrillness of our age and God's

es, is depicted by the Guardian in

other remarkable sentence. Here,

it not for the basso ostinato of

Will that keeps the syntax steady,

hiss and spit of our own noise

literally wind around our throats

strangle us:

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

Bahá'u'lláh has liberated us to

equality of hearing in this

He has invited us into a democracy of listening, of meditating on His

Each one of us has this God-given right, this freedom. In fact, He has granted it as an obligation, a

for our spiritual independence. While abrogating individual authority and placing power in His divinely con-

ponder His meanings, to plunge into the ocean of His Revelation without

kept hold of the main sentence that quietly reminds us that God does and always will accomplish His design.

literally

Silence, in such circumstances as we live, is synonymous with spiritual life. this

Small wonder, therefore, that in this in

Dispensation Bahá'u'lláh has annulled the

the role of the chattering theologian, fact

invalidated the authority of the priest.

Our response to God's silence cannot be passive, but neither can it be foisted on others. The principle of autocracy in the Bahá'í Faith lies in the authen- inclined to

ticated texts of this religion, in the absolute authority of the words writ- pebbles

ten by its Founder and His appointed Interpreters. No individual can usurp that autocracy; no one has to right to impose his or her personal interpreta- tions of those words over others'. But the principle of democracy also exists, another kind

not only in how we vote, nor just in how we consult, or are governed by elected institutions rather than ap- unwillingness

pointed individuals, but also in the way

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There are times, Bahá'u'lláh ex- plains, when God chooses to be silent the

because of "the impediments that have by

hindered Thy people from recognizing words

Thy truth" (Gleanings 28). He with- circumstance:

holds His Words when He knows we are not listening to them; He speaks

carrying the burden of influence on others, without being weighed down by individual power. He has

released us to be lovers rather than priests. The true pearl diver in

age cannot barter what he has found

the marketplace of power because

proof of his treasure lies in the

that he has drowned.

EARS TO HEAR

But we are not, by nature,

drown. We cling to the dry land of received ideas, the sand and

of inherited notions. We turn our backs on the ocean and become adept at cultivating spiritual deafness, especially when it is too much of a challenge to hear the uncomfortable truth. As a result, there is

of silence buried between the words of God, which is caused not only by our inability but by our

to listen.

a proof of truth as the words when they are uttered. He reminds us of

wisdom of this withholding silence

highlighting the relationship of

to time as well as to

"Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can

everything
only if we are ready to hear, for "words that he can disclose be regarded
as
are revealed according to the capacity timely, nor can every timely
utterance
of the people." And, as He tells us, be considered as suited to the
capacity
with beguiling candour, "as there were of those who hear it" (Gleanings
176).
few ears to hear, for some time the Pen Once we understand this wisdom,
our
has been silent in its own chamber, and hearts might be more willing to
absorb
to such a degree that silence has had the import of His Words. But until
we
precedence over utterance" (Bahá'í do so, we are effectively deaf.
And our
Scriptures 133). deafness delays the inevitable.
In the Hidden Words, Bahá'u'lláh "How manifold are the truths,"
He
goes even further and establishes this tells us, "which must remain
unuttered
reciprocity between the ear and the until the appointed time is come!"
tongue as a spiritual principle. The (Gleanings 176). And even when the
method of the Manifestations, in oth- right time comes, how often do
truths
er words, is one which we should emu- remain unuttered because we are
still
late: "The wise are they that speak not not listening?
unless they obtain a hearing, even as
the cup-bearer, who proffereth not his SUFFERING IN SILENCE
cup till he findeth a seeker, and the lov- Once we do begin to listen,
er who crieth not out from the depths
however,
of his heart until he gazeth upon the we hear new layers in all that God
does
beauty of his beloved" (Hidden Words, not say. His silence, we discover
to our
Persian n.36). Such words not only shame, can be filled with sadness,
with
disappointment on our account, which
caution us to weigh what we say but
is that terrible alternative to His good
invite us to meditate on the reasons for
pleasure.
and causes of silence. "O Bond Slave of the World!"
God's silences cannot, by their very writes Bahá'u'lláh in the Hidden

Words,

nature, be fathomed, but the withholding ones caused by our unreadiness to and

listen, our inability to hear, are worth heedless-

pondering. To be responsive to the thy

receptivity of the listener, Bahá'u'lláh came"

seems to suggest, can be as eloquent
The Silences of God

The sorrow of the Best Beloved and the Friend is more dreadful, perhaps, space,

than the wrath of the Father. Divine displeasure is more difficult for us to plangent

bear than any punishment, because it how

resonates with the silence of God's forbearance, it echoes with His long suffering:

whipped until we cried for mercy. As

At many a dawn have I turned from the realms of the Placeless we

unto thine abode, and found thee on the bed of ease busied with others than Myself. Thereupon,

even as the flash of the spirit, I returned to the realms of celestial glory and breathed it not in

My retreats above unto the hosts of holiness. (Bahá'u'lláh, Hidden response.

Words, Persian n.28)

our

follies reverberating a hundredfold; it

It is that "breathed it not" which really confounds us. It is that delicacy of His keeping silent on our account,

of His "desiring not" our shame. He would not advertise our faithlessness nor have our stupidity trumpeted be-

omi-

"Many a dawn hath the breeze of My loving-kindness wafted over thee

found thee upon the bed of

ness fast asleep. Bewailing then

plight it returned whence it

(Persian n.30).

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gone as far as assuming that God's silence, like the darkness of outer

is synonymous with a vacuum. If and when we finally realize how

it is with sorrow on our behalf,

quiet with patient forgiveness, we

may be even more ashamed than if we

had been hauled up by the heels and

our understanding of this new Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh evolves,

begin to become unnervingly aware of a very dangerous, very mature kind of silence that lies between His Words.

NO ANSWER CAME THE STERN REPLY

A corollary to the silence of God's sorrow is the silence of His

It is against that gong that we hear

is in that quiet echo that we register

the hollowness of our own sounds.

God's way of answering our urgent questions with silence is the most painful kind of all.

We are all familiar with that

fore the angels. "And whenever the
insis-
manifestation of My holiness sought
beseechings.

His own abode," He reminds us, "a
stranger found He there, and, home-
the

less, hastened unto the sanctuary of
We

the Beloved. Notwithstanding I have
crite-

concealed thy secret and desired not
reality,

thy shame" (Bahá'u'lláh, Hidden Words,
outraged

Persian n.27).

indignant

This sin-covering silence of God
has emboldened us, and made us bra-
frustrated

zen. It has permitted us to persist in
our follies to such a degree that we have

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

to despair.

by

Indeed, most of twentieth-century
literature has been an exploration the
our

pointlessness of asking questions, in
inadequacy as well as compulsion in
doeth,

our use of words. The characters of
last

Vladimir and Estragon talk incessant-
frustration is

ly as they wait for the reply of Godot,
carrieth

which never fully satisfies even when it
comes⁷; the Marabar caves in Forster's

A Passage to India render all words
equally meaningless, even as their
sometimes a

echoes can be interpreted in a myriad

nous silence that counters our

tent prayers, our anxious

We are well acquainted with those
waves of silence that lap against

dry shores of our shrill demands.

expect a response that suits our

ria of logic, our perception of

our immediate needs, and are

by its absence. We hurl our

requests against the concave sky-blue

shell of His ear and become

at the mocking echoes that redound

upon us. What we perceive to be the

which is in truth praiseworthy"

(Selections 48). Why such a

"praiseworthy" is best explained

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who, with an ineffable
lightness of touch, reminds us of

total dependence on that Will when

He affirms that "He doeth as He

and what recourse have we?" In the

analysis all our fury and

a waste of breath because "He

out His Will, He ordaineth what He
pleaseth" (Selections 51).

The seeming non-response of God
to our appeals is therefore

clear answer, had we the ears to

hear it
 different ways; Joyce has taken inco-
 'Ab-
 herence to such heights of creativity
 "Then
 in Finnegans Wake that language has
 head
 become a mockery of itself in the ab-
 in the
 sence of any other meaningful game
 51). For
 to play. The vacancy underlying words
 beneath
 has become a way for contemporary
 realize
 artists to bear witness to our stoicism,
 and also to our folly as human beings.
 the
 It sums up the existential as well as
 mea-
 aesthetic dilemma of contemporary
 dis-
 existence. But interestingly enough,
 harm
 in the Bahá'í Writings we not only ex-
 folly of
 plore the futility of asking questions
 case,
 but find confirming answers implicit
 They
 in this silence.

are the equivalent of pure
 compassion.
 According to the Báb, these silences
 are themselves ordained by God and,
 as such, are an expression of His Will.
 He states, "O Ye servants of God!
 of
 Verily, be not grieved if a thing ye
 analysis,
 asked of Him remaineth unanswered,
 the
 inasmuch as He hath been commanded
 and we
 by God to observe silence, a silence
 silenc-
 es of God, another wind stirs in the
 7 See Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*.

and the hearts to understand. As
 du'l-Bahá continues to assert,
 better for thee to bow down thy
 in submission, and put thy trust
 All-Merciful Lord" (Selections
 if we listened to the resonance
 this kind of silence we might
 that the demands we have been mak-
 ing, the requirements we have set,
 logic by which means we seek to
 sure God's response can only reap
 appointment at best, or bring us
 at worse. They echo with the
 our demands. His silences, in this
 are a mercy to our own selves.

AT A LOSS FOR WORDS

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

soul, another note strikes the bone. "It behooveth you to remain silent before His Throne," observes the Báb, "for indeed of all the things which have been created between heaven and earth nothing on that Day will be deemed more fitting than the observance of silence" (Selections 164).
 dejected
 For the silences as well as the words of God have a curious impact on the uproar in our heads. They can leave us at a loss for words. They can render us mute. When we listen to them, (Tablets, we hear something beyond the actual sounds and syllables. When we stop the true our ears to our own noises, some un-acquired spoken understanding is communicated to us that rises out of our darkness like a murmuring remembrance. As Bahá'u'lláh states in the Kitáb-i-Íqán, their spirit, for when "the mention of God When the stream of utterance reached this stage, We beheld, (Kitáb-i-Íqán and lo! the sweet savours of God were being wafted from the day-arteries spring of Revelation. . . . It made all things new, and brought un-numbered and inestimable gifts to from the unknowable Friend. The robe of human praise can never contain are muted, we find our definitions dissolving, our languages integrating. All words tend toward self-destruction, but God destroys words absolutely in order to them. His silence, too, absorbs all other sounds into itself and turns them into music: "Be ye not sad nor on account of the disturbance and uproar of the people of desire and sion," writes 'Abdu'l-Bahá. "Ere the symphony of the Kingdom shall silence all the other noises" (vol. 1, 223).
 Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh urges seeker to free himself from all meanings, to purge his heart of all fancies and false assumptions. He us to strip away the shadow of words that cloud our understanding of hath become an empty name" and "His holy Word a dead letter" (29), it is necessary to breathe a new creativity into it through the of language.
 When the connotations of words thicken with use and abuse, we react their "shadows" merely and lose sight of their "spirits" altogether, as the

Báb

hope to match Its noble stature,
and Its shining figure the mantle
of utterance can never fit. With-
out word It unfoldeth the inner
mysteries, and without speech It
revealeth the secrets of the divine
sayings. (59)

shall not pronounce judgment

Once our human noises are mo-
mentarily hushed, once the voices we
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infers:

The reason for this command is
that haply, in the Day of the Reve-
lation of that supreme Truth, the
feet of the people shall not falter
upon the bridge, and that they

against the Fashioner of their ex-
istence, adducing against Him the

very shadow of His verse in their
heart, and rendering naught, and
at once, all their inmost realities
(Gleanings

and deeds, without even perceiv-
ing it. (Persian Bayán 6:8; qtd. in
repeatedly,

Saiedi, Gate of the Heart 37)

The act of pondering, of meditating,
And therefore must each new revela-
tion cast aside the definitions of the
one.

old, like outworn robes. We must strip
of

ourselves to seek for truth, not only
humbled and in silence, but quite na-
ked: "O brother," Bahá'u'lláh writes in
the Kitáb-i-Íqán,

In this

state of inward and outward listening
behold how the inner mysteries
of "rebirth," of "return," and of
"resurrection" have each, through
eternal.

these all-sufficing, these unan-
swerable, and conclusive utteranc-
man

es, been unveiled and unravelled
before thine eyes. God grant that
through His gracious and invis-
ible assistance, thou mayest divest
thy body and soul of the old gar-
stat-

ment, and array thyself with the

THE TOUCHSTONE

"Ponder this in thine heart"

46, 76; and Kitáb-i-Íqán 125, 149,
167), writes Bahá'u'lláh

and "meditate" on the Word of God.

The act of pondering, of meditating,
And therefore must each new revela-
tion cast aside the definitions of the
one.

old, like outworn robes. We must strip
of

ourselves to seek for truth, not only
humbled and in silence, but quite na-
ked: "O brother," Bahá'u'lláh writes in
the Kitáb-i-Íqán,

In this

state of inward and outward listening
behold how the inner mysteries
of "rebirth," of "return," and of
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ible assistance, thou mayest divest
thy body and soul of the old gar-
stat-

ment, and array thyself with the

It has implied a certain conjunction
body and mind that indicates poise,
that implies a quiet control and a
steadiness of concentration which
is both physical and spiritual.

we reach for the touchstone of
understanding. Sometimes, by grace,
we attain it. And the thrill is

The well-known icon of the West-
ern meditative tradition, that of a

contemplating a death's head, contains
its own inherent thrill. The mirroring
of skulls, the eyeing of the hollow
eyed has always hinted at the possible
reversal of the roles. If Rodin's

ue The Thinker and Mona Lisa's smile

new and imperishable attire. (158) still hold their power over us, it is pre-
 sumably because of this. When the In the final analysis, this "new" nakedness is the only attire that is relatively imperishable on this side of the grave. Like silence, such a divestment of old garments is actually what renders us immortal. We may have imagined that writing words would eternalize us, but ironically enough, it is unadorned by words that we might tell live forever.

observer becomes aware of being observed, a shudder passes through him. A perturbation seizes his mind. He is filled with dread that perhaps he is one who is actually being read. That awareness is a step in the direction of true understanding. Religion, like art, points heightened self-awareness. By us to "ponder" and to "meditate" on

the Word of God, Bahá'u'lláh is giving us the key to a new and hidden language. The Silences of God

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For it seems that when God splits the stone tablets of His silence, His Word actually gives utterance to us. (254) standard, this is the Touchstone of God, wherewith He proveth His servants. (Kitáb-i-Íqán

It reverses our position as speakers, as wordmongers, and forces upon us the uneasy recognition that we ourselves have been breathed forth, that we are the ones being interpreted, even as we speak. "Yea," Bahá'u'lláh confirms, in the Kitáb-i-Íqán, "such things as throw consternation into the hearts of all men come to pass only that each soul may be tested by the touchstone is." In a letter⁸ to the Universal House of Justice, the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Center recent scholars . . . assert that, the Qur'án itself, the form of most prevalent is irony." This it defines as "the perception of a clash between appearance and reality, between the ideal and what actually

of God, that the true may be known
 divine
 and distinguished from the false" (52).
 Whenever multiple meanings are at
 work, language permits and delights
 in irony. And whenever words contain
 irony, they retain elasticity, they resist
 literalism and obfuscation. When lan-
 guage invites us to play games with
 recognize
 perspective and scale, with appearance
 as
 and reality, it keeps our minds and
 layers
 spirits alive, it jolts us out of our old
 signifi-
 habits. And the myriad silences con-
 their
 tained between the words of God are
 perhaps the most creative use of irony
 and
 in the world, for they force us to ques-
 assayer of
 tion all our assumptions, all our habits.
 Bahá'u'lláh affirms that,
 very
 truth to us, the Manifestations of
 the Birds of Heaven and Doves
 of Eternity speak a twofold lan-
 guage. One language, the outward
 language, is devoid of allusions,
 Thou,
 is unconcealed and unveiled. . . .
 The other language is veiled and
 concealed, so that whatever lieth
 hidden in the heart . . . may be
 'Humorist'
 made manifest. This is the divine
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grace to manifest Thy Cause," attests
 Bahá'u'lláh in one of His prayers.
 within
 "Wherefore I have been subjected to
 break
 such adversities that my tongue hath
 Although

Only when we respond to this
 irony—only when we are conscious
 of what is concealed and what is re-
 vealed—do we begin to grasp the
 fundamental purpose of the Word of
 God. As long as we cannot hear the
 silences between His words and the
 ironies in both, we will not
 their echoes in ourselves. As long
 as
 we cannot see these multiple
 and simultaneous scales of
 cance, we will be deprived of
 creative power. This Word and Its
 silent shadow, sifts and fashions
 shapes us—It is the divine
 our souls.
 Indeed, in order to prove this
 the Word of God submit themselves
 to the most grievous ordeals and al-
 low themselves to be harrowed by
 the greatest tests of all. "It is
 O my God, Who hast called me into
 being through the power of Thy
 might, and hast endued me with Thy
 8 Memorandum titled "The
 12 Jan. 1997.
 face, and Gabriel overshadowed me,
 and the Spirit of Glory stirred
 my bosom, bidding me arise and
 my silence" (Gleanings 103).

been hindered from extolling Thee and from magnifying Thy glory" (Prayers and Meditations 208).

He to

What must it mean for these extraordinary Beings Who know better each

than anyone the impossibility of comprehending God's Word, to have to be "Glorious

the Ones Who utter it? glorified art Thou, O Lord my God! My

tongue, both the tongue of my body and the tongue of my heart, my limbs

The domain of His decree is too vast for the tongue of mortals to describe, or for the bird of the human mind to traverse; and the dispensations of His providence are too mysterious for the mind of man to comprehend. His creation no end hath overtaken, and it . . . will continue to the "End that God's

knoweth no end." Ponder this utterance in thine heart, and reflect how it is applicable unto all these holy Souls. (Kitáb-i-Íqán 167)

be more perturbing than this duality?

When Bahá'u'lláh writes of the Word of God summoning Him to Kitáb-i-Íqán,

speech, the darkness from which It rises not only perturbs His rational mind to

but seizes upon Him, like an involuntary Will. "Had it been in my power," every

He writes, "I would have, under no circumstances, consented to distinguish

be myself amongst men." But when He

acknowledges

chooses to hold His peace, "lo, the voice of the Holy Ghost, standing on my right hand, aroused me, and the

He calls on God "with a stammering tongue" and with an "afflicted pen" (Prayers and Meditations 8), were

keep silent, He says, every hair on

head would vibrate with its music,

bone of His body would flute with

song, His very blood would sing:

glorified art Thou, O Lord my God! My

and the tongue of my heart, my limbs and members, every pulsating vein within me, every hair of my head, all proclaim that Thou art God, and that there is none other God beside Thee" (Prayers and Meditations 112).

Those Who are the Embodiments of His Names and Attributes not only endure the paradoxes implicit in

mysterious Will, but contain them.

The mysterious mingling of Their divine and human nature symbolizes the ultimate irony of God. What could

When people "discover suddenly," as Bahá'u'lláh says in the

"that a Man, Who hath been living in their midst, Who, with respect

every human limitation, hath been their equal, had risen to abolish

established principle imposed by

Faith—they would of a certainty

veiled and hindered from

ing His truth" (74).

No wonder the Manifestations of God in every age pose the ultimate

Supreme Spirit appeared before my
God

The Silences of God

caused not this turmoil but to test and
prove His servants" (Kitáb-i-Íqán 51).

...

We are perturbed by the nature of
these living symbols and metaphors.
We can barely understand heaven and
earth, but "whatever lieth between
them," namely the Manifestations
themselves, remains the ultimate
enigma. These divine Embodiments
speak only in veiled language about
their dual nature. In the last analysis
the Word of God offers no rational
Manifestation." (Vol. IV, 93;
explanation to Their mystery, and
provisional trans.)

we are left to respond in the silences,
"inasmuch as the divine Purpose hath
Clearly the significance of words
decreed that the true should be known
has been so democratized in this age
from the false, and the sun from the
shadow, He hath, therefore, in every
season sent down upon mankind the
an

showers of tests from His realm of
glory" (Kitáb-i-Íqán 53).

rather

And so, the final purpose of
God's silences is to test us. It is
that

the touchstone whose ambiguities
destroy and undermine our facile
interpretations. It is a double-edged
sword that has been tempered, like
steel, in the fires of paradox. And
revelation

the fact that these divine paradoxes,
in turn, test our understanding may
be implicit in Bahá'u'lláh words, in
the Ma'idíy-i-Asmani, in which He
things,"

anticipates a different "proof " in the

test for the human race: "Verily,

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We therefore . . . made Our verses
testimonies for all to witness.

However, in this Dispensation, the
one True God—Glorified be His
Name—hath purposed that most
of the believers who are wholly
devoted to Him should speak in
the language of divine verses.

Therefore, we have ordained that
a proof other than the revelation
of divine verses be produced to
vindicate the truth of the next

that new proofs must be found to com-
municate the Primal Will to human-
kind. I do not know whether this is

indication that we will one day probe
the silences of God in prose

than verse, or whether my brother was
prophetic, after all, in suggesting

in some future dispensation, a female
Manifestation of God might appear,
simply smile, and say nothing at all.

But certainly we shall be tested by
whatever is "other than the

of divine verses."

And with that thought, I will
for my own safety's sake, "observe
silence," "look at the end of

and "renounce the world"

(Bahá'u'lláh,
next Dispensation than what we have Tablets 156).
been led to expect from those of the
past. "As My previous Manifestation
decreed that the proof of My
Dispensation should be the revelation
of divine verses," He states,
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