

# The Epistolary Style of Shoghi Effendi<sup>1</sup>

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The English letters of Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'í world during his tenure as Guardian of the new faith reflect the revolutionary nature of the Revelation, not only in their vast and astounding range of content but also in their form and style. Aside from the historical *God Passes By*, letters constitute the bulk of Shoghi Effendi's written communications with the Bahá'í world, and many of these epistles were written in English. Since Shoghi Effendi must rank as the master literary stylist of the Bahá'í Faith in the English language, in addition to being the Revelation's unique Guardian, his choice, use of, and adaptations to this literary form are significant to Bahá'ís both now and in the future. The purposes of this paper are to investigate the new style of the epistle, to examine the roots of its development, and to demonstrate that elements of the form have been modified to accommodate the great vision of Shoghi Effendi, architect of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh.

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Before embarking upon this investigation, however, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the terminology that will be used. The words *epistle* and *epistolary* have been chosen in preference to the words *letter* and *literary* because of the former pair's associative rather than definitive meaning. As C. Hugh Holman states, "Theoretically an epistle is any letter, but in practice the term is limited to formal compositions written by an individual or a group to a distant individual or group." Holman further says that an epistle differs from a letter because it is "a conscious literary form," which concerns itself with "public matters and with philosophy as well as with religious problems" (199). While Shoghi Effendi did write letters that were less formal in tone and that were in answer to an individual's private questions, in his role as Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, one could not really class any of this correspondence as "private," since his answers to any questions always constituted the authoritative interpretation of Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's teachings. Thus, "epistle," with its more public and formal connotations, suits the nature of Shoghi Effendi's communications much better than does "letter" with its chatty and private connotations, especially since in the twentieth century the latter term has come to be associated only with the familiar letter.

In the Guardian's usage, the former type of communication might be classified loosely as an "epistolary essay." This is the Guardians most striking

contribution to English letters. The relation between letter and essay here is tailor-made for the Guardian’s purpose. The “essay” aspect allows for breadth of subject matter, use of historical analysis, a world-encompassing perspective, and a scholarly, definitive treatment of the issue at hand. Yet, the direct nature of the address, often intimate in tone, as well as the striking blend of formal and highly informal levels of rhetoric—perhaps a reflection of the Guardian himself—make these letters tremendously powerful on the level of personal appeal.

Shoghi Effendi’s choice of the more formal epistle form is wholly befitting to the style of his writing. Again, referring to Holman for a working definition, style may be said to be “the arrangement of words in a manner which at once best expresses the individuality of the author and the idea and intent in his mind. . . . Style is a combination of two elements: the idea to be expressed, and the individuality of the author.” Holman goes on to say:

It is impossible to change the diction or to alter the phrasing of statement and thus to say exactly the same thing; for what the reader receives from a statement is not alone what is said, but also certain connotations which affect his consciousness from the manner in which the statement is made. And from this it follows that, just as no two personalities are alike, no two styles are actually alike. (514)

In the case of Shoghi Effendi, his elegant English prose style reflects perfectly his station as Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith, elucidating the teachings and giving direction to its adherents in language that would endure for the entire duration of the Revelation. When deciding on the design and materials for the buildings at the World Centre of the Bahá’í Faith on Mount Carmel, Haifa, the Guardian chose as his models the structures of the classical world because of their enduring qualities. His choice of English prose style is as timeless and as enduring, as meticulously fashioned and as majestic in the realm of words as those architectural models are in the realm of physical structures. Bearing in mind Holman’s definition of style, the reader sees that it is impossible to change even one word of the Guardian’s communications and retain the identical meaning. Rúhíyyih Khánum Rabbani, in *The Priceless Pearl*, describes the conciseness and density of his style, a style lofty enough to carry the complex ideas that he had to communicate to the Bahá’í world. She says, “In his translations of the Bahá’í writings, and above all in his own compositions, Shoghi Effendi set a standard that educates and raises the cultural level of the reader at the same time that it feeds his mind and soul with thoughts and truth” (Rabbani 197). For Shoghi Effendi, then, style was not merely an affected use of language; it was his vehicle for rendering the divine teachings into a definitive and accessible language for growing numbers of English-speaking believers around the

world who urgently required inspiration and direction.

The roots of Shoghi Effendi's finely honed English style must lie in the original Persian and Arabic languages of the Revelation, the power and beauty of which are exemplified in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The delicacy and allusiveness of the Oriental languages, their role as the first media of God's most recent Revelation, and their strength as the communicators of God's new laws and principles for the spiritual well-being and development of humankind can be best understood and appreciated by native Arabic- and Persian-speaking Bahá'ís. These, too, were Shoghi Effendi's first languages. Yet Shoghi Effendi was chosen and trained by '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 addition to his appreciation for Persian and Arabic style, Shoghi Effendi possessed an ear finely attuned to the

virtues of the great English stylists. In the translations of Bahá'u'lláh prayers, one senses the influence of that great Renaissance model of style, the King James version of the Bible. This turning to a more archaic style on the part of Shoghi Effendi reflects his great respect for the elegance of Shakespearean English and also makes use of the most scholarly example of religious writings rendered into English.

In Shoghi Effendi's original work, the style and technique of Edward Gibbon and Thomas Carlyle exert influence. Rúhíyyih Khánúm has noted the Guardian's fondness for Gibbon's History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, and it was not for the content alone that Shoghi Effendi had admiration. She records, "It was his own pet bible of the English language and often he would read to me excerpts from it, interrupting himself with exclamations such as 'Oh what style; what a command of English; what rolling sentences'" (Rabbani 38).

Gibbon's penchant for lengthy, balanced sentences and his stylistic habit of building a paragraph that cannot be broken apart without serious rupture to the meaning of the whole are features also apparent in the writings of the Guardian. A brief passage taken from Gibbon's examination of the early history of the Christian church in the Roman Empire will serve to indicate comparable aspects of style. Gibbon writes:

The promise of divine favour, instead of being partially confined

to the posterity of Abraham, was universally proposed to the free-man and the slave, to the Greek and to the barbarian, to the Jew and to the Gentile. Every privilege that could raise the proselyte from earth to heaven, that could exalt his devotion, secure his happiness, or even gratify that secret pride which under the semblance of devotion, insinuates itself into the human heart, was still reserved for the members of the Christian church; but at the same time all mankind was permitted, and even solicited, to accept the glorious distinction, which was not only proffered as a favour, but imposed as an obligation. It became the most sacred duty of a new convert to diffuse among his friends and relations the inestimable blessing which he had received, and to warn them against a refusal that would be severely punished as a criminal disobedience to the will of a benevolent but all-powerful Deity. (92)

One notes, in the first sentence, the listing of balanced prepositional phrases appearing in pairs of opposites, a syntactical technique designed to demonstrate the truth of the universality of Christianity. In the second sentence, multiple verb phrases are embedded in the first of the two major clauses, while the second major clause qualifies and elaborates upon the first. The final sentence of the quotation includes vocabulary usage such as “most sacred

duty,” “inestimable blessing,” and “a benevolent but all-powerful Deity” all of which bear great resemblance to the usage of the Guardian two-hundred years later.

Trevor-Roper’s introduction to *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* points out that in addition to syntactical expertise, Gibbon combined “beneath a majestic style and the appearance of ease, an equal mastery of the new ‘philosophy’ and the old ‘erudition’” (viii). An example of this philosophy and erudition is evident in Gibbon’s passage on the early miracles of Christianity, when he states:

The duty of an historian does not call upon him to interpose his private judgment in this nice and important controversy; but he ought not to dissemble the difficulty of adopting such a theory as may reconcile the interest of religion with that of reason, of making a proper application of that theory, and of defining with precision the limits of that happy period, exempt from error and from deceit, to which we might be disposed to extend the gift of supernatural powers. (110)

Shoghi Effendi’s philosophy and erudition were, perforce, much broader than that of the eighteenth-century Gibbon, but the technique of reasonable and thorough scholarship throughout his epistles shows how Shoghi Effendi built upon Gibbon’s solidly laid foundations. In *The World Order*

of Bahá'u'lláh, Shoghi Effendi clearly outlines the historical perspective of the rise of the Bahá'í Faith. He writes:

Should we look back upon the past, were we to search out the Gospel and the Qur'án, we will readily recognize that neither the Christian nor the Islamic Dispensations can offer a parallel either to the system of Divine Economy so thoroughly established by Bahá'u'lláh, or to the safeguards which He has provided for its preservation and advancement. (20)

From this point, the Guardian proceeds with historical analysis of the development of Christianity and Islam, demonstrating their deviations from the original teachings of their divine Founders. Certainly Gibbon's call for a reasoned examination of religion is answered here. Thus, not only in style but also in approach, Gibbon served as one major model for Shoghi Effendi.

Nineteenth-century historian, man of letters, and stylist, Thomas Carlyle was also admired by the Guardian. Again, the style is complex, reflecting the complexity of thought present in the writer himself. Carlyle's power of rhetoric was perhaps his most important talent as far as Shoghi Effendi 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 cry to his fellows, that they arise and

attain their salvation from present evils through work, follows:

Awake, ye noble Workers, warriors in the one true war: all this must be remedied. It is you who are already half-alive, whom I will 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 you count only these, will not be left. Let bucaniering be put far from you; alter, speedily abrogate all laws of the bucaniers, if you would gain any victory that shall endure. Let God's justice, let pity, nobleness and manly valour, with more gold-purses or fewer, testify themselves in this your brief Life-transit to all the Eternities, the Gods and Silences. It is to you I call; for ye are not dead, ye are already half-alive: there is in you 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 least this, That the mandate of God to His creature man is: Work! The future Epic of the World rests not with those that are near dead, but with those that are alive, and those that are coming into life. (166)

Carlyle had no way of knowing the true significance of that final sentence, written in 1843, but certainly the air of expectancy and prophecy found in this

brief passage is representative of much early Victorian writing. Content aside, however, Carlyle's literary techniques of exhortation, caution, praise, and promise are apparent in passages of the Guardian's writings as well. Witness the following from the conclusion of his letter "America and the Most Great Peace," included in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*:

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 Standard which, if 'Abdu'l-Bahá's wishes are to be fulfilled, must be raised in your own country has yet to be unfurled. The Unity of which that standard is to be the symbol is far from being yet established. The machinery which must needs incarnate and preserve that unity is 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 any of her sister communities in

East or West to achieve such ascendancy as shall deprive her of that spiritual primacy with which she has been invested and which she has thus far so nobly retained? Will she not rather contribute, by a still further revelation of those inherent powers that motivate her life, to enhance the priceless heritage which the love and wisdom of a departed Master have conferred 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 capacities of people; both, in a sense, temper their praise, Carlyle by cautioning the workers not to be "bucaniers" and Shoghi Effendi by listing the tasks that still lie ahead. Carlyle, too, looks to the future, but he lacks the specificity of vision that Shoghi Effendi expresses. This lack gives Carlyle's exhortation a tentative air, on the whole, while that of the Guardian radiates confidence in its challenge to the American Bahá'í community.

A comparison of Carlyle, Gibbon, and Shoghi Effendi not only reveals the influences of the former two upon the

Guardian but also shows their points of difference. Certainly, the scope of the Guardian's vision was beyond that of Carlyle, and while this breadth of vision may be more a legacy of Gibbon, who wrote not only history, as Hugh Trevor-Roper points out, but also "universal history" or "philosophic history" (viii). Still, there are further differences. Gibbon wrote the history of a civilization long dead, where historical interpretation was made easy because of the era's remoteness. Shoghi Effendi, however, used this technique of historical interpretation and analysis to clarify the significance of the clouded, ever-changing events that were taking place around him as he wrote. Astonishingly, these writings still read as if they were written only yesterday.

Stylistically, one of the most striking differences between the Guardian and his predecessors is the nature of rhetorical address. Of course, in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the rhetorical stance of the writer was conventionally formal, and although there might occur the occasional address to the "gentle reader," the distancing of writers from their audience was a rhetorical device designed to enhance the authority of the authors over their addressees. Shoghi Effendi completely reverses this form of address. Throughout his writings are scattered numerous intimate addresses to the communications' recipients, such as the "fellow believers" of the passage quoted earlier, "beloved co-workers," "fellow laborers in the Divine Vineyard," "dearly-beloved

friends," "friends and fellow-heirs of the grace of Bahá'u'lláh," "friends and fellow-defenders of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh," and numerous other loving and tender appellations.

Throughout the letters, he rallies the troops of his followers around him, giving the authoritative interpretation of events, yet including himself in the numbers of believers undergoing the turmoils of the age, as in the following example: "Dearly-beloved friends! Can our eyes be so dim as to fail to recognize in the anguish and turmoil which, greater than in any other country and in a manner unprecedented in its history, are now afflicting the American nation . . . ?" (Shoghi Effendi 79). Many times the eyes of the average Bahá'í were "so dim," but Shoghi Effendi's eyes, possessing that sweeping perspective with which he was endowed as Guardian, were never dimmed. Another example of the Guardian's including himself with the rest of the Bahá'ís occurs in his letter "The Goal of a New World Order" where, in speaking of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, he states:

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

At the close of his communications, he signs simply as “your brother and co-worker” or “your true brother,” his name given simply as “Shoghi” rather than the more formal “Shoghi Effendi” that one might well expect from the appointed head of a world religion. It is a mark of the Guardian’s humility and his great sense of the necessity that Bahá’ís work together in order to achieve enduring victories that he included himself in the number of the rank and file, much like a general marching to the front lines with his troops. This, in itself sets him apart from his stylistic models and indicates that he is willing to put his words into action, not merely to write academic tomes.

The choice of the epistle form is also indicative of the Guardian’s desire to inspire to action. He could conceivably have written straight essays, nor directly addressing anyone, but the purpose of his communication was always to move his audience to deeds, not merely to inspire them with his words. To this end, the epistle form with its direct address is uniquely suited. It is difficult for the recipient of a letter (be it a nation or an individual) to miss the purport of a document that bears the recipient’s name at the beginning, while a formal essay written in the third person can easily be put out of mind once read.

Historically, the epistle has been the vehicle for teachings in former religions, notably Christianity. One thinks immediately of those written by the Apostles of Jesus and included in the

New Testament of the Bible. Paul’s epistles to the Romans, the Corinthians, the Thessalonians, and numerous other groups are prime examples of these communications. Other apostles also addressed groups of early Christians in the epistle form. It was their only means of communicating with scattered groups of believers, to encourage them, to clarify what they perceived Christ’s teachings to be, to exhort the people to live by their new beliefs, and to go out and teach others. These were the same objectives with which Shoghi Effendi sat down to write his letters to the Bahá’í world. The important and obvious difference in the two cases is that Shoghi Effendi possessed divine authority in his interpretations of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings, while the apostles had no definitive authority and incorporated their personal ideas into the small body of Christ’s teachings. In so doing, they may have diluted the strength and changed the intention of the original Word of God.

The epistles of Christianity, then, while providing an early example of communication, are not suitable models to which one may turn for explaining Shoghi Effendi’s choice of this form. Infinitely more rewarding is a turning to the tablets of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The English translation of one of Bahá’u’lláh’s most comprehensive writings is, in fact, titled *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, addressed as proof of His teachings to the son of the eminent Muslim leader who was responsible for the execution of two devoted and innocent Bábís.

Numerous others of Bahá'u'lláh's works, such as *The Seven Valleys* and *The Four Valleys*, are addressed to leading intellectuals, and his tablets to the kings and rulers of the world provide an important example for Shoghi Effendi, dealing directly as they do with the problems and challenges of the immediate future. The many, more intimate personal addresses of 'Abdu'l-Bahá serve as models for the render, understanding, and intimate aspects of Shoghi Effendi's letters. Still, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's tablets were written in Arabic or Persian. In Shoghi Effendi's own letters to the Bahá'í world, humanity received for the first time in its history divinely inspired direction originating in the English language.

The differences between Shoghi Effendi's communications and those of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá are many. Significantly, the contents of the Guardian's letters are much more concerned with the practical aspects of building the Administrative Order of the Bahá'í Faith, a project which was advanced primarily in the West, and particularly in North America. For this purpose, English was more functional than Persian or Arabic. Also, during Shoghi Effendi's lifetime there existed the means to disseminate such letters widely and efficiently to the rapidly growing number of English-speaking believers. Because of improvements in worldwide communications, as well as the spread of the Bahá'í Faith, the Guardian was able to give much more up-to-date and comprehensive reports of the global progress being made and

to analyze extensively the global challenges confronting Bahá'ís. Historical perspective on the Bahá'í Faith, was possible by Shoghi Effendi's time, as well, and played a large part in the Guardian's messages. The sense of urgency as an effect of the Guardian's use of direct address is also a result of the convergence of his historical analysis and his world-encompassing perspective of the future.

This same sense of urgency lies behind another method of communication employed by the Guardian and for which he adapted the English language to suit his purpose. Whenever a matter 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 cables, he did not abandon his majestic epistolary style; he merely pared it, eliminating connectives unnecessary to the meaning but retaining always his unmistakable dignity of language.

Shoghi Effendi was never dominated by form or convention in his communications. Rather, he adapted and used form and convention (as any good craftsman uses tools) to accomplish the task before him—the building of the Administrative Order of Bahá'u'lláh. It is illuminating to note the enduring influence of the Guardian's style in communications from the Universal House of Justice since its establishment in 1963. In continuing the same use of epistolary and cable forms initiated by the Guardian, in its blending of formal and intimate language, in its dignified yet loving tone, in its

dual historical and futuristic perspective, and in its world-encompassing yet personal scope, this second “twin pillar” of the Administrative Order has, in turn, upheld the standard toward which all Bahá'í institutions must strive.

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 Universal House of Justice indicated the similarities of style. “Dearly-loved Friends,” the Institution writes:

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 with indefeasible unity and spiritual force its redemptive mission, inevitably suffers the disruption of economic, social and civil life which afflicts its fellow men throughout the planet. (¶ 1)

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 Riḍván 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

ample assurance of victories to come if we but follow the path of His guidance. He rewards our humble efforts with effusions of grace which bring not only advancement to the Cause but assurance and happiness to our hearts, so that we may indeed look upon our neighbors with bright and shining faces, confident that from our services now will eventuate that blissful future which our descendants will inherit, glorifying Bahá'u'lláh, the Prince of Peace, 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 his great vision but also set the example of how to carry forward this “ever-advancing civilization” in language, style, and form worthy to be its medium.

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