Baha'i Literature

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Bahá'í Literature

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Bahai literature is a large body of writing in Persian and Arabic produced by leaders and adherents of the Bahai religion in Iran from the 1860s to the present. This article is concerned primarily with poetry and belles lettres rather than apologetic, didactic, historiographical, liturgical, or scriptural materials, except insofar as the last-mentioned exhibit characteristics of literary interest.

The immediate antecedents of Bahai literature are the various scriptural and apologetic writings produced in the 1260s/1840s by the Bab and some of his leading followers. Babism was primarily a literate and elitist movement among a section of the Shi?ite ?olama?, but from its outset conventional learning and scholarly writing were, if not wholly rejected, relegated to a status much inferior to that enjoyed by the products of “innate knowledge” and “inspired” composition or “revelation,” in which the speed of writing was regarded as a sign of divine activity. In the later phase of the movement (roughly 1264/1848 to 1283/1866), the ability to write or utter “divinely-inspired” verses became the chief criterion whereby claimants to religious authority might be judged. Several individuals regarded as ommi (in this case unlearned, but not illiterate) began to write in this manner, but apart from works by the Bab and Mirza Yahya Nuri Sobh-e Azal, very little of this material has survived. Nevertheless, those writings we do possess, together with letters and fragments by other members of the Babi hierarchy (all of them ?olama?, like Molla Mohammad-?Ali Barforuši Qoddus, Qorrat-al-?Ayn Tahera, Sayyed Yahya Darabi, and Sayyed Hosayn Yazdi share certain important characteristics (see MacEoin, Babi Doctrine and History, chap. 4). There is a tendency toward esotericism, obscurantism, idiosyncrasy in matters of style, grammar, and subject, and the use of extended doxological and invocatory formulae (particularly in elaborate perorations based on the divine names). Free association and

stream-of-consciousness-style composition are marked features of some works, e.g., the Bab’s Ketab al-asma? and Ketab-e panj ša?n or Sobh-e Azal’s Mer?at al-bayan, Saha?ef al-Azal, Lahazat, etc.

These characteristics are retained in the later writings of Sobh-e Azal (which include a great deal of poetry), but otherwise the Azali branch of Babism has been almost bereft of literary productions of any kind, in spite of the existence of Azali litterateurs such as Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani, Shaikh Ahmad Ruhi Kermani, and Mirza Yahya Dawlatabadi. Mirza Hosayn-?Ali Nuri Baha?-Allah, whose Bahai version of the original Babi movement rapidly ousted its Azali rival throughout Iran, first came to prominence as one of the unlearned revealers of inspired verses in Baghdad during the 1850s and then as the de facto head of the faith in the 1860s. His early writings represent a significant departure from most previous Babi writing (except for the poetical works of Qorrat-al-?Ayn, with whom he was associated) in that they are, for the most part, couched in straightforward prose or verse. Although he was later to take a marked aversion to such matters, Baha?-Allah was at this period markedly influenced by Sufi writing and even spent a two-year period (1270-72/1854-56) living as a dervish in Kurdistan (see Cole, “Baha'u’llah and the Naqshbandi Sufis”). Sufi influences are particularly at work in a small number of poems composed in Baghdad, Kurdistan, and Istanbul, several of which bear the pen name (takallos) “Darviš.” The most important of these are: 1) a Persian gazal entitled Rašh-e ?ama, generally considered his earliest extant work; 2) an Arabic qasida of 127 distichs (bayts) entitled al-Qasidaal-warqa?ia, modeled on ?Omar ebn al-Farez’s famous Nazm al-soluk; 3) a Persian matnawi of 318 bayts entitled Matnawi-e mobarak, written in Istanbul and probably the last of Baha?-Allah’s works in verse. Perhaps the most noticeable feature of these poems, which are written in an elegant yet uncomplicated style and possess considerable freshness, is the complete absence of identifiably Babi elements.

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This is also largely true of some of Baha?-Allah’s earliest prose works, several of which are of real literary merit. Notable among these are: 1) Haft wadi and 2) Cahar wadi, two Persian mystical treatises along the lines of ?Attar’s Manteq al-tayr; 3) Kalemat-e maknuna, a collection of Persian and Arabic aphoristic statements, mostly of an ethical nature; 4) the Horufat-e ?alin, a short Arabic disquisition on death, which also exists in a Persian translation by the author; 5) the Ketab-e iqan, one of his very few full-length works, being a book of apologetics and exegesis written in a lucid and original Persian style; 6) the Jawaher al-asrar, an Arabic treatise along similar lines written about the same time; and 7) a series of brief Persian and Arabic poems and prose pieces, largely mystical in nature, including “Lawh-e mallah al-qods” and “Lawh-e naqus,” all in prose, and the poems “Lawh-e huriya,” “Lawh-e šakar-šakan,”

“Lawh-e golam al-kold,” “Lawh-e halhala ya bešarat,” “Saqi az gayb-e baqa?,” “Baz a wa be-deh jam-i,” and “Az bag-e elahi.”

Although Baha?-Allah continued to write extensively in Edirne (1280-85/1863-68) and Palestine (1285-1309/1868-92), his later work is, with only a few exceptions, increasingly turgid, repetitive, and visibly lacking in the linguistic brilliance and poetic energy that characterize his early output. The contents of some of these later writings reveal an acquaintance with European ideas, but the style and format remain Persian. Divorced from its earlier mysticism, Baha?-Allah’s prose becomes less elegant and even archaic. Perhaps the best products of this period are a series of proclamatory letters to several kings and rulers in Asia and Europe, some of which exhibit a polished epistolatory style. His last major work, a book-length Persian letter to the famous mojtahed of Isfahan Aqa Najafi, is a rambling patchwork of quotations from earlier works tied together with personal reminiscences and historical allusions. The need to produce “inspired” verses at great speed in response to the stream of letters and petitions arriving from Iran and elsewhere led him to rely more and more on established formulae in order to keep up with the demand.

By contrast, the works of Baha?-Allah’s eldest son ?Abbas (?Abd-al-Baha?, q.v.) exhibit the mannered characteristics of an urbane and well-educated litterateur in touch with modern currents of thought and behavior and with some European writing. Whereas his father’s Arabic was heavily Persianized, simple, and frequently ungrammatical, that of ?Abd-al-Baha? is polished, careful, and more Arab than Iranian in its manner. His earliest work, a commentary on the Hadith “konto kanzan makfiyan” written in his late teens in Edirne for ?Ali Ševket Pasha, shows close familiarity with the ideas and exegetical methods of philosophical Sufism. These and related themes occur in several other works which appear to be from roughly the same period, including tafsirs on the Surat al-fateha and the words golebat al-Rum (Koran 30:1). Other issues begin to emerge in later works, however, among which social and political questions come increasingly to the fore. The most detailed and interesting of these works is a Persian treatise entitled al-Resala al-madaniya (or Ketab asrar al-gaybiya le-asbab al-madaniya [sic]), written in 1292/1875 and published anonymously in Bombay (1310/1892-93) and Cairo (1329/1911), and later translated twice into English. This work, which makes general proposals for reform in Iran and the Islamic world as a whole, deserves to be more seriously regarded as a contribution to the reformist literature of the period. Much slighter and rather more conservative in tone is the Resala-ye siasiya (1893), also published anonymously. Of less interest are his Maqala-ye šaksi sayyah (A traveler’s narrative), a brief anonymous history of Babism written about 1303/1886 and later published together with a translation by E. G. Browne; and the Tadkeratal-wafa?, a collection of meager hagiographies given as table-talks in 1915 and published posthumously in Haifa in 1343/1924. Until his death in 1340/1921, ?Abd-al-Baha? kept up a vast correspondence with Bahais in Iran, Europe, and

the United States, and his collected “tablets” (alwah; tawqi?at) contain numerous examples of his mature literary style. Of interest too are his many public addresses delivered in Europe and North America, his table-talks collected under the title al-Nur al-abha fi mofawazat hazrat ?Abd al-Baha?, and his numerous Persian prayers (monajat). The latter are often extremely beautiful, with a fine feeling for the rhymes and cadences of the language; some are even written in verse.

?Abd-al-Baha?’s grandson and successor, Šawqi (Shoghi Effendi, q.v., d. 1377/1957), wrote principally in English, all his major works being translated later into Persian; but he also penned large quantities of letters in the latter language, as well as some in Arabic. His baroque and mannered style, with its extended periods, archaisms, and at times contrived vocabulary, had a marked effect on Bahai writing in this century, encouraging it to be florid, hyperbolic, and out of step with general changes in modern Persian letters (a phenomenon paralleled by Bahai writing in English during the same period). At the same time, Šawqi’s elegant and sensitive translations of Bahai scriptural writings (largely works by Baha?-Allah) deserve to be mentioned here.

Bahai writing in general has concentrated on apologetics and historiography, and includes very few works of real literary merit or wider interest, with the partial exceptions of the writings of Mirza Abu’l-Fazl Golpayegani (q.v.), some autobiographical works (notably Mirza Haydar-?Ali Esfahani’s Behjat al-sodur, Yunes Khan Afrukta’s Katerat-e noh-sala, and Dr. Habib Mo?ayyad’s Katerat-e Habib), and a few collections of hagiographical biography in the tradition of Islamic rejal literature (notably Solaymani’s Masabih-e hedayat and Bayza?i’s Tadkera-ye šo?ara?).

There is, however, a substantial body of poetry written by Iranian adherents of the faith, some of which is of an exceptionally high standard, although it remains for the most part unknown outside Bahai circles. Bahai poetry is essentially a continuation of classical Persian and Arabic religious verse, although it has its own themes and conventions. Much of it is didactic or apologetic in nature, and most of it makes for dull reading, but this is more than compensated for by the vigor and freshness of the better examples.

A number of early Babis wrote poetry, among them Hajj Solayman Khan Tabrizi and Karim Khan Mafi (Behjat Qazvini), but little of their work has survived. Of much greater importance is the verse of Qorrat-al-?Ayn Tahera, which has remained popular with Bahais and has even gained a well-deserved reputation with a wider public in Iran and India. Born in Qazvin 1229/1814 into a family of ?olama?, she received training as an ?alema and became a leading exponent of the Shaikhi (q.v.) school. An early convert of the Bab’s, she dominated the Iraqi branch of the Babi movement until 1263/1847, when she returned to Iran. Her influence on the formulation of Babi doctrine was considerable, and the numerous apologetics she wrote on behalf of the sect helped provide the impetus for the break with Islam in 1264/1848. Imprisoned

for several years in Tehran, she was executed following the attempt on the life of Naser-al-Din Shah in 1268/1852. Her reputation among modern Bahais rests largely on the belief that she was an early champion of women's rights, something which has no foundation in fact. Nevertheless, her legendary stature combined with the genuine beauty of many of the poems she composed has given her work a firm place in Bahai literature. Only a small number of her poems (as well as several falsely attributed to her) have been published, but the present writer has discovered several manuscripts of what appear to be authentic works by her, from which a scholarly edition of her poetry may eventually be prepared.

The existence of poetry by Qorrat-al-?Ayn and Baha?-Allah gave the writing of verse an acceptable place in the Bahai movement, even when the marked anti-Sufism of Baha?-Allah and ?Abd-al-Baha? (see, e.g. Baha?-Allah, Alwah-e mobaraka, pp. 184-88; ?Abd-al-Baha?, Makatib I, p. 346) rendered many of the classical models unacceptable and blocked the possibility of a spontaneous development of mystical verse within the religion. Although ?Abd-al-Baha? spoke disparagingly of the poets of the past (Makatib I, p. 451), he did express approval of poetry written on Bahai religious themes and included versified passages in some of his letters (e.g., ibid., pp. 414, 421, 439; II, pp. 54-55). Since both singing and instrumental music were permitted in al-Ketab al-aqdas (see aqdas), poetry became a natural extension of liturgical recitation and a useful vehicle for the expression of numinous feelings and didactic intentions.

The earliest Bahai poet of merit was Molla Yar-Mohammad Zarandi Nabil (1247-1310/1831-92), better known as the author of the history translated into English by Shoghi Effendi as The Dawn-Breakers or Nabil's Narrative. Converted to Babism at an early age, Zarandi was among the Babis who took up residence in Baghdad in the 1850s. Having failed to attract a following for theophanic claims advanced by himself, he became one of the earliest proponents of belief in Baha?-Allah as the Babi messiah. After journeys which took him to Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Egypt, he finally settled in Palestine, where the Bahai exile community was located from 1285/1868. His history was begun in 1305/1886 and completed shortly before his suicide in 1310/1892, following the death of Baha?-Allah.

Very little of Nabil's poetry has been published. A lengthy poem in couplet form (matnawi) providing details of Babi and Bahai history was printed in Cairo in 1342/1923-24, but copies of it are extremely rare and it has not been reissued since then; another historical matnawi, entitled Hejr o wesal (Separation and union) has not so far found its way into print. Several examples of the shorter poems, including two fine qasidas, each with the refrain Baha?, Baha?, have been published by Browne (JRAS 24, 1892, pp. 323-25; Materials, pp. 351-57) and Bayza?i (Tadkera III, pp. 421-35). Nabil does appear, however, to have been a prolific writer: Bayza?i states that he has seen a collection of his poems amounting to 10,000 bayts, the bulk being made up of matnawis (Tadkera III, p. 418). Apart from the vigor of

style in his non-historical poems, the chief characteristic of Nabil's work is its use of hyperbole in reference to the claims and person of Baha?-Allah.

Of great literary merit is the work of Zarandi's younger contemporary, Aqa Mirza ?Ali-Ašraf Lahijani, known as ?Andalib (ca. 1270/1853-54—1335/1917), whose divan runs to over 750 pages. Originally a Shaikhi, ?Andalib was converted to Bahaism in his twenties, after which he became widely known in Lahijan for his convictions. In 1300/1883, he was arrested along with several others in the vicinity of Rašt and imprisoned there for almost two years; it was during this period that he completed his divan of gazals, amounting to over 300 poems. He later took up residence in Shiraz, where he remained, apart from several journeys (including two to Palestine), until his death.

?Andalib's gazals, written in the classical style, are notable for the absence of overt references to Bahai beliefs or figures, and have undeservedly been neglected by non-Bahai anthologists. His other poetry is unqualifiedly Bahai in inspiration, consisting largely of poems in praise of Baha?-Allah and ?Abd-al-Baha? or on various Bahai festivals, particularly that of Rezwan (see ?id-e rezwan). He also wrote a lengthy matnawi on the martyrdoms of two Bahai brothers in Isfahan in 1296/1879 (Divan, pp. 433-70) and another in reply to criticisms of Bahai belief. Apart from his fame as a poet, ?Andalib enjoyed a reputation as one of the leading controversialists of the Bahai movement in his day. A lively account of his technique is given by E. G. Browne in A Year Amongst the Persians (pp. 401-02, 433-35, 436-38, 438-40, 442-43). At least one prose work in defense of Bahaism (an estedlaliya in reply to Shaikh Baha?i Lahijani) is extant but unpublished.

The writing of apologetics was a particular concern of another Bahai poet of the same period, Mirza Mohammad Sedehi, known as Na?im (1272-1334/1856-1916), whose most popular work, Ahsan al-taqwim or Jannat al-na?im, is an extended poetical apology for Bahaism. Of peasant stock, Na?im had a limited education but wrote poetry from an early age and formed part of a small literary circle in the village complex of Sedeh. This small group, which included the poets Aqa Sayyed Mohammad Nayyer and Aqa Sayyed Esma?il Sina, was converted to Bahaism in 1298/1881. Arrested and expelled from the Isfahan area, Na?im settled in Tehran, where he taught Persian at the British embassy and established a class for young Bahai missionaries, which he ran until his death.

Apart from the Ahsan al-taqwim, which has been published in several editions, including an annotated recension by ?Abd-al-Hamid Ešraq Kavari, Na?im is well known in Bahai circles for his Qasida-ye nuniya (published in full but without title, with a translation by E. G. Browne in his Literary History of Persia IV, pp. 198-220), a Bahariya (or Sayfiya) modeled on that of Mirza Habib Qa?ani, and a morabba? entitled Manzuma-ye bist o noh horuf. Na?im also wrote several prose

works, some of which have been published; these include two Bahai apologies (estedlaliya), a refutation of the Persian introduction to the Ketab-e noqtat al-kaf, and a collection of passages from the Persian Bayan (q.v.). The apologetic and didactic character of so much of Na?im's verse makes it rather forced and often turgid, although one cannot deny the ingenuity with which he incorporates textual references and quotations into the first part of his Ahsan al-taqwim. Where his poetry is freed from these restraints, however, it does reveal considerable charm.

In contrast to the overtly sectarian character of the above writers, the work of Abu'l-Hasan Mirza Shaikh al-Ra?is (1264-1336/1848-1918) is for the most part concerned with broader issues. A son of Mohammad-Taqi Mirza Hesam-al-Saltana, Abu'l-Hasan trained as an ?alem and acquired a reputation as a preacher and a constitutionalist. He appears to have been converted to Bahaism at an early age, either by his mother or by Mirza ?Ali-Reza Sabzavari Mostašar-al-Molk. Although Shaikh al-Ra?is never openly proclaimed his Bahai allegiance, his connection with the faith did become known and proved a spur for controversy on more than one occasion. Under the sobriquet of Hayrat, Shaikh al-Ra?is wrote a small amount of poetry, most of which has been collected in the compilation entitled Montakab-e nafis. There are also several poems by him on Bahai themes, some of which have been published by Bayza?i (Tadkera I, pp. 282-90). His prose works include the Resala-ye ettehad-e Eslam, written for Sultan ?Abd-al-Hamid, and the Resalat al-abrar, an Arabic diatribe against Golam Ahmad Qadiani.

Mirza Mohammad Ardestani, known as Nateq (1298-1355/1880-1936), also started life as an ?alem, but abandoned his clerical calling following his conversion in 1325/1907. He was for eleven years Director of the Bahai Wahdat-e Bašar school in Kašan and later taught at the Ta?yid school in Hamadan before becoming a full-time Bahai missionary. His divan of almost 400 pages was published posthumously by the Bahais in Tehran. Although they show little originality, Nateq's poems at least take a somewhat broader view than those of most Bahai poets. Several prose works by him remain unpublished.

There are numerous other Bahai poets, most of whom have been made known thanks to the assiduous researches of Ne?mat-Allah Doka?i Bayza?i, whose 4-volume Tadkera-ye šo?ara-ye qarn-e awwal-e baha?i contains biographies and samples of the work of no fewer than 134 individuals. Not very many of these are of much literary merit, of course, since Bayza?i's criterion for inclusion appears to have been that someone be a Bahai and write poetry. Nevertheless, his collection does serve to draw attention to the work of several individuals previously unknown and possibly worth further notice. It is worth observing that a reasonable number of female poets appear in this collection, several of whom were active in the Babi and early Bahai periods.

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