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言語文化共同研究プロジェクト2025

Cultural Formation Studies VIII

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Cultural Formation Studies VIII

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Preface

Our primary task for this project this year was to read and explicate Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics* as translated into English by Steven Corcoran (Duke University Press, 2019). We grappled with the "modalities of repopulating the planet" in our age (11), the "ongoing redefinition of the human in the framework of a general ecology" (13), the "generalized introduction of tools and calculating or computational machines" (14), the power of capital, the compression of time, and the "nocturnality" of democracy. We confronted the possibility that "civil peace in the West ... depends in large part on inflicting violence far away" (19). We wondered what it means that we "consume the divine" in the present as our "paranoid dispositions crystallize around the grand narratives of the (re)commencement and of the end" (27). And we asked how all these issues relate to the idea of necropolitics.

If the essays in the present volume do not necessarily reflect the content of Mbembe's work, they perhaps respond to his provocations and stimulations and to the discussions they catalyzed. These discussions were greatly enriched by the contributions of younger scholars and graduate students, whose proactive, insightful participation deserves commendation. And particular recognition and gratitude go to Liying Wang, the assistant for this project, who arranged all the gatherings and readings and put together this volume with extraordinary competence and dedication.

Thus Spoke My Grandfather, in Another Tongue:

Postmemory and the Monolingualism of the Other in Rustem Galeev's *Так говорил мой дед*

Mizuki Sakurama-Nakamura

1. Introduction

In 2024, a Toronto-based émigré publishing house issued a seven-hundred-page philological commentary that is also, and perhaps primarily, a work of autobiographical fiction. Rustem Galeev's *Так говорил мой дед* (Thus Spoke My Grandfather) presents itself as a close reading of a family chronicle, *семейная хроника*, written in the early 1950s by the author's grandfather, Arslan-babay, recopied and extended two decades later by his eldest son, Rinat-abıy, and finally annotated line by line by the grandson, Rustem, from his adopted home in North America. The three layers of this text share a single striking feature. They are all written in Russian. Arslan-babay spoke Tatar until his late adolescence; Rinat-abıy spoke Tatar until he was eighteen; Rustem himself was a Tatar-speaking child until he entered kindergarten at the age of five, whereupon, as he puts it with characteristic bluntness, '*я решил стать русским*' ('I decided to become Russian'; Galeev 2024: 20). The book that emerges from this three-generational passage through the imperial language is paradoxically, perhaps impossibly, a sustained meditation on what it means to be Tatar.

Any reading of this text must navigate between two equally unsatisfactory interpretative temptations. One temptation is essentialism: the inclination to locate a stable Tatar-ness beneath the Russian surface, an ethnic substance that merely awaits recovery through the gesture of writing. This reading is flattered, moreover, by certain moments in Galeev's own rhetoric, where the Tatar is described as having returned '*из степи*' ('from the steppe') to assert a genetically inherited self (Galeev 2024: 714). The inverse and arguably more insidious temptation is the implicit naturalisation of language loss, the suggestion that since Tatar-ness can evidently be performed in Russian, nothing of political consequence has been lost in the intergenerational passage from Tatar to Russian monolingualism. This view would render the shift a matter of linguistic convenience, of the subject's free choice, and thereby absolve the long imperial history of Russification of its continuing effects.

This article argues that Galeev's text, read with care, refuses both framings. To develop the argument I draw principally on two theoretical resources. Jacques Derrida's *Le monolinguisme de l'autre* (1996) offers a conceptual vocabulary for a language that is at once the only one one possesses and not one's own. Alongside it, Marianne Hirsch's concept of *postmemory* (Hirsch 2008; 2012) theorises the mediated, generationally belated inheritance of experiences one has not directly

lived. Held together, the two frameworks allow me to construe Tatar-ness in the book not as an essence recovered, nor as a content indifferent to its linguistic vehicle, but as *a labour of inscription* performed at the very site where the imperial language has become the only available medium.

2. Theoretical Orientation: Against Essence, Beyond Loss

2.1 Ethnicity without groups

The departure point of this article's analytic lies in what Rogers Brubaker (2004: 2) has called the critique of 'groupism', the tendency in ethnic and nationalist studies to treat ethnic groups as 'substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed'. Brubaker's injunction is to distinguish sharply between categories of practice and categories of analysis: although actors routinely invoke ethnic categories to classify, mobilise, justify and contest, the analyst ought not on that account reify the corresponding groups into sociological objects with stable properties. Ethnicity, in this framing, becomes 'something that happens' (Brubaker 2004: 11) rather than something that *is*, a situational and contingent achievement rather than a pre-given substance. The relevance of this starting position to the study of Tatar cultural production is immediate. Galeev's text is saturated with the idiom of ethnic substance, from the 'bad Tatar' who supposedly re-emerges when the Russian skin splits (Galeev 2024: 715) to the DNA analysis that reveals less than one per cent Mongol ancestry (Galeev 2024: 77). The analytic task is to describe what this idiom does without ratifying its metaphysics.

Yet Brubaker's framework, though indispensable as scaffolding, is insufficient on its own. It is too easily mobilised, against its author's intentions, in the service of a breezy post-national constructivism that treats ethnic attachments as free-floating discourse. Such a reading risks naturalising precisely the political losses — linguistic, institutional, territorial — that constituted the historical ground on which Tatar-ness has become the kind of precarious and reflexive category it now is. To prevent the analysis from sliding in that direction, I supplement Brubaker with two thicker frameworks drawn from Derrida and Hirsch.

2.2 Derrida's monolingualism of the other

Jacques Derrida's *Le monolinguisme de l'autre, ou la prothèse d'origine* (1996) is organised around a formulation that must be read slowly to register its force: '*Je n'ai qu'une langue, ce n'est pas la mienne*' (Derrida 1996: 15; '*I have but one language, and it is not mine*'). Derrida, a French-speaking Algerian Jew whose family had been stripped of French citizenship under Vichy and later restored to it, possessed French as his sole language; the Arabic of the majority population and the Hebrew or Ladino of his Sephardic forebears were equally inaccessible to him. Yet he could not simply claim French as his own. French was the language of a metropolitan centre that had withheld full belonging; it was the language in which he was, as he puts it, at once '*indigène*' and

'*étranger*' ('*native*' and '*stranger*'; Derrida 1996: 29).

From this autobiographical ground Derrida elaborates two axioms that must be thought together: '*on ne parle jamais qu'une seule langue*' and '*on ne parle jamais une seule langue*' (Derrida 1996: 21; '*one never speaks but a single language*' and '*one never speaks a single language*'). The paradox of their simultaneous truth is the conceptual substance of the work. The monolingual condition of the colonised subject is that there is in fact only one language available, the language of empire, and no reservoir of ancestral tongue lies waiting underneath; and yet this single language is itself internally fractured, carrying within it the traces of what it has displaced and the interdict that bars the speaker from full possession. Derrida's term for this interdict is '*aliénation sans aliénation, aliénation originaire*' (Derrida 1996: 47; '*alienation without alienation, originary alienation*'): an estrangement that cannot be remedied by the recovery of a lost language, because no such original possession ever existed.

The pertinence of this formulation to Galeev's situation will emerge in Section 3. What is crucial here is to register its structural implication. The monolingualism of the other refuses both the fantasy of linguistic recovery and the consolation of linguistic indifference. It holds the subject in a language that is simultaneously all that there is and insufficient to what the subject wishes to say.

2.3 Hirsch on postmemory

Marianne Hirsch's concept of *postmemory* emerged from her work on the second generation of Holocaust survivors, and specifically from reflection on how children and grandchildren 'remember' events they did not live through. Postmemory, she writes, 'describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before — to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up' (Hirsch 2008: 106–107). The prefix 'post' marks a temporal and affective structure of belatedness, though not a diminution of intensity: postmemorial experiences, she insists, are 'transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right' (Hirsch 2008: 107).

Two features of her concept are particularly productive for the reading of Galeev's text. The emphasis on mediation is indispensable: postmemory works through narrative, image and embodied behaviour rather than through direct witness, which means that its medium — here the Russian-language chronicle — is not incidental to what is transmitted but constitutive of it. Equally important is her insistence that postmemory does not collapse the generational distance it registers. The postmemorial subject is not identical with the witness; she is a reader, a listener, an interpreter whose proper task is to hold the difference between her own position and that of the generation before her.

The extension of postmemory from its Holocaust-centred genealogy to other contexts of

historical violence has generated considerable scholarly debate (cf. LaCapra 1998; Rothberg 2009). The concept is not to be applied indiscriminately, and I invoke it here with care. It applies to Galeev's text not because the Tatar experience is analogous to the Shoah — the analogy would be both morally and analytically wrong — but because the formal structure of belated inheritance through narrative mediation is isomorphic across the two cases. The application is defensible, moreover, because Galeev's text itself thematises belatedness, mediation and the impossibility of direct access to the events it narrates.

2.4 Two thinkers held together

What recommends the joint use of Derrida and Hirsch is that both refuse the recovery of a lost plenitude while equally refusing its dismissal. Derrida's monolingualism is not a condition to be cured by relearning the mother tongue, but neither is it a neutral linguistic fact; it is a wound that must be named as a wound. Hirsch's postmemory is not a delusion of inherited pain to be dispelled by critical distance, but neither is it identical with the experience it transmits; it is an affective inheritance whose form is precisely that of mediated difference. Both thinkers, in other words, teach the analyst how to inhabit the interval — the *écart* — between loss and its dismissal. This interval is what Galeev's text occupies, and what the following three chapters attempt to describe.

3. The Monolingualism of the Grandson

3.1 'A non-Russian Russian'

Galeev introduces himself to the reader in the opening pages of the book with a formula that the remainder of the work will unfold: *'Меня зовут Рустем Галеев, и я — нерусский русский'* (Galeev 2024: 18; *'My name is Rustem Galeev, and I am a non-Russian Russian'*). The construction is carefully calibrated. It does not say that the speaker is 'not Russian' tout court, nor that he is Russian in some straightforward sense; it names him as a Russian whose Russian-ness is internally contradicted, crossed through by what it is not. The formulation functions, in Derridean terms, as a micro-description of the monolingualism of the other. The subject possesses the language and all that the language carries, including the designation 'Russian' in its cultural and linguistic sense, but this possession is marked at its origin by an interdiction. One is Russian and one is not; one is a Russian *'who has but one language'*, and *'ce n'est pas la mienne'* (Derrida 1996: 15).

The autobiographical scene that grounds the formulation is the kindergarten. *'До пяти лет я говорил по-татарски. А потом меня отдали в детский садик, и я решил стать русским'* (Galeev 2024: 20; *'Until the age of five I spoke Tatar. Then I was sent to kindergarten, and I decided to become Russian'*). What is arresting about this passage is its double register. On the surface it narrates a subject's choice: the child decides to be Russian. But the choice is immediately complicated by its material conditions, the institution that forbids Tatar in the playground, the library

of his aunt Zur-apa to which access requires Russian literacy, the socioeconomic hierarchy in which Russian is *'пропуск в большой мир'* ('a pass to the wider world'; Galeev 2024: 20). The decision is structured by what Derrida would call an interdiction: not a direct prohibition on speaking Tatar but a pervasive set of constraints whose effect is to render Tatar monolingualism a social impossibility. Galeev describes himself, with a phrase that recurs throughout the book, as having become *'a neophyte'* (*неофит*) more Russian than the Russians, a formulation that precisely captures the compensatory overperformance Derrida identifies in the colonised subject.

3.2 Writing the chronicle in Russian

The book's central philological question is posed on page 28: *'Рукопись написана на русском языке. Это очень важный знак — Ринат-абы мог написать эти хроники и на татарском языке. Но он написал на русском'* (Galeev 2024: 28; *'The manuscript is written in Russian. This is a very important sign — Rinat-abıy could have written these chronicles in Tatar. But he wrote in Russian'*). Galeev offers two reasons for the uncle's choice: the presumed reader, who no longer reads Tatar, and the writer's own sense of *'жизненное достижение'* ('life achievement'; Galeev 2024: 28) in his mastery of Russian. The text then registers a significant affective moment: *'Я невольно почувствовал укол совести, когда понял это'* (Galeev 2024: 28; *'I involuntarily felt a twinge of conscience when I understood this'*).

The twinge of conscience is the decisive clue. It marks the passage from a complacent instrumental reading of the language choice (Russian is what the presumed reader knows, therefore Russian) to a recognition that the horizon of the presumed reader is itself a historical artefact, produced by the serial displacement of Tatar across three generations. Galeev's own commentary makes the recognition explicit when he notes that *'татары в целом теряют свой язык, и младшие представители семейства Галеевых — не исключение'* ('Tatars in general are losing their language, and the younger members of the Galeev family are no exception'; Galeev 2024: 28). The passage registers language shift as event, not as neutral background, and it does so through the affective intrusion of conscience upon the analytic voice. It is at such moments that Derrida's formulation becomes most pertinent: the linguistic situation is one in which the subject possesses a language that is not, and cannot simply become, his own.

3.3 Native language as unavailability

The book's treatment of Tatar as *родной язык* (native language) is insistently anti-sentimental. It resists, on one hand, the nationalist reconstitution of the mother tongue as the repository of authentic selfhood, the position that would regard the present text's very existence as an act of betrayal. It resists, on the other, the liberal cosmopolitan claim that linguistic attachment is merely a preference among others. The text produces instead a figure of the native language as *constitutively*

unavailable: lost without possibility of full recovery, yet refusing to release its claim on the subject.

The philological reading of Rinat-abiy's Russian provides the most sustained evidence for this. The uncle's Russian, as Rustem observes, bears the traces of the Tatar thought beneath it: *'в тексте это иногда сильно чувствуется: ведь дядя до 18 лет говорил по-татарски... текст написал по-русски, хотя на родном языке этот текст был бы куда безошибочнее'* (Galeev 2024: 28–29; *'in the text this is sometimes strongly felt: after all, my uncle spoke Tatar until the age of eighteen... he wrote the text in Russian, though in his native language this text would have been far more faultless'*). The Russian text is therefore double. It is a Russian text that also indexes the Tatar it is not. This is neither code-switching nor diglossia in the standard sociolinguistic senses, but something closer to what Derrida (1996: 40) calls the 'trace', a presence of the other language not as a rival medium but as the marker of its own unavailability.

The Tatar words that punctuate the Russian text — *бабай, эби, дэу-эни, абый, апай, Тенгри, без булдырабыз*, the maternal formula *таш баш* ('stone head') — operate on the same principle. They are not exoticising ornaments: they do not offer the non-Tatar reader a sampler of the ethnic. Their function is to mark, at specific nodes in the Russian text, the sites at which the Russian cannot quite say what is being said. The grandfather's form of address, the kinship terminology of the extended family, the pre-Islamic theonym, the motto of Tatar self-sufficiency: each resists Russian translation not because of semantic untranslatability in any strong sense but because the Russian translation would elide the very fact that the utterance is being made from within the monolingualism of the other. The Tatar words are, to recover Derrida's other central term, the *prothèse d'origine*, the prosthesis of origin that supplements the Russian text at the precise point where an originary Tatar-ness is both claimed and marked as unavailable.

3.4 Against the rhetoric of language loss

It remains to address the most delicate point. Does the reading developed here license the conclusion that the shift from Tatar to Russian is of no political consequence, since Tatar-ness can evidently be performed in Russian? The reply must be unequivocal. The text itself will not permit such a conclusion, and indeed goes to considerable lengths to prevent it.

Galeev's philological narrative is punctuated by a sober catalogue of the institutional mechanisms by which Tatar was displaced. Universal conscription into Russophone education, the Sovietisation of higher learning, and above all the two successive alphabet reforms — from Arabic script to Latin in 1927, and from Latin to Cyrillic in 1939 — are presented not as neutral modernisations but as the instruments of a deliberate intergenerational rupture. The book's sharpest formulation comes in its reading of a scene in which Shayda's illiterate parents must have a kidnapped daughter's note read to them by younger children: *'После того, как язык перевели на кириллицу, связь между поколениями разбили окончательно. В один момент старшее*

поколение стало безграмотным, и это подчеркнуло разрыв с младшим' (Galeev 2024: 241; 'After the language was converted to Cyrillic, the connection between generations was definitively broken. In one stroke the older generation became illiterate, and this underscored the break with the younger'). What is being described here is not a metaphorical fracture but a concrete administrative act whose effect was to render Tatars illegible to themselves across generations.

A reading that would treat Galeev's Russian-language performance of Tatar-ness as evidence that the language question is settled would therefore be not merely reductive but politically complicit. It would take the survival of Tatar-ness through Russian, a survival achieved at enormous cost and in defiance of the very institutions that sought to preclude it, as the retrospective justification of those institutions. Derrida's formulation clarifies the stakes once more. To say that the colonised subject has but one language, and that this language is not his own, is not to say that the condition is acceptable or that the alternatives have been adequately considered. It is to say that the condition is what it is, and that analysis must proceed from within it rather than pretending to a position outside. The political consequence is not that language loss should be mourned as a lost plenitude, nor that it should be dismissed as a surface phenomenon, but that it must be held as a wound whose continuing effects structure the very possibility of Tatar speech today.

4. Three Generations, One Notebook: Postmemory Without Archive

4.1 The textual architecture

The formal structure of *Так говорил мой дед* is itself an argument about memory. Arslan-babay's original notebook, composed in or around 1952, does not exist in the text as an autonomous document. It is present only within the expanded, recopied and partially rewritten version produced by Rinat-abiy two decades later, and that expanded version is in turn present only within the dense philological commentary composed by the grandson in the 2020s. The reader never encounters the grandfather directly; nor, for that matter, does the grandson. What the reader encounters is a triple mediation in which each layer is simultaneously a transmission and an interpretation of the one beneath it.

It is tempting to read this architecture as philologically deficient, an impediment to the retrieval of the 'real' grandfather, and the text occasionally encourages such a reading by its ostentatious forensic gestures, its fragment numbering and comparative glossing. But the stronger interpretation is that the triple architecture is not an obstacle to be overcome but the positive form of the book's memorial work. There is no unmediated grandfather to be retrieved. The grandfather exists as the addressee of a transmission whose very condition is the loss of direct access. This is the postmemorial structure in its most literal sense.

4.2 Postmemory as generational belatedness

Hirsch's emphasis on the *belated* character of postmemorial experience is directly illuminating here. Rustem is not a witness of the events narrated in the chronicle, the early-twentieth-century rural life of the Bugulma district, the kulak disposessions, Arslan's service in the war, the post-war return to a family marked by alcoholism and institutional defeat. He knew the people; he sat at their table; he ate their food. But the events that constituted them as the people he knew were available to him only through story, through rumour, through the chronicle he is now reading. His position is, in Hirsch's (2008: 107) phrase, that of the generation whose relation to its inheritance is mediated 'by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up'.

What distinguishes Rustem's postmemorial stance, however, is that he is also explicitly a reader. He refuses the fusion with the witness that Hirsch (2012: 33) identifies as the temptation of postmemory, and insists throughout on the difference between his own position and that of the grandfather he interprets. This insistence takes the form of philological suspicion. Rinat-abiy's insertions into the grandfather's manuscript are subjected to sustained critique for their tendency toward *'lakirovka'*, the varnishing of a difficult past into a heroic chronicle of the Soviet Tatar. When Rinat-abiy writes that Arslan's son *'рос нормально, учился, после школы призвали в армию'* (*'grew up normally, studied, after school was called up into the army'*; Galeev 2024: 343), Rustem comments that *'У Рината-абы другая задача — показать, что Арслан-бабай заложил крепкий фундамент, и здание семьи поэтому тоже крепкое. Но это не так'* (*'Rinat-abiy has another task, to show that Arslan-babay laid a firm foundation, and therefore the house of the family is firm too. But this is not so'*; Galeev 2024: 343). The uncle's varnishing is an act of love for the father, and Rustem honours the love; but he does not accept the varnish, and he signals the non-acceptance openly.

This is what might be called *critical postmemory*: inheritance without piety. The grandson receives the chronicle but refuses to become its simple custodian. He reads it against itself, drawing out the silences and rhetorical self-protections of both grandfather and uncle. The result is a postmemorial text that is also a work of ethnographic self-analysis, a text that takes the family chronicle genre and turns it back on its own conditions of possibility.

4.3 Tengri as performative naming

Among the most striking elements of the book is the recurrence of Tengri, the pre-Islamic Turkic sky god, as a figure in Rustem's first-person sections. The passages in which Tengri appears are among the most rhetorically heightened in the entire work: *'Тенгри не принял меня... От меня отказались все. Родные, жена, друзья... И тогда же понял, что я — не русский... Я — татарин'* (Galeev 2024: 714; *'Tengri did not accept me... Everyone rejected me. Kin, wife, friends... And at that moment I understood that I am not Russian... I am Tatar'*).

A careless reading might take these passages as evidence of a mystical-essentialist recovery of

pre-Islamic Turkic paganism beneath the syncretic Islam of the Volga Tatars and the official atheism of the Soviet period. Such a reading would be a category error. Galeev is explicit that Tengri was never a codified religion in the sense of a written scripture and institutional clergy, that *'культ Тенгри так и не сформировался'* (*'the cult of Tengri never formed'*; Galeev 2024: 50), and that modern Tatars have for the most part been Muslims. The Tengri passages in the text are therefore not acts of theological reconstruction. They are acts of naming.

The analytic move that best captures this, though it is not the central apparatus of the present article, is one familiar from Butler's (1997) work on performativity: the utterance does not describe an antecedent state of affairs but enacts it in the moment of its articulation. When Galeev names Tengri, he does not retrieve an ancestral faith; he performs a break with the Russian neophyte self he had cultivated for decades. *'Тогда-то русский неофит Руст Галеев и умер. Кожа, которую я пытался на себя натянуть, лопнула'* (*'At that moment the Russian neophyte Rust Galeev died. The skin I had tried to pull on burst'*; Galeev 2024: 715) is not a report from the interior of a religious conversion but the staging of an interpretative realignment that makes the book itself possible. Tengri here functions less as a deity than as a placeholder for the position from which Tatar-ness can be affirmed without being translated back into the categories of Russian-imperial normality.

4.4 Refusing the victim genre

Critical postmemory, as developed here, entails a specific ethical stance. It registers structural violence without reproducing it in the form of victim testimony. Galeev's text is unsparing in its diagnosis of the damage done to his family by a century of Soviet and post-Soviet history. The chronicle reveals the early deaths of the generation born in the 1910s and 1920s, the loss of sons to the war, the chronic alcoholism that afflicted Arslan-babay's own sons and nearly claimed Rustem himself. The book contains what is surely one of the most politically pointed single observations in recent Russophone prose on this subject: *'До войны татары не пили. С фронта мои деды вернулись законченными хроническими алкоголиками. Фермент, перерабатывающий алкоголь, у нас отсутствует'* (Galeev 2024: 345; *'Before the war Tatars did not drink. My grandfathers returned from the front as completed chronic alcoholics. The enzyme that processes alcohol is absent in us'*).

The claim is at once biographical, pharmacological and political: it identifies the transmission of addiction as a specific material outcome of integration into Russophone military and Soviet workplace culture. And yet the text refuses to package this diagnosis as a claim to victim status. The reason for the refusal is instructive. To claim victimhood would be to accept the relational structure in which Tatars are defined by what has been done to them, and thereby to confirm the position of 'the defeated' (*побеждённые*) which Galeev repeatedly describes as the structural position from which Tatar-ness has been imagined under Russian rule. What the book offers instead is a diagnosis

accompanied by refusal. The damage is named, but it is not allowed to become the whole story.

This ethical stance is consistent with Hirsch's insistence that the task of the postmemorial generation is not to merge with the sufferings of the previous generation but to hold the distance between itself and them (Hirsch 2012: 5). Rustem's diagnostic voice honours the grandfather and the uncle precisely by refusing to become them. He inherits the chronicle, but he does not inherit its silences or its heroic pieties.

4.5 Archive, or its absence

A final dimension of the postmemorial reading concerns the question of archive. Hirsch's work on postmemory has, in its canonical form, been closely linked to the visual and documentary archives of Holocaust memory — photographs, letters, testimonies, preserved objects — and to the ways in which these artefacts mediate the inheritance of trauma. Galeev's text is instructive precisely because it operates almost entirely without such an archive. The grandfather left a single notebook; the earlier family papers were largely destroyed or lost; the wider communal archive of the Volga Tatars has been serially rewritten by successive imperial and Soviet regimes. What the grandson inherits is therefore not an archive but the trace of one.

This is not a local peculiarity of the Galeev family. It is the generic situation of many post-Soviet minority communities whose documentary past has been edited by state power, whose places of memory have been redefined and whose transmissional infrastructures have been disrupted (cf. Etkind 2013). The form that *postmemory* takes in such situations is what we might call *postmemory without archive*: an inheritance in which the primary act is the reconstruction, through narrative, of the material basis of remembering itself. Galeev's philological reading of Rinat-abıy's reading of Arslan-babay's reading of his own life is a paradigmatic instance of this work. The book is the archive it recovers, and the recovery is also the constitution of what is recovered.

5. Tatar-ness as Labour: Diaspora as Condition

5.1 The enabling distance of Toronto

The book could not have been written in Kazan. This is not a generic remark about the relative freedom of Western publishing houses, though that matters, but a structural claim about what diaspora makes available. In a preface to the published edition, Galeev observes that the reader should bear in mind the book *'писалась она не для русского читателя'* (*'was not written for the Russian reader'*; Galeev 2024: 17). The addressee of the book is not the Russophone public sphere of the Russian Federation but an imagined interlocutor outside it: an emigrant Tatar, a reader of world literature, a non-Russian Russophone of a different kind.

The metropolitan Russophone context, the one in which Galeev spent the first four decades of his life, does not afford the space from which Tatar-ness can be articulated as Tatar-ness. Within that

context, Tatar-ness is at best a folkloric quaint, at worst the site of a historical shame (*'в начальной школе я мучился комплексом вины, что я татарин'*, *'in primary school I was tormented by a sense of guilt that I was Tatar'*; Galeev 2024: 114). It functions as the unmarked background against which the Russian-imperial narrative of civilisational unity, *'соборность, единость'* (Galeev 2024: 37), is written. To make Tatar-ness appear as itself within such a context requires a work of dissociation that is structurally difficult to perform from within. Diaspora supplies what the metropolitan position withholds: a location from which Tatar-ness can be named without being immediately recontained by the framework of Russian-imperial normality.

5.2 Diaspora without compensation

It is crucial not to draw from this observation the misleading inference that the diasporic condition compensates for, or retrospectively justifies, the Russification against which it positions itself. Such a reading would reinstate precisely the rhetoric of language-loss neutralisation that this article has sought to resist. The fact that Galeev's Tatar-ness becomes articulable in Toronto does not mean that the conditions that made it inarticulable in Kazan have been redeemed.

What diaspora permits is the retrospective naming of those conditions as conditions. In the Soviet context that Galeev describes, the pressure toward Russification operated without a position from which it could be seen as such: *'Советский Союз обещал прекрасное будущее, а прошлое его мало интересовало... Для меня как-то само собой подразумевалось, что рано или поздно все границы между национальностями сотрутся'* (Galeev 2024: 42; *'The Soviet Union promised a wonderful future, and was little interested in its past... It was somehow self-evident to me that sooner or later all boundaries between nationalities would be erased'*). The ideological operation of the modernist Soviet project was precisely to render Russification invisible as Russification, to redescribe it as universal progress. What the diasporic position affords is the visibility of that invisibility, the possibility of naming as a historical event what had been presented as a natural process.

The distinction here is not a fine one. It is the difference between an interpretative framework that absorbs language loss into a narrative of personal mobility (*'I moved to America, where I could finally be myself'*) and one that insists on the structural violence of the conditions that made such mobility the necessary precondition of speech (*'I could only articulate my Tatar-ness at a distance because the metropolitan context had rendered such articulation impossible'*). The former is a compensatory reading; the latter is a diagnostic one. Galeev's text, with its refusal of both the heroic emigrant genre and the nostalgic homeland genre, commits itself throughout to the diagnostic rather than the compensatory option.

5.3 Performance without possession

The three chapters preceding this one can now be drawn together into a single analytic claim. The Tatar-ness that emerges from *Так говорил мой дед* is neither an essence recovered nor a content indifferent to its form. It is a *performance* in the strong sense, an act of doing that is also an act of making, whose materials include the Russian language in which the doing takes place, the chronicle form that mediates its transmission, the Tengri-naming that stages its break with Russian-imperial normality, the diasporic position from which its enunciation becomes possible, and the philological labour that knits these materials together.

To describe this as performance is to register, with Brubaker (2004), that Tatar-ness is a category whose work consists in its ongoing mobilisation rather than in any substantive content. But the Brubakerian framing alone is too thin to carry the observation; it requires the thickening supplied by Derrida and Hirsch. Tatar-ness is mobilised in Russian, which is to say in the monolingualism of the other, and the mobilisation must be read as the specific achievement that it is, an achievement wrested from linguistic materials that were not designed to carry it, and burdened at every point by the history of their imposition. Tatar-ness is mobilised across three generations, which is to say through the postmemorial structure of belated inheritance, and the mobilisation must be read as a critical rather than a pious act of transmission, one that honours the inherited chronicle by reading it against itself.

The key theoretical implication is that performance, in this sense, is incompatible with possession. There is no stable substance called Tatar-ness that the performer takes up and puts into use. The performer *is* the performance, and the performance is the ongoing labour of articulating a position that has no fixed content apart from this labour itself. This is neither a celebration nor a mourning; it is a description. And it is a description that refuses to absorb its object into either the heroic or the victimological genres that have tended to structure accounts of minoritised identity in the post-Soviet space.

5.4 The Teptyar inflection

A final instance may help to ground the general claim in a concrete textual moment. Galeev describes himself repeatedly not simply as a Tatar but as a *Teptyar* (*менчар*), a designation for those Volga peoples, including ethnic Tatars, who in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries fled eastward rather than submit to Muscovite conquest. The Teptyars, as Galeev reconstructs the etymology, were '*вытесненные (буквально вытиснутые), отторгнутые от своего сословия люди*' ('*the displaced — literally pushed out — those torn from their estate*'; Galeev 2024: 39). The term names a specific sub-category within the Tatar whole, constituted by the act of refusal and the acceptance of its costs.

What makes the Teptyar identification analytically productive is that it is avowedly and constitutively a category of *practice* rather than a category of *analysis*, to deploy Brubaker's distinction once more. One does not belong to the Teptyars by birth in any simple sense; one is

Teptyar because one's forebears chose the refusal, and because one inherits and reperforms that refusal in the manner of one's own life. Galeev's description of the Teptyar mentality, that '*они смотрят на остальных татар свысока, как сбежавшие на смирившихся*' ('they look down on the rest of the Tatars, as those who fled upon those who submitted'; Galeev 2024: 39), is also a self-description, and simultaneously an act of affiliation that constitutes the lineage it claims to describe. The circuit is performative in the sense developed throughout this article: the naming is the act of belonging, and the act of belonging is the naming.

6. Conclusion

This article has offered a reading of Rustem Galeev's *Так говорил мой дед* that attempts to navigate between two equally unsatisfactory interpretations of minoritised identity in post-imperial contexts. One would locate Tatar-ness as an ethnic essence lying beneath or beyond its Russophone articulation, waiting to be recovered through acts of authentic return. The other would treat the Russophone articulation as evidence that the language question has been settled and that linguistic dispossession carries no continuing political weight. The text itself, I have argued, refuses both framings, and the analytic task has been to show how it does so.

The refusal is achieved through a specific configuration of textual strategies. The Russian-language performance of Tatar-ness is neither disavowed as betrayal nor celebrated as transcendence, but held as the monolingualism of the other in Derrida's (1996) sense, the only language one possesses, and one that is not one's own. The three-generational structure of the text is neither collapsed into pious transmission nor dismantled into philological atomism, but inhabited as a form of critical postmemory in Hirsch's (2008, 2012) sense, an inheritance mediated by narrative and marked by the generational distance that inheritance presupposes. The diasporic condition is neither mourned as exile nor celebrated as liberation, but registered as the condition under which the naming of Russification as Russification becomes possible for this subject, without on that account being offered as compensation for the losses that preceded it.

The broader implication for the anthropological study of minoritised identities is that the analytic question should shift from the adjudicative ('is this authentically Tatar?') to the descriptive-ethnographic ('what is being done, by whom, with what materials, to what effect, when Tatar-ness is claimed in this particular utterance?'). This shift preserves what is valuable in Brubaker's (2004) critique of groupism, the refusal to hypostatise ethnic categories into stable sociological objects, while protecting it from its own worst tendency, which is to dissolve the specificities of post-imperial dispossession into a post-national cosmopolitanism. What Galeev's text models is a mode of ethnic self-articulation in which the practice is simultaneously the category and its critique: a reflexive, historically burdened and technically demanding performance of Tatar-ness that refuses both the restorationist and the dismissive options.

That this performance takes place in Russian, across a three-generational chronicle, from Toronto, through a philological labour on a family notebook, is not an accident of the author's biography. It is the specific form that a post-imperial minoritised subjectivity has taken in one particular life, under one particular set of conditions, and through the mobilisation of the intellectual and literary resources that this life has made available. Other forms will take other shapes. What the book offers is not a model to be imitated but a demonstration of what such a form can look like when its author refuses the consolations of both essence and indifference, and commits instead to the long labour of inhabiting the interval between them.

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The Emergence of Climate Fiction in Bangladesh:

Analysis of Selina Hossain's *A Habitat of Insects* and Sayed Manzoorul Islam's *The Vulture's Wings*

Md Mamunur Rahman

1. Introduction

With the heightened concern for global environmental catastrophe, literatures around the world have started to address the issue of Anthropocene-induced ecological disaster, giving rise to the literary genre titled as “cli-fi”.¹ Therefore, a pertinent question arises as to how the literature of Bangladesh, one of the most ecologically vulnerable countries, reflects this stark climate threat. The country's contribution to global warming is rather negligible, as it has only recently been transitioning from a traditionally agriculture-based, rural economy to an urbanized, industry-based one. Situated in the low-lying Bengal Delta bordering the Bay of Bengal to the south, Bangladesh is at risk of losing a great portion of its land area, including the world's largest mangrove forest, the Sundarbans, to the sea.² Over the decades, the frequent visitations of natural disasters, such as severe storms, devastating floods, scorching heat, and erratic weather patterns have become the new normal. The periodic occurrences of powerful cyclones incur heavy losses of lives and properties and set ecological migration in motion. Furthermore, Bangladesh faces its own distinct set of challenges regarding climate-change impact, such as over-population, over-urbanization, river-erosion, scarcity of drinking water, salinity, and internal and international migration.

Sensitivity to nature, if not climate *per se*, has been a lifeline of Bangladeshi literature. Traditionally nestled in the lap of nature, Bangladeshi people have tied their fates to the cycles of nature, exhibiting great insight and resilience in dealing with weather events. The cultural attitudes of the people to the rhythmic movement of nature have been expressed through innumerable myths,

¹ Can, T., & Cangir, H. (2025), “Speaking of extinction: A comparative corpus-assisted analysis of metaphorical framing in climate change fiction and British newspapers.” *Litera*, 35(1), p. 128. <https://doi.org/10.26650/LITERA2024-1587752>.

² Douwe van Schie, Md Fahad Hossain, and Nusrat Naushin, “Loss and Damage Policy in Bangladesh: From Domestic Challenges to Global Engagements.” <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/governing-climate-change-loss-and-damage/loss-and-damage-policy-in-bangladesh/9D0FBFD42F42F092C274593131E52393>. Access: 10 June 2025.

sagas, folk-tales and folk songs. Modern Bengali literature, including the works of the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, often grounds itself in the movement of seasons, offering ample instances where the beauty of nature is profusely admired while the nature-induced disaster is profoundly lamented. However, the recent emergence of Bangladeshi climate fiction addressing immediate climate catastrophe and global warming remains a critically under-researched area.

Amitav Ghosh (born 1956), who seems to have set a trend of cli-fi genre in the South Asian context, was born in West Bengal, India. However, he has an ancestral connection with Bangladesh; his forefathers migrated from the then East Bengal, now Bangladesh, as “ecological refugees long before the term was invented”.³ Ghosh’s novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) demonstrates the agency of nature against the backdrop of the rising sea-level threatening to sink the mangrove forests, the Sundarbans that cuts across the borders of Bangladesh and India. Ghosh’s novel *Gun Island* (2019) also deals with migration caused by climate change through the protagonist Deen, foregrounding “planetary environmentalism” and “multispecies justice” whereby spaces are given to various species to live and thrive.⁴ In both novels, Ghosh introduces local myths, legends, folktales, and beliefs, thereby recognizing the indigenous lore of the people.

Climate change fiction often tends to be dystopian, post-apocalyptic or futuristic, and, in that sense, a bit remote from the pressing reality of the immediate present.⁵ Amitav Ghosh addresses this issue in his non-fiction work, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016). He ascribes the failure of the imaginative writers to tackle the issue of the climate disaster to a carbon-driven culture that has a tendency to conceal its seamy side. Ghosh claims that “the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (12). Yet, as he advocates, it is high time for the novel to engage with the reality of immediate climate threats. After the so-called subjective phase of Anthropocene, humans should now “recognize” the “uncanny” fact that nature has its own agency and purposes “about which we know nothing”, and this is particularly true for the Bengal Delta where the land is “demonstrably alive” (7).

Of late, a fair number of Bangladeshi writers have been focusing on current climate concerns in their novels and short stories, setting the trend of a unique climate-response literature. Bangladeshi expatriate writers like Tahmima Anam and Atif Numair Chaudhury, who pen their creative urge through the medium of English, demonstrate considerable awareness to the climate issues like the risk of sea-level rising, and the impact of industrialization and deforestations on

³ Amitav Ghosh. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Gurgaon: Penguin Random House India, 2016. P. 4.

⁴ Khan, R. H. (2025), “Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island*: The Climate Crisis and Planetary Environmentalism.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 66(3), 423–437. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2024.2314094>.

⁵ Adeline Johns-Putra, “Climate change in literature and literary studies: From cli-fi, climate change theatre and ecopoetry to ecocriticism and climate change criticism.” Advanced review. *WIREs Clim Change* 2016, 7:266–282. doi: 10.1002/wcc.385.

climate. Tahmima Anam relates her first-hand experiences of the vulnerability of people who live on 'chars'—small islands made up of river silts that rise and sink as per the whim of the river course.⁶ Landless people, the "repeated victims of flooding and river erosion" build their houses on these islands to "live with their unreliable, unforgiving landscape". Anam echoes the cautions of the climate experts that "Bangladesh is sinking under the weight of the rising seas, one of the first victims of our transforming climate."⁷ Anam's novel, *The Bones of Grace* (2016) features ecological refugees displaced by environmental catastrophe. Numair Atif Chaudhury's futuristic novel, *Babu Bangladesh* (2019), is a scathing attack on corrupt politicians whose development narrative undermines environmental reality.

Like these expatriate writers, Bangladeshi writers writing in Bengali blend climate concerns with contemporary history, politics, and gender and class consciousness. Since the middle of the last century, many prominent Bengali novelists, including Manik Bandyopadhyay, have focused on class conflict, portraying the struggles of marginal communities living along the rivers. This tendency seems to overlap in the present Bangladeshi novelist's treatment of climate concerns. Drawing upon the literary background established above, this paper qualitatively analyzes Selina Hossain's *Pokamakorer Gharbasati* (A Habitat of Insects, 1986) and Sayed Manzoorul Islam's *Shokuner Dana* (The Vulture's Wings, 2013) to trace the emerging trend of cli-fi in Bangladesh.⁸

2. Selina Hossain's *A Habitat of Insects*: A Precursor of Bangladeshi Cli-Fi

Selina Hossain (born 1947) is one of Bangladesh's most prominent living novelists; her writings focus on women's empowerment, the legacy of the Indian Partition of 1947 and the 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh. Her novels have been translated in a number of languages including French, English, Russian, Finnish and Japanese. Hossain's fictional works display deep sensitivity to the marginalized people living along the coastal belt of the Bay of Bengal or on the precarious river banks and silt islands. Many of her novels manifest her deep understanding of the intimate relationship between humanity and ecology, testifying to her acceptance of the agency of nature. The novel, *A Habitat of Insects*, which was later turned into an award-winning film, revolves around the inhuman living conditions of the people in a fishing neighborhood in the remote coastal region of the Bay of Bengal. The novel, inspired by Hossain's actual visit to the open sea on a fishing trawler, highlights concern about anthropogenic climate change, establishing it as a precursor of climate change fiction in Bangladeshi literature.⁹

The setting of the novel spans Shah Pari'r Char (silt island), Shah Badar Char, and St. Martin's

⁶ Tahmima Anam, "Losing the ground beneath their feet."

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2008/sep/04/climatechange.flooding>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ For convenience, henceforth this paper will mention only the English titles of these two novels.

⁹ <https://bangla.thedailystar.net/সংস্কৃতি/বই/সাহিত্য/সেলিনা-হোসেনের-শিল্পীসত্তা-359506>.

Island, which constitute the southernmost tip of mainland Bangladesh, falling within the administrative district of Cox's Bazar, nearing the border with Myanmar. Cox's Bazar is home to the longest natural sea beach in Asia, while St. Martin's Island is the only coral island in Bangladesh, located around 30 kilometers from the mainland.¹⁰ The people of the fishing neighborhood subsist on fishing, salt cultivation, oyster collection and dried fish processing. On the whole, this area is the "ground zero" for climate literature, as it provides instances of sea level rise, coastal erosion and climate-induced migration.¹¹

In the novel, *The Habitat of Insects*, the fishermen of the coastal neighborhood, although dehumanized by poverty and upper-class oppression, live in harmony with the sea. The protagonist, Malek, feels an indomitable pull towards the sea. He often stands on the coastal embankment to enjoy the rhythmic tidal waves. He feels elated seeing the beauty of the purple flowers of water spinach scattered across the sandy beach. In the rainy season, Malek collects oysters for pearls, but in the autumn, he goes out to the open sea to catch sharks. While on land, Malek feels oppressed by his employer Torab Ali, and by Shafia who is deaf to his love; he then finds solace in the sea, "Looking at the sea, he sees waters up to the horizon and beyond, he then cools down, finding meaning in life, and his heart is overflowed with love for his fellow human beings" (48). Moreover, Malek has a maddening fascination for St. Martin's Island: "Whenever he has a chance, he must go there. In the full-moon, he will pass night lying on the sands" (20).¹² He feels affinity with the vines, shrubs and mosses of the mangrove forests, getting comfort from the environment there— "When he dips his feet in the water, it embraces them with affection. There grow various types of algae—a perfect mix of red, blue, green, and brown. He feels soothed gazing at them" (92). Through Malek's interaction with nature, the novelist wants to underline the need for an empathetic relationship between humanity and nature.

Hossain's novel, however, exposes the effect of human intervention on the pristine beauty of St. Martin's Island. While roaming the island, Malek notices a subtle change in the ecosystem; it is not like the island he saw in his boyhood, the stones above and beneath the water have gradually turned charcoal black. Malek's awareness of the changing environmental reality of the island is instilled by an expert team from Dhaka, who came last year to study the ecosystem of the island—examining its soil, snails, oysters and more. Malek learned from the team leader, Chaudhury Shaheb, about the importance of a healthy ecosystem for the safety of the coral island. Chaudhury Shaheb had explained that every element in nature plays its part in retaining ecological harmony; for

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cox's_Bazar_Beach.

¹¹ In the recent decades, the island suffers from unprecedented vulnerability with regards to its coral and marine biodiversity, and this is why, tourism has been banned from February to October each year. It is a testimony to the fact the Selina Hossain's novel deals with a current event.

¹² Selina Hossain. *Pokamaker Gharbashati* (A Habitat of Insects). Dhaka: Sulekha Prokashoni, 1986. P. 20. All quotations of the novel are from this edition and their English translation is rendered by the researcher.

instance, vines, shrubs and algae purify the water. It pains Malek see how human interference has already caused an environmental disaster on the island. The number of bird species has reduced to a half; the Common Snipe, which used to wander along the banks of the river, Naf, has become extinct. Besides, the sea on the eastern side of the island shows the sign of irrecoverable ecological disaster. As Malek ruminates:

Once the sea was calm on this side of the island; there were innumerable types of aquatic plants. Gradually, the number of plants is dwindling, and with them, the diversity of insects and animal species. Now boats and trawlers ply the area. The water is stirred up by this movement, and the burnt oil from the trawlers changes the color of the water. Altogether, the place appears polluted to Malek, and he now refrains from going in that direction. (93)

Malek, who has learned from the expert team that St. Martin's Island offers an immense potential for research in soil science, botany, biology, and climate study, feels frustrated to see this devastation.

Selina Hossain's narrative illustrates how the local ecosystem is being ruined through indiscriminate cutting of trees and the removal of sandstones scattered across the river, Naf. Malek knows from the expert that these stones are "like the pores of this island, merging with its body. They shouldn't be removed to clear land for paddy fields; rather, the structure of the island will remain intact if coconut trees are planted among them" (92). Malek becomes apprehensive that the island's demise is imminent due to clearing of land for crops. At this pace, land clearing will certainly lead to "a cataclysmic disaster" (92).

For Selina Hossain, the oppression of nature by vested interest groups intersects with class exploitation. Influential and corrupt people, like Gani Miah and Torab Ali, exploit both the poor fishermen and the sea and island. They employ hundreds of boats for overfishing and clear land for cultivation, contributing to deforestation on the island. Gani Miah illegally grabs a large portion of land on St. Martin's Island. Malek notices that on the island, wherever there is human intervention, there is environmental ruin. The resources of the land have been pillaged by the powerful, who remain pathologically indifferent to both man and nature.

The novel's title, *A Habitat of Insects*, metaphorically illustrates how the poor fishermen of the coastal neighborhood are treated like insects by the upper-class people. These fishermen live from hand to mouth; they do not even get enough drinking water. As they have no boats of their own, they are forced to work for low wages. The money-lender, Torab Ali owns a massive fleet of trawlers and more than twenty fishing nets; he runs salt farm, a dried-fish processing industry, and other illegal businesses. The fisherman Suza is said to be a lucky guy who can catch a huge number of fish, but his luck only feeds the greed of Torab Ali. While Suza is enthralled by the beauty of the sea, his eyes darken when he thinks about his family; his inability to marry off his daughter due to financial

constraints sickens his heart. The inhabitants are so dehumanized that they accept their insect-like existence as the machinations of fate. Hossain further hints at the nexus between greedy people and corrupt officials—if the poor people attempt to stage a protest against the oppression, they are either beaten by thugs or sent to jail on false charges.

Yet, the novelist seems to suggest that a change to the status quo is possible if people become conscious of the anomaly of their existence. This is why her protagonist, Malek, gets resolved to go door-to-door to help people understand both the value of the ecosystem and the injustice in the social system. The fishermen are the majority, yet they cannot stand up against the exploiters because they are not united. Malek tries to unite them, encouraging them to form a cooperative society in which they will have their own boats and nets needed to fish in the sea. They will not have to share anything with the moneylenders who send them to the mighty sea to catch sharks and extract all the profits themselves.

Malek's attempt to unite the fishermen collides with the interest of the moneylender, Torab Ali, who appoints musclemen to attack him. Malek's bruised body "looks like the variegated looks of the muddy soil of the fishermen's village" (119). By comparing Malek's body with the local landscape, Hossain seems to indicate that nature is on the side of the oppressed. Having been released from the hospital after three months, Malek again works for the cooperative society. The fishermen procure their own boats and nets and go to catch sharks in the open sea. Malek and his team catch a monstrous shark that, being pushed above the boat, bites his right hand, almost separating it from his body. The novel ends here, leaving the status of Malek's life or death to the conjecture of the reader. Anyway, the novelist deftly foregrounds the idea that the awareness and activism of the downtrodden people are vital to rescue the ecosystem and the social system from the grind of the vested interest groups who are the exploiter of both human beings and the environment.

3. Sayed Manzoorul Islam's *The Vulture's Wings*: Bangladeshi Cli-Fi Proper

Sayed Manzoorul Islam (1951-2025) was a prolific writer, academic, award-winning translator and columnist with a considerable dose of social awareness. His oeuvre consists of five novels and eight short story collections, shaped by his observations of the social, political and environmental issues. His Bengali novel *Shakuner Dana* (The Vulture's Wings) manifests a deep anxiety about an impending climate disaster which, according to him, is fueled by the greed and corruption of the vested-interest groups with transboundary roots.

In Bangladesh, there is a pertinent issue of "development victimhood and resistance", where "environmental precariousness due to geographical position meets unnatural disasters in a development-hungry state."¹³ Modernization and urbanization drive often ignores the environmental

¹³ Samia Zaman, (2023), Review of *The Bangladeshi Environmental Humanities Reader: Environmental Politics*, 32 (4). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2023.2192149>.

issue and the rights of the marginalized people. As a result, declining environmental justice is effectively creating an “environmental proletariat.”¹⁴ In this connection, the role of the national and international NGOs and donors—who influence state environment policy through development assistance and loans—often comes under scrutiny, revealing that “the seemingly apolitical co-management approach to nature conservation creates a conducive environment for facilitating the operation of transnational business actors.”¹⁵

In his novel, *The Vulture's Wings*, Sayed Manzoorul Islam addresses the environmental injustice caused by the so-called development project, challenging the state's adoption of economic benefit as the only development indicator. The novel centers around the lives of the people of the ‘haor’ or wetland basin, collectively known as CMB area.¹⁶ People in this area have been living as one with the basin and rivers, depending on fishing in the basin and cultivating paddy on the fringe land. Suddenly, they find their existence at stake because of a government-sponsored mega project titled, “Integrated Development and Preservation”, encouraged and financed by international donors. A narrative of development is circulated, as voiced by Nirad Chandra Chaudhury, the naïve retired engineer of the Water Board—paddy production will ramp up, tourism will thrive, business will boom and connectivity with the rest of the country will be solidified. However, the novelist's satire rests on Mr. Chaudhury's inability to satisfactorily answer Azad's question as to what will happen to the people whose homes will be consumed by water. His reply simply parrots the position of the international donors: collective benefit at the cost of the individual loss. As the novelist hints, in the long run, the vested interest group will be the collective, leaving the local people landless, homeless, devastated and destitute.

Understandably, this narrative is contested by the inhabitants of the CMB area. For instance, Hanif Miah asserts that any development project should incorporate the opinion of the local people who know the ecosystem better—their inter-generational knowledge and experience outweigh the insufficient and hasty study of the experts from outside. This view is supported by von Hofmann, the internationally reputed Dutch environmental expert, who demonstrates that the project is being adopted without sufficient prior study, failing to account for its massive environmental impacts. The novelist wryly compares it to India's ‘Farakka Barrage Project’ on the river Ganges, which is causing unprecedented salinization and desertification in Bangladesh situated in the lower delta.

Islam's novel exposes the hypocrisy and corruption involved in the name of development project with huge foreign loans. He voices the public perception that a lion's share of the lent money is squandered away by different stakeholders—international donors, national and local politicians,

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ A haor is “a wetland ecosystem in the north eastern part of Bangladesh which is physically a bowl or saucer shaped shallow depression, also known as a backswamp” (*Wikipedia*). During the monsoon it becomes a vast sea-like expanse, mixing itself with a chain of rivers, while in the dry season it turns into an innumerable lake-like formations.

and a few corrupt officials. The novel provides ample hints that international donors provide funds not out of sheer altruism, but rather with an eye toward massive financial returns, “if they donate one hundred BDT, they extract five hundred BDT in the name of interest” (12).¹⁷ The “World Money Lending Body”, as Islam terms it, designs programs in a way that only raises the project cost, sending a huge number of consultants and trainers who only mess up the project outcome. Dr. Malek, the CEO of an NGO responsible for the feasibility study, is an expert in environmental science, but he finally sets aside his moral stance and turns into a cohort of the international donors. On the other hand, the elected representative, Safar Ali, works with obsessive tenacity to secure government approval for the project, planning to extract huge money from it. He is already beginning to reap the fruits of the project even before its implementation, receiving gifts like a car, while opportunistic people throng around him.

The novelist gives an impression that the project proposal has been tabled to facilitate the selected people: “Even a student of the 4th grade understood then that the project had been considered only for opening up a way for the people of the governing party to make money worth hundreds of millions” (86). Civil Engineer Aurin, who is employed in the feasibility study team of Dr. Malek’s NGO, realizes that the systematic rites of corrupt practices would finally make the project a farce in the name of development: “Aurin fears corruption the most. If people become preoccupied with making money, if they pay utmost consideration to their self-interest, no project would yield maximum benefit for the common people” (113). She has already seen corruption in its myriad forms—grabbing rivers, cutting trees leading to deforestation and so on. Her concern relates to the title of the novel, “The Vulture’s Wings”: while actual vultures become extinct because of the man-made climate disaster, the metaphorical vultures—the greedy people—abound in the country. Islam thus depicts the link between power and money through the activities of the corrupt politicians and officials.

Islam’s narrative makes it clear that the project will completely uproot the local people, turning them into climate refugees. The protagonist, Azam, envisions a grim picture of the ‘post-deluge’ situation, when his family will have to migrate to Dhaka. von Hofmann cautions that the project will be a death knell for the sensitive ecosystem of the ‘haor’ area, where cement-and-brick type development will disrupt the synchrony of nature’s elements. He suggests at least three years of study before undertaking the project; however, it is actually being taken after a hasty, nine-month study, which Hofmann argues, is not enough to understand “a living entity” (92).

Islam’s ecocritical awareness is manifested in this assertion that the ‘haor’ is a living being, having body and health like human beings: “Its one hand stretches to Vadartek on the East, another to the Moyna Beel, and it has an umbilical connection with the river, Tishna” (26). The river too is

¹⁷ Sayed Manzoorul Islam. *Shakuner Dana* (The Vulture’s Wings) Dhaka: Anyaprokash, 2013. P. 12. All quotations from the texts are from this edition, and their English translation is rendered by the researcher.

an animated being having lungs to breathe—it is a mother figure that bestows everything on her children, the people living around her. The arrival of mechanical modernity has polluted the basin's body with burned-out petroleum from engine-propelled boats and the chemical fertilizers used in the paddy fields. Yet, it has learned to purify itself. Presently, the basin's health is reviving, as is evident in the arrival of migratory birds after a multi-year hiatus. The novel's assertion that the 'haor' or wetland basin is a living entity seems to resonate with Amitav Ghosh's view that the non-human world, including forests, animals, rivers and storms, is a living entity and that humans should now recognize its agency, its "all-encompassing presence" around us.¹⁸ In *The Vulture's Wings*, Islam seems to indicate that the donor-sponsored project would only terrorize nature, hampering its cycle of life.

The novel asserts that the local inhabitants who live in tune with the 'haor' are better able to speak on its behalf. People like Shailen the boatman, and Malek Miah the farmer, along with Azam, Azad, and Safia of the younger generation, possess their own 'scientific mode' of understanding—combining knowledge of biology, botany, agriculture, fisheries, and marine sciences. Their science does not necessarily conform to the Western ontological system; rather, they have their own empirical method based on inter-generational knowledge that defies and supersedes conventional Western-oriented science. As Shailen comments, understanding the ecosystem of the 'haor' is not easy for outsiders, because it remains embedded in the movement of nature—including storms and cyclones—and cannot be fully comprehended with geometrical instruments of the project surveyors. The boatman's comment raises the genuine ecocritical concern that it is the human tendency to impose man-made laws on nature while ignoring its agency. Azam's grandfather would say that the haor is as alive as a human being and, therefore, its living status should be respected. This belief is still shared by the local people.

The novelist infuses some sort of optimism that rests on the activism of the people around the basin and the positive role played by the media and civil society. Islam seems to present the character, Azam, as an ideal. The house Azam builds is a mini specimen of green technology: the pillars are made of dead trees, the floor and walls are of mud, and the book rack is made of wood from an expired boat. Azam decides not to marry before achieving self-reliance, although he appears romantic in his internal monologues centering on Safia, a college-going girl of the village. Azam's protest flares up when he apprehends the impending doom of the basin. Like Azam, Safia, her brother Azad, and her father Malek Miah take initiatives to forge public sentiment against this fatal project. They are in turn joined by civil society, the media and environmentalist organizations. Aurin raises a storm by finding faults with the project after visiting different areas of the basin. She is finally accompanied by her architect fiancé Mahin who has already had bitter experiences of working in a corporate firm that sucks the blood of the poor people. Reporters from the media

¹⁸ Amitav Ghosh, 2016. P. 7.

outlets, like Dipa and Ria leave no stones unturned to expose the evil intent behind the project. Ria categorically says,

A project starts in the name of the poor but ends up with the money going to the pockets of the rich. But I will not spare these exploiters. It is simply unacceptable that they suck the lifeblood out of the masses and siphon money abroad to buy luxury apartments while I stand idly by. (57)

Ria has already received death threats from the vested interest groups, but they cannot derail her from her resolve. In the face of the public protest, the “World Money Lending Body” retreats from financing the project, and finally, the Prime Minister decides to postpone the inauguration.

4. Conclusion

Selina Hossain’s *A Habitat of Insects* and Sayed Manzoorul Islam’s *The Vulture’s Wings* raise pertinent issues related to the immediate risk of climate disaster that are looming over Bangladesh. Conforming to the vogue of the Bangladeshi novel in the realistic tradition, both authors mingle their climate concerns with their understanding of contemporary politics and socio-economic realities. Selina Hossain’s novel, set in the coastal zone of the Bay of Bengal, exposes how human intervention is damaging the ecosystem of the area, especially St. Martin’s Island. Sayed Manzoorul Islam’s novel too focuses on the dangers to the ecosystem due to the intervention of vested interest groups in the name of development project. Both the novelists emphasize the need for public awareness and activism to resist unjust human intervention in nature; thus, these two novels clearly hint at the future course of Bangladeshi cli-fi literature.

Imagining China in the 1970s: Syncretism, Orientalism, and Cultural Politics in Don DeLillo's *Ratner's Star*

Lijun Wang

1. Introduction

Don DeLillo (born 1936) is one of the most influential American novelists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Known for his sharp prose and philosophical depth, his fiction explores themes such as mass media, technology, consumer culture, political violence, and the hidden structures shaping modern life. Born in the Bronx, New York, DeLillo worked in advertising before turning to fiction. His early novels in the 1970s—such as *Americana* (1971) and *End Zone* (1972)—established his reputation as an innovative postmodern writer. In the following decades, he gained wider recognition with works such as *White Noise* (1985), which won the U.S. National Book Award, *Libra* (1988), a fictionalized account of the John F. Kennedy assassination, and *Underworld* (1997), a novel exploring themes of memory, nuclear anxiety, waste, and the hidden patterns linking personal experience to global history during the Cold War. In this paper, I examine one novel from DeLillo's oeuvre—*Ratner's Star* (1976)—to trace how Sino-U.S. rapprochement in the 1970s is represented in his fiction, an aspect that has rarely been addressed in DeLillo scholarship.

Belonging to DeLillo's early experimental phase, *Ratner's Star* emerges from the Cold War scientific imagination of the 1970s, when space exploration, cryptography, and systems theory shaped intellectual culture. It is an experimental early novel that blends satire, mathematics, and philosophical speculation. The story centers on Billy Twillig, a fourteen-year-old mathematical prodigy who is recruited to join an international team of scientists at a secret desert research facility. Their mission is to decode a mysterious signal believed to have originated from a distant star known as Ratner's Star. As Billy becomes involved in the project, the novel moves beyond a straightforward science-fiction premise and turns into a wide-ranging exploration of language, knowledge, and systems of meaning. DeLillo fills the narrative with eccentric scientists, elaborate mathematical theories, and playful linguistic experiments. Often compared to postmodern works by writers such as Thomas Pynchon, the novel satirizes the scientific quest for absolute knowledge while also questioning whether the universe—or human communication itself—can ever be fully understood.

Part of previous studies on *Ratner's Star* are reviewed here. In *In the Loop* (1987), Tom LeClair comments that "Part of DeLillo's risk, beyond the secrecy of his mathematical subject, was

his choice to make his elegantly formal system open and equifinal, diverse and mysterious, an imitation of the ecosystem as well as of mathematical methodology.”¹ In *American Magic and Dread* (2000), Mark Osteen notes that “the conclusion of *Ratner’s Star* celebrates the creative powers of belief”² and that the novel suggests that “reality is a function of our representations, and that both are constantly reshaped by observation.”³ In *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* (2003), David Cowart argues that “DeLillo envisions a darkly ironic reconciliation of a notorious cultural dichotomy,”⁴ namely, between science and the humanities—specifically, between fiction and mathematics. In *Beyond Grief and Nothing* (2006), Joseph Dewey argues that in the novel, “DeLillo queries,” “What do we do,” “when science cannot provide solution when it must confront the yin-yang world it pretends to measure?”⁵ He contends that DeLillo offers two “dead-end responses” in part 1 (which is titled “Adventures: Field Experiment Number One” and includes Chapter 1-12): “anxious frustration and fuzzy mysticism,” while “part 2 [“Reflections: Logicon Project Minus-One”] celebrates chaos and, indeed, reveals apparent chaos is more an unsuspected cooperative.”⁶ Focusing on apocalypticism in *Ratner’s Star* as well as the other two DeLillo novels, Katherine Da Cunha Lewin holds that the novel “still mediates on the relationship between anxiety, ending and death.”⁷ Centered on the intertextuality between the novel and *Zero K* (published in 2016, another science fiction by DeLillo), Graley Herren maintains that “the eponymous Shazar Lazarus Ratner” is “reincarnated in *Zero K* as Ben-Ezra,” which implying the “cosmic connections” among each “self-contained” DeLillo novels.⁸

Although *Ratner’s Star* has been widely interpreted through its mathematical, philosophical, and postmodern dimensions, its engagement with the evolving political context of 1970s Sino-U.S. relations has remained largely unexplored. This paper departs from previous studies by arguing that DeLillo’s authorial awareness of the shifting political dynamics of Sino-U.S. relations in the 1970s informs the novel’s conception. Drawing on archival research materials associated with the novel, it shows that DeLillo’s portrayal of Maurice Wu—a Chinese American archaeologist fascinated by Chinese culture and employed by an organization promoting Sino-American scientific

¹ Tom LeClair, “A New Map of the World: *Ratner’s Star*,” *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 122.

² Mark Osteen, “Boomerang: *Ratner’s Star* Through the Looking Glass,” *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo’s Dialogue with Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 96.

³ Osteen, “Boomerang,” 97.

⁴ David Cowart, “‘More Advanced the Deeper We Dig’: *Ratner’s Star*,” *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2003), 151.

⁵ Joseph Dewey, *Beyond Grief and Nothing: A Reading of Don DeLillo* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 44.

⁶ Dewey, *Beyond Grief and Nothing*, 46.

⁷ Katherine Da Cunha Lewin, “Apocalypticism, environmentalism and the other in Don DeLillo’s *End Zone*, *Great Jones Street* and *Ratner’s Star*,” *Don DeLillo: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, edited by Kathrine De Cunha Lewin and Kiron Ward (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 44.

⁸ Graley Herren, “A miniature star: Remains and returns in the metafiction of *Zero K*,” *The Self-Reflexive Art of Don DeLillo* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 202.

collaboration—reflects the cultural and political climate of the United States during the 1970s. In this period, Western centrism, and more specifically Americentrism, increasingly came under criticism for its ignorance of non-Western cultures, even as U.S.-China relations were moving toward rapprochement. By situating the novel within this historical context, the paper illuminates how transformations in Cold War U.S.-China relations are reflected and refracted within American literary discourse.

2. Criticism of Americentrism and Sino-U.S. Rapprochement in the 1970s

In “The Power of History,” an article published by *The New York Times* in 1997, DeLillo famously remarks: “This is the lost history that becomes the detailed weave of novels. Fiction is all about reliving things. It’s our second chance.”⁹ Drawing on such a literary philosophy, this paper proposes a new reading of *Ratner Star*, arguing that the change in Sino-U.S. relations reflected in the work is the lost history DeLillo attempts to relive.

To begin with, *Ratner’s Star* opens with a conversation that alludes to the relationship between the United States and Asian countries since the end of the Second World War:

“You [Billy Twillig] are not an Amerasian, are you?”

“What’s that?”

“What they used to call war kids,” she said, “GI papa, native mama. They sold for five hundred dollars in Bangkok. ‘And that’s no phony baloney, bub.’ You’re about the right age for an Amerasian. My name’s Mrs. Roger Laporte. ‘Hi, I’m Barnaby Laporte. Whereabouts you go to school, good buddy?’”¹⁰

By the end of the 1970s, several wars, such as the Korean War and the Vietnam War (the Allied occupation of Japan can also be included, even though it was not a war), had been fought on the soil of Asian countries. “GI papa, native mama” explicitly and playfully summarizes the dominance of the U.S. over Asian countries—and the legacy left by such asymmetrical dynamics. In fact, Mrs. Laporte’s mentioning of the human trafficking of Amerasian children in Bangkok comes from one of DeLillo’s clippings, “GI Children Sell for \$ 500 In Thailand,” reported on 5 November, 1973 by the *New York Post*. It confirms that the trade of Amerasian children usually happened in “various areas near the U.S. military base.”¹¹ This history is also discussed by another character, Robert Softly, Billy’s tutor, who remembers how personal experience of Americans is linked to the history of the Vietnam War in the U.S.:

⁹ Don DeLillo, “The Power of History,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 7 Sep. 1997, 63.

¹⁰ DeLillo, *Ratner’s Star* (London: Picador, 2016), 9.

¹¹ DeLillo, “Research Clippings for *Ratner’s Star*,” Container 50, *Don DeLillo Papers*, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

“I’m reminded of a family that lives across the road from me in Pennyfellow,” Softly said. “Years ago they adopted a very small child, an Asian girl, orphaned by the bombing. In a matter of days she became the focus of that home as none of the natural children in the family ever did. This is because she possessed something unique. Moral authority. Time and again I heard one member of the family chide another for piggishness, insolence, bad grammar, always saying in effect: ‘What will Phan think of us when she’s old enough to understand?’ Remarkable, the sheer authority of that small round object. Because she was tiny, virtually mute, because she was Asian, an orphan, a victim of war, Phan was the ultimate moral force in that household, a living contradiction of nearly everything the family had once held to be eternal; that is, justice, truth, honor, so forth [...]”¹²

In Softly’s recollections, an American couple adopts a Vietnamese girl, Phan, who has been victimized by the war. At first glance, the adoptive parents appear to embody the benevolence and humanitarian ideals promoted in American society through their willingness to adopt a child of a different race and save her from the terror of war. However, as suggested by the question, “What will Phan think of us when she’s old enough to understand?”, the moral hypocrisy underlying such an adoption inevitably emerges once the child grows up and learns about not the piggishness, insolence, bad grammar of her American parents but the history of U.S. intervention in Vietnam and the suffering that American military actions inflicted on millions of Vietnamese families, including her own—perhaps even the loss of her biological parents and other relatives in the war.

Criticism of the Vietnam War is not the only historical context informing *Ratner’s Star*; critiques of Americentrism in 1970s American society also play an important role in understanding the novel. Among Don DeLillo’s research materials for the book, one newspaper clipping merits particular attention. Published by *The New York Times* on 30 June 1973 and titled “China’s 20th-Century Ascendancy,” the clipping is an excerpt from a lecture given by W. A. C. H. Dobson (then Professor of Chinese at the University of Toronto) at the University of Prince Edward Island. At the beginning of the article, Dobson points out that understanding China’s emergence as a powerful Third World nation has become an urgent issue for the Western world, one that requires “a considerable re-orientation” in Western thinking. By “re-orientation,” he means abandoning the conventional tendency to regard “the history of Western civilization as history itself,” noting that the Chinese have maintained their own “Sino-centric world view” for centuries. Although the rise of a communist China on the global stage appears threatening to many in the West, he suggests:

Mao Tse-tung would express this somewhat differently. Describing the rise of Soviet and

¹² DeLillo, *Ratner’s Star*, 316-17.

American power upon the ashes of the erstwhile colonial powers, he sees the role of “superpower” as one in which the U.S. and the U.S.S.R are attempting to reassert colonial domination under a different guise. This role for China and therefore the role of “superpower” he repudiates. In the Sino-centric worldview, China stands as the champion of what she calls the “two intermediate zones”—the first, the developed countries, which, each in varying degrees, he sees as being under Soviet or American hegemony and the second, the developing world—the former colonies—which each she alleges to be the object of superpower rivalry. As champion, China envisages herself as apart from but an equal of the other two superpowers.¹³

To help readers understand Mao Zedong’s theory, Dobson proposes looking back at China’s pre-1949 history, presenting it as evidence of the Chinese capacity to absorb and transmit the wisdom of their ancestors. He later familiarizes readers with the centuries-old Chinese conception of the commune as a form of “well-ordered society” and explains how this tradition has been integrated into modern Chinese society alongside Marxism and Leninism. As he concludes: “In Mao’s China—indeed throughout Asia—history is a very present reality, and I see more in contemporary China as continuity with the past than as abrupt change under the impact of ‘alien ideology’.” Through this effort, Dobson reassures readers that, despite the seemingly formidable linguistic divide between English and Chinese, Chinese culture can be understood by Westerners, provided they abandon a Western-centric perspective and approach Chinese history with greater openness.

More interestingly, this clipping contains four symbolic illustrations drawn from traditional Chinese philosophy and writing—bagua with yin-yang, ancient Chinese seal-style characters, the character “水” (shuǐ, meaning “water”), and a figure of Laozi (Daoist sage). At the bottom of the page, it notes that these images come from the book *Symbols, Signs and Signets* (1969) by Ernst Lehner. The first circular diagram shows the yin-yang symbol in the center surrounded by the bagua, in which yin-yang represents the balance of opposite forces in the universe, while bagua symbolizes natural forces such as heaven, earth, and winds. The second symbol contains stylized ancient Chinese characters written in a seal-script style. Resembling a traditional Chinese seal design, such designs were historically carved on stamps used by scholars and officials. The characters appear decorative and symbolize the Chinese written tradition and cultural antiquity. The third symbol is the character “水”, and in Chinese philosophy, water often symbolizes flexibility and adaptability. The last drawing shows a bearded sage in traditional robes, holding a scroll, which represents Laozi, the legendary author of the *Dao De Jing* and founder of Daoism. These images collectively reference key aspects of Chinese intellectual tradition: cosmology—yin-yang and bagua; writing heritage—seal characters; natural philosophy—the character “水”; classical philosophy—Laozi and Daoism. In

¹³ DeLillo, “Research Clippings for *Ratner’s Star*,” Container 50.

this way, these visuals help the article frame China not only politically but also through its deep philosophical and cultural traditions.

Then, why did a 1973 *New York Times* article about China use these specific symbols? Such a choice indeed reflects a typical Western framing of China during the early 1970s, especially around the time of the U.S.-China rapprochement after the visit of Richard Nixon to the People's Republic of China in 1972. Presenting China as an "ancient civilization" has been one of the major ways of Western journalism to explain modern China through its classical heritage. All four symbols evoke timeless philosophical wisdom. This approach tried to bridge Marxism with Chinese cultural continuity, even though the Cultural Revolution was actually attacking many traditional elements. Moreover, such particular choices of portraying China as mysterious, ancient, and philosophically deep reflect the "Orientalist" unconsciousness of the criticism of Western-centrism, as for Western publications, symbols like yin-yang or Daoist sages functioned as visual shorthand for "China."

This piece of news clipping, more importantly, bespeaks a historical moment of rediscovering China in American society. In 1973, the United States had only recently begun re-engaging diplomatically with the People's Republic of China after decades of Cold War hostility. Key moments include Ping-Pong Diplomacy, the 1971 secret diplomatic mission of National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger to China, the 1972 visit of Richard Nixon to China, and the Shanghai Communiqué. American readers were therefore curious but unfamiliar with China. The pictures in this clipping are far from random decorations because they visually construct China as a civilization defined by philosophy, symbolism, and antiquity, helping American / Western readers interpret contemporary Chinese politics through familiar cultural tropes.

In addition to Dobson's *New York Times* article, DeLillo also collected other clippings on Chinese culture and the Sino-U.S. rapprochement. One undated clipping, "Restive Chinatown Ready for Its New Year," describes how Chinese Americans celebrated the Lunar New Year, preparing the traditional New Year's Eve dinner and organizing festivities for the Year of the Tiger. Another clipping, "Taiwan Almanac, Top-Seller, Mixes Myth and Science," written by Peggy Durdin, published by *The New York Times* on August 31, 1973, discusses the popularity and cultural significance of the Chinese almanac in Taiwan. Closely associated with feng shui practices, the Chinese almanac is a traditional calendar book used to determine auspicious and inauspicious days for major life events—such as weddings and funerals—as well as for everyday activities like moving house or cutting hair. The clipping even reproduces the cover of a 1973 "Chinese People's Almanac," which depicts the legendary first emperor, Huangdi, accompanied by two attendants—a boy and a girl—dressed in traditional Chinese clothing. On the left side of the illustration appears the phrase "中國民曆" (meaning "Chinese People's Almanac"), while on the right it reads "中華民國六十二年" (meaning "the 62nd Year of the Republic of China," corresponding to 1973). The two attendants hold a New Year couplet that reads "新年大吉, 財喜双至," meaning "Good fortune in the

New Year, with wealth and happiness arriving together.”

In another *New York Times* article, “Shanghai: Mutual Admiration Society,” Harold C. Schonberg reports on the visit of the Philadelphia Orchestra to Shanghai in the early 1970s. The visit, according to Schonberg, attracted significant attention in Chinese newspapers and cultural circles, which praised the orchestra’s technical excellence and international reputation. The article highlights Chinese instrumentalists performing on traditional instruments such as the erhu, sheng, and pipa, whose distinctive sounds impressed Western musicians despite being unfamiliar to Western musical conventions. At the same time, he briefly introduces Chinese culinary culture to his readers, noting that “if Chinese music is in flux, subject to the whims of ideology, the great and ancient art of Chinese cooking continues to thrive. The Chinese have always taken cooking and eating seriously.” To illustrate the deep historical roots of this tradition, he invokes the legend of Emperor Tang of the Shang Dynasty, who is said to have hosted a banquet for 4,000 guests nearly four millennia ago. By juxtaposing the ideological volatility surrounding music with the enduring prestige of Chinese cuisine, the article presents food culture as a stable and continuous marker of China’s civilizational identity. Schonberg continues:

The men in the present Chinese leadership are notoriously ascetic. But when they throw a banquet, nobody is going to leave the table hungry. Five thousand years of refined cooking goes into it. There are good Chinese restaurants in the West, but nothing that remotely compares with the best cooking here. If nothing else, the ingredients are largely unavailable outside China. And if by any chance they were available, the majority of American eaters would be turned off by such delicacies as cuttlefish roe soup, sea slugs or marinated carp’s stomach. Yet those who have tasted those dishes can vouch for the fact that they are indeed delicacies, as subtle as anything in the French haute cuisine.¹⁴

The paragraph begins with a striking contrast between political austerity and cultural abundance. Here, the author juxtaposes the austere image of the Maoist leadership with the extravagance of Chinese culinary tradition. The leaders associated with Mao Zedong are portrayed as ideologically disciplined and personally frugal, yet the banquet represents an enduring cultural practice that exceeds political ideology. This rhetorical move suggests that politics may impose restraint, but civilizational traditions—especially food culture—persist and even flourish. Framing Chinese cuisine as an ancient civilizational achievement is another feature. The phrase “Five thousand years of refined cooking” invokes a familiar Western trope of China as an ancient civilization. Instead of presenting cuisine simply as food, the passage frames it as historically continuous, highly sophisticated, and the product of a long cultural lineage. The excerpt then shifts

¹⁴ DeLillo, “Research Clippings for *Ratner’s Star*,” Container 50.

to the presumed reaction of American readers—the discomfort Americans may feel when facing a Chinese dish. The next sentence highlights culinary differences as cultural differences. Foods that are delicacies in China are presented as potentially alien or repulsive to Americans. However, it then concludes with a reconciliation through a comparison of Chinese dishes with French fashionable cuisine. By comparing Chinese cooking to a familiar European benchmark, the author makes its sophistication intelligible to Western audiences. In this way, the news attempts to illustrate a broader narrative: despite the ideological austerity of Maoist politics, China remains a civilization defined by deep historical traditions and refined cultural practices.

Taken together, these news clippings capture a broader moment in 1970s America, when Americentrism—or more broadly Western centrism—was increasingly subject to criticism, and cultural diplomacy between China and the United States was attracting growing public attention. At the same time, they exemplify a common pattern in Western journalistic representations of China, in which the country is portrayed as both ancient and refined yet culturally exotic and unfamiliar. Such portrayals thus express a certain admiration for Chinese civilization while simultaneously maintaining a subtle sense of Western distance.

3. China-related Representations in *Ratner's Star*

Echoing Dobson's observation in the aforementioned 1973 *New York Times* article "China's 20th-Century Ascendancy" that "All is not new and much of the seemingly newest is very old indeed," DeLillo's representations of China in *Ratner's Star* register both a respect for the country's long-standing cultural traditions and a lingering strain of Orientalism.

Billy's tutor, Softly, is "a nonhereditary child-size" adult, "an abnormally small baby,"¹⁵ and is regarded as "an idealized Hollywood dwarf" by some of his friends¹⁶. The cause of Softly's disability, as well as his background, is disclosed later through Billy's conversation with Maurice Xavier Wu, a Chinese American archaeologist and Softly's colleague:

"Where did you [Wu] meet Rob [Softly]?"

"The Chinese-American Science Solidarity. A few years ago."

"What was he doing there?"

"Rob has a deep interest in things Chinese. He was born in China. Did you know that?"

"He never told me about an event like that."

"In fact his physical condition is a result of something called Chinese gnome disease. This is a crippling illness that was prevalent in a particular area of China for an entire millennium. It attacks the bones and muscles, preventing normal growth in children and reducing adults to

¹⁵ DeLillo, *Ratner's Star*, 292.

¹⁶ DeLillo, *Ratner's Star*, 312.

a gnomelike state. It wasn't recently that the cause was found. A lack of certain minerals in the water."

"He never told me that."

"Maybe because you're not Chinese," Wu said. "I'm Chinese."¹⁷

Although there was no such organization as "Chinese-American Science Solidarity" in the history of Sino-U.S. relations (it is a DeLillo creation), it can nevertheless be read as the writer's imagination of Sino-U.S. rapprochement. The revelations of Softly's hidden origins, that he was born in China, and that his physical condition stems from a Chinese disease, link his body directly to a geographical and cultural origin. Thus, his disability becomes not merely personal but historically and culturally situated.

Meanwhile, the conversation stages a subtle negotiation of cultural authority and difference. Wu's explanation of Softly's illness simultaneously invokes China as a site of ancient mystery and scientific knowledge, while his final remark establishes an insider-outsider divide that foregrounds the role of ethnic identity in determining who can access or interpret Chinese experience. Wu's explanation of "Chinese gnome disease" introduces China as a place associated with strange, little-known historical phenomena. The disease is described as existing for "an entire millennium," affecting a specific region of China, and was only recently explained through mineral deficiencies in water. This combination of mystery, antiquity, and scientific discovery suggests that although the country appears both ancient and enigmatic, it gradually becomes intelligible through modern science. Such an explanation of "Chinese gnome disease" also illustrates how China is translated into the language of modern science. What initially appears as a strange or mysterious phenomenon is ultimately explained through a rational cause. This shift mirrors the broader Cold War discourse in which China was increasingly framed not only as a revolutionary state but also as a participant in global scientific modernity, particularly during the period of expanding Sino-American scientific exchanges.

Softly's disease indeed is associated with a piece of news that DeLillo collected when writing the novel. Titled "Chinese Conquer 'Gnome' Disease," the undated reports that a Chinese medical team had succeeded in "conquering a strange disease which has raged for a 1000 years" in Shansi province.¹⁸ According to the news, the disease "was attributed in the past by the people of the mountain region to a 'God of the Plague'." It continues: the team in March 1970 found that "it was caused by the lack of certain minerals in the local water." The tension between science and exoticism in such a narrative is noteworthy. This shift mirrors the broader logic of the novel, where scientific inquiry attempts to decode phenomena that initially appear strange or incomprehensible. As the

¹⁷ DeLillo, *Ratner's Star*, 323-24.

¹⁸ DeLillo, "Research Clippings for *Ratner's Star*," Container 50.

conversation in the novel retains elements of Orientalist framing, the same undertones persist in the news report. In this way, the disease's exotic name and its association with a remote region of China contribute to a representation of China as ancient, mysterious, and geographically distant.

The most striking line, however, appears at the end of the Maurice-Billy conversation above: "Maybe because you're not Chinese... I'm Chinese." By suggesting that Softly withheld information from Billy because Billy is not Chinese, Wu claims his cultural authority based on ethnic identity. In this moment, ethnic identity becomes a credential that legitimizes Wu's access to information about Softly's past and about Chinese history. Although the passage operates within a discourse that marks China as culturally different, Wu functions as a mediating figure: a Chinese American who interprets China for non-Chinese characters. Wu's final remark, moreover, can be interpreted as a challenge to the Americentric assumption that Western observers can fully understand other cultures. Within the context of the 1970s—when the United States was beginning to reassess its understanding of China during the diplomatic thaw following the visit of Richard Nixon to China—this moment can be read as dramatizing the limits of American knowledge about China.

To summarize, in the context of *Ratner's Star*, this brief exchange reflects the larger cultural atmosphere of the 1970s: Americentrism is implicitly questioned when Wu asserts the limits of Billy's understanding while China emerges as both knowable and unfamiliar, requiring mediation through figures like Wu. Thus, the conversation does more than explain Softly's illness—it in fact dramatizes a shift in cultural authority. Wu's assertion of Chinese identity highlights the limits of American knowledge about China while positioning the Chinese American figure as a mediator between two cultural and epistemological worlds.

As the preceding analysis suggests, Maurice Wu also warrants closer examination. His background emerges in a dialogue with Jean Venable, a reporter in the process of writing a book based on her interviews with the entire team involved in the Ratner's Star project.:

"Full name please."

"Maurice Xavier Wu."

"Where did you get the Xavier?"

"My father was a missionary," he said.

"Where?"

"U.S. of A."

"Did you grow up there?"

"Off and on."

"Did you date American girls?"

"Did I date American girls?" he said. "What kind of book are you writing?"

"I try to ask whatever comes into my head," Jean said. "It's a new technique I've been

developing. But I think I may abandon it. Nothing but junky things have been coming into my head. Everything's up in the air right now. Don't tell Rob I said that. I'm sort of going through the motions, frankly. But keep it to yourself."

"Maybe we should do this another time," Wu said...¹⁹

This exchange reveals several important dynamics. Wu's full name, "Maurice Xaxier Wu," immediately introduces a hybrid cultural identity. The Western given name "Maurice" (a European given name commonly used in English and French contexts) and especially "Xavier"—a name associated with the Catholic missionary tradition—contrast with the Chinese surname "Wu." The name, therefore, compresses Western religious history and Chinese identity into a single personal identity. This detail quietly evokes the long history of Western missionary encounters with China, particularly from the sixteenth century onward. Missionaries often served as cultural intermediaries, translating knowledge between Europe and Asia. By giving Wu this middle name, DeLillo subtly alludes to the historical framework in which Western religious and cultural influence flowed outward toward China. However, DeLillo nevertheless reverses that historical pattern. When Wu explains that his father "was a missionary" in the "U.S. of A.," the conversation suggests a reverse missionary trajectory: rather than Western missionaries traveling to China, the Chinese father carries a missionary background connected to the United States. This reversal destabilizes the traditional hierarchy in which the West acts as the cultural transmitter and China as the recipient. In this sense, Wu's identity embodies a two-way cultural movement, reflecting the changing geopolitical environment of the 1970s when China was re-entering global cultural exchanges after decades of isolation. Such hybridity thus positions him as a figure who moves between cultural worlds.

On the other hand, Jean's questions also reveal an Americentric framework of curiosity. Her interview moves quickly toward questions about Wu's assimilation, while her questioning style is abrupt and somewhat intrusive: "Did you grow up there?" "Did you date American girls?" These questions shift quickly from biographical information to personal life, revealing a kind of journalistic curiosity that borders on voyeurism. The question about dating particularly assumes that Wu's relationship to American culture—especially through romantic relationships—is a key measure of his identity. This dynamic reflects, thus, not only a broader pattern in which minority characters are interrogated about their assimilation into American culture but also a broader tendency in American discourse to treat Asian or Asian American subjects as objects of sociological curiosity, rather than as autonomous cultural agents.

Rather than confirming or denying Jean's Americentric attempts to categorize his identity, Wu responds with a counter-question, "Did I date American girls? What kind of book are you writing?" politely interrupting that framework and challenging the legitimacy of Jean's inquiry. Meanwhile,

¹⁹ DeLillo, *Ratner's Star*, 337.

Wu momentarily challenges the authority of the American interviewer. His resistance to being reduced to a subject of casual cultural curiosity thus indicates the agency of minority in American society.

As the preceding analysis suggests, Wu's name functions almost like a miniature historical map—Western missionary history, Chinese cultural identity, and modern scientific collaboration, all of which converge in one character. This section further explores both the narrative disclosure of his Chinese identity and the novel's representation of the intertwinement of science and mysticism. I argue that these effects are realized through DeLillo's characterization of Wu as a bat-obsessed archaeologist who embodies a form of cultural and epistemological syncretism.

Wu's decision to become an archaeologist stems from his fondness for antiquity:

Oldness was becoming an obsession of his. Everything and everybody were turning out to be a lot older than anyone suspected. It began for Wu when he first learned about the charcoal-burning hearths and human skulls found half a century earlier in the caves at Chou-Kou-Tien. Everybody everywhere was being re-evaluated. In the Transvaal, Mexico, Europe, Indochina, the East African rift valley. Flint tools, jawbones, bark paper, shell necklaces, ivory weapons. One way or another the findings were pushing everything back, with ramifications broad enough to include the possibility that truly upright "men" coexisted with relatively erect "hominids."²⁰

The reference to the caves at Zhoukoudian (Chou-Kou-Tien) is crucial. This site is famous for discoveries related to early human ancestors, "Peking Man". For Wu, this discovery marks the beginning of his obsession. This imaginative framework can be traced to a 1974 news article collected by DeLillo, "China to Explore 'Peking Man' Site." The article outlines the history of "Peking Man," reporting the 1929 discovery of a complete skull belonging to a previously unknown hominid type, the interruption of excavations at Zhoukoudian in 1937 due to the outbreak of the war against Japan, and the resumption of archaeological work in 1949 under the Communist government.²¹ The excerpt also situates Wu within a global network of archaeological discoveries through the list of places, such as Mexico and Africa, emphasizing that the re-evaluation of human history is worldwide, not confined to China. Archaeology emerges as a global scientific enterprise that is collectively pushing back the timeline of human existence. This indeed aligns with DeLillo's collection of news reports on archaeological research into the origins of human beings worldwide. Drawing on a 1974 *New York Times* article titled "China Excavation Yields 2,000-Year-Old Writings," which reports the discovery of "a hoard of historical manuscripts, philosophical treatises

²⁰ DeLillo, *Ratner's Star*, 382.

²¹ DeLillo, "Research Clippings for *Ratner's Star*," Container 50.

and medical texts” in Changsha,²² DeLillo has Wu encounter a range of Chinese artifacts. These include “T’ang amphoras with handles designed to resemble dragon’s heads,” “miniature jade vases with spiral ornamentation,” an “early Han” “lead-glazed pottery bowl,” and “a Ming figure identified as a Taoist divinity.” The latter is described: “whose clothing, whose posture, whose facial expression, whose accompaniment of symbolic animals had associations that branched back hundreds and thousands of years, every such conjunction subscattering then into increasingly cryptic motifs involving taboos, legends, reincarnations, composite gods.”²³

In the novel, Wu habitually wears a decorative necklace—“a medallion,” “a circular thing that has a cluster of bats set into it”—whenever he goes into the field. He refers to it as “wu fu,” written “五蝠” in Chinese characters, a shortened form of “五只蝙蝠” (“five bats”). His affinity for bats derives from the phonetic homophony between “蝠” (fu, bat) and “福” (fu, good fortune) in Chinese. As he remarks, “The Chinese are probably the only people who think of bats in connection with good luck and a long life.”²⁴ By integrating a traditional Chinese system of meaning into his archaeological practice, Wu embodies a form of cultural and epistemological syncretism that blurs the boundary between scientific inquiry and symbolic interpretation. This syncretic mode of thought is further illustrated in Wu’s dialogue with Billy about bats. When asked whether he has ever witnessed a bat’s birth, Wu responds that although he has not, he assumes “they do it pretty much the way we do,” adding that “if you attach nonbat emotions to the event, it’s just as happy as human birth and just as sad.”²⁵ He then explains the reason for this sadness—“The birth of a baby equals the death of a fetus. This experience recreates itself throughout our lives,” and the phrase “this including a measure of that” is a good summary of Wu’s philosophy.²⁶

After years of excavation, this “Everything could be the other way around”²⁷ thinking has influenced his understanding of the relationship between religion and art:

How enriching he found this sort of thing, never one to overlook the fact that religion and art probably began in caves and having always viewed religion as nothing more or less than an integrated system of art in which a superhuman element is variously invoked, beseeched, prattled at and adored. A religion’s success or failure, for him, was based solely on the conscious efforts of its practitioners to express their veneration in ways that reflected, expanded and altered the mind’s conception and the senses’ external arrest of what is beautiful. In Wu’s scheme of things, Hinduism, for example, was an overflowing success, a plague-chronicle of diversities, cycles, soul wanderings and richly depressing cultural

²² DeLillo, “Research Clippings for *Ratner’s Star*,” Container 50.

²³ DeLillo, *Ratner’s Star*, 386.

²⁴ DeLillo, *Ratner’s Star*, 337.

²⁵ DeLillo, *Ratner’s Star*, 355.

²⁶ DeLillo, *Ratner’s Star*, 356.

²⁷ DeLillo, *Ratner’s Star*, 356.

practices; while, for instance, the eerie Protestant disciplines that stressed hymn-singing and Bible-reading struck him as being deficient in those contemplative delights that color the oriflamme of art. Guano dropped nearby. He troweled and sorted in the dimness, wondering why it was that systems of religion were so often used as frames of reference for the clarification of ideas that were in no way related to spiritual attitudes. Self-contradiction. The flailing brilliance of initiates in those unspecifiable realms deemed so central to being. Newton resorting to the idea of God as an absolute encompassing structure in his theory of mechanics. Leibnitz in the heyday of his mysticism using binary arithmetic to try to convert the Emperor of China to Christianity.²⁸

This passage offers a dense and revealing insight into Wu's intellectual framework, particularly his syncretic blending of archaeology, aesthetics, and religious thought. Wu conceptualizes religion not as a system of belief grounded in transcendence, but as an aesthetic and expressive practice. By claiming that "religion and art probably began in caves," he roots both in prehistoric, material origins—aligning with his archaeological sensibility. Religion, in his view, becomes "an integrated system of art," defined by human acts of expression (invocation, adoration, ritual performance) rather than divine truth. This effectively secularizes religion, recasting it as a cultural and artistic phenomenon. Wu even evaluates religions according to aesthetic criteria rather than theological validity. His judgment of Hinduism as "an overflowing success" reflects its richness, multiplicity, and symbolic abundance—qualities he associates with artistic vitality. In contrast, Protestantism is dismissed as "deficient" because of its relative austerity and lack of sensory or contemplative depth. This contrast reveals Wu's attraction to traditions that blur boundaries between art, ritual, and cosmology. At the same time, the paragraph exposes a tension—if not a contradiction—in Wu's thinking. While he reduces religion to art, he also questions why religious systems are so often used to explain non-spiritual domains, such as science and philosophy. His references to Isaac Newton and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz highlight this paradox: both figures invoke religious or metaphysical frameworks in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. In this way, his role as a figure who collapses distinctions between science and mysticism, past and present, empirical observation and symbolic meaning, is further reinforced. Overall, this passage deepens Wu's characterization as a syncretic thinker: one who interprets the world through overlapping systems of knowledge, even as he remains aware of the contradictions such a perspective entails.

This observation is in fact echoed in Softly's assessment of Wu: "What I value most about Maurice is this flair of his for syncretistic thinking. Sweet and sour pork. Diametrically opposed entities partaking of each other's flesh. It permeates all his thinking. The reconciliation of opposites.

²⁸ DeLillo, *Ratner's Star*, 386-87.

Childish and dumb but I love it.”²⁹ The metaphor Softly utilizes, “sweet and sour pork,” a dish emblematic of Chinese-style cuisine, not only captures Wu’s inclination to reconcile opposites but also gestures toward a broader cultural synthesis that the novel attempts to explore, in which seemingly incompatible systems—East and West, science and mysticism—are brought into uneasy yet generative coexistence.

Nevertheless, the excerpt below complicates Wu’s characterization by linking his intellectual pursuits to an underlying psychological and existential desire for belonging:

He’d scrutinized astronomical inscriptions on ancient Chinese oracle bones. He had written a brief study of the relationship between mathematics and fortune-telling (“techniques of destiny”) in early China. He’d toured the temple caves of the Northern Wei dynasty. He’d investigated China’s history and tried to analyze the language itself. He’d spent long periods of time in the land itself. From all of this he hoped to gain nothing more than a feudal sense of security. He did not pursue self-identification, a centralized response to one’s own distinctness, as much as community. [...] What he wanted from that microscopic China in his mind was some affirmation of the fact that he was not alone.³⁰

The catalogue of Wu’s activities—studying oracle bones, writing on the relationship between mathematics and fortune-telling, visiting Northern Wei cave temples, and analyzing the Chinese language—presents him as an interdisciplinary figure whose interests move fluidly across archaeology, linguistics, religion, and science. Notably, his work on “techniques of destiny” collapses the boundary between rational systems (mathematics) and divinatory practices (fortune-telling), further illustrating his tendency to merge epistemologies that are conventionally kept separate. However, a crucial shift is introduced subsequently: these scholarly pursuits are not driven by detached intellectual curiosity but by an affective need. Wu seeks “nothing more than a feudal sense of security,” a striking phrase that suggests a longing for hierarchy, rootedness, and stable social belonging. This desire contrasts with modern Western ideals of individuality and self-definition. This contrast is made explicit in the following sentence: Wu does not pursue “self-identification” or a “centralized response to one’s own distinctness,” but rather community. In this sense, his orientation toward China is not merely academic or cultural; it is existential and compensatory. The closing line—his wish for “some affirmation of the fact that he was not alone”—reveals the emotional core of his syncretism. Wu’s blending of science, mysticism, and cultural traditions is not simply intellectual play; it is a strategy for overcoming isolation. Overall, the paragraph portrays Wu as a figure whose syncretic thinking is inseparable from a deeper search

²⁹ DeLillo, *Ratner’s Star*, 313.

³⁰ DeLillo, *Ratner’s Star*, 356.

for community and existential reassurance, highlighting both the richness and the limitations of his engagement with “China.”

Moreover, the next passages offer one of the most complex and revealing portraits of Wu, foregrounding the limits and contradictions of his syncretic project, particularly as it intersects with identity, language, and cultural belonging.

Wu was engaged in a lifelong effort to become Chinese. His crossing between the spheres was becoming burdensome in many ways, with the result that what had been a tendency to examine and strengthen the Oriental aspects of his identity was now a demanding need and more. The cultural parts could not be equated; the languages were noninterlocking; the souls did not shine in each other’s light. These, it seemed, were the obstacles he faced. His own life then was a bitter contradiction of that dyadic principle of thought in which an element complements its opposite. State of being one. Singleness of purpose. Constancy and accord. Ironical that these intuitive Chinese objectives were precisely what he saw no hope of attaining in years that remained to him (relative youth notwithstanding). During his stays at one or another division of the Chinese Academy of Sciences he was never able to believe that his presence was any more than an *exchange* of some unspecifiable sort, a form of reciprocal scientific politeness in which a rather anonymous prehistorian from the West is allowed to stride casually in and out of the Institute of Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology, occasionally speaking the language to colleagues, who (as per terms of contract) answer him in elaborately meaningless phrases—this entire affair, down to the length of his stride, subject to duplication in a Western university (or some such) with a slightly Westernized Chinese scientist doing the striding and with English the language in question.

Vocal sounds in meaningful patterns.

The language itself, Chinese, was a deeply woven structure through which he tried to guide his intercultural assumptions. To become Chinese was to rethink oneself, to yield to alien verities. Whatever as in him of that nation and race had to be allowed to find its way to definitive expression. The vagueness of such an undertaking was precisely what made it seem impossible; the generalities that had to be exposed in layers; the set of personal characteristics that had to be restaged somehow; the primary source that had to be found; the embedded part of him that had to be read and understood: 本.

Wu, risking the well-ordered foolishness of the man who leads an overexamined life, was determined to resist the prospect of failure. At some accessible level of his being, the prevailing theme, he continued to believe, was simple unity. The single-cell mechanism of man in nature. The rote-prayer of centuries of science. To be only part Chinese was to be an

archery target for the honed ironies his own predicament had given precise dimensions to. His thinking led in nearly every direction to some outsized metaphor, *this* the object of his ironic perception, *that* the impediment to his personal research.³¹

The opening line—"Wu was engaged in a lifelong effort to become Chinese"—recasts what had earlier appeared as cultural affinity as something far more intense and burdensome. His movement "between the spheres" (Chinese/American, East/West) is no longer generative but exhausting. What was once a "tendency" has become a "demanding need," suggesting that syncretism has shifted from a productive mode of thinking into a kind of identity crisis. Then, the very principle that defines Wu's thinking—the reconciliation of opposites—is explicitly dismantled. The stark formulations—"the cultural parts could not be equated; the languages were noninterlocking; the souls did not shine in each other's light"—mark a decisive rupture. These parallel clauses emphasize incompatibility rather than synthesis, undermining the "sweet-and-sour" logic. This culminates in a crucial irony: "His own life then was a bitter contradiction of that dyadic principle." The philosophy of complementarity collapses when applied to lived experience. Wu's longing for unity—"state of being one," "singleness of purpose," "constancy and accord"—is framed as aligned with what he perceives to be "intuitive Chinese objectives." Yet these ideals are precisely what he cannot attain. While he idealizes "Chineseness" as coherent and unified, his own hybrid identity renders such unity impossible. Thus, "China" becomes less a real cultural entity and more an imagined site of wholeness, against which his own fragmentation is measured.

Meanwhile, a form of institutional and linguistic alienation emerges from the description of Wu's time in Chinese scientific institutions. His presence is reduced to a ritualized and performative exchange, "reciprocal scientific politeness," devoid of genuine intellectual or personal connection. The symmetry of the scenario—easily reversible with a Chinese scientist in the West—suggests a hollow internationalism, in which exchange does not produce mutual understanding or meaningful engagement but merely mirrors itself—in other words, an exchange for its own sake. Language also becomes a key barrier: despite his efforts, communication remains "elaborately meaningless." This reinforces the earlier claim that "languages were noninterlocking," positioning language not as a bridge but as a structural limit to syncretism. The third paragraph then turns inward, intensifying Wu's struggle. His effort "to become Chinese" now involves a radical process of self-reconstitution—to "rethink oneself" and "yield to alien verities." The invocation of "本" (root, origin, essence in Chinese) is especially significant. Notably, DeLillo's use of a Chinese character in the text recalls Dobson's deployment of "水" in "China's 20th-Century Ascendancy," discussed in the previous section. The word "root" signals a desire to locate an authentic core of identity. Yet this search is paradoxical. The process is described as vague, layered, and nearly impossible. Wu's pursuit of an

³¹ DeLillo, *Ratner's Star*, 392-93.

essential “本” thus becomes self-defeating.

Despite recognizing these obstacles, Wu “was determined to resist the prospect of failure.” This persistence reflects both intellectual commitment and existential desperation. He continues to believe in “simple unity,” invoking scientific imagery (“single-cell mechanism”) alongside quasi-religious repetition (“rote-prayer”), once again blending epistemologies. However, the final lines return to irony—To be “only part Chinese” makes him a target of irony, and his thinking produces “outsized metaphors” that ultimately impede his understanding. In other words, the very syncretic thinking that defines Wu also prevents him from resolving his predicament.

Overall, the excerpts above mark a turning point in Wu’s characterization. His earlier syncretism—playful, generative, and intellectually rich—is now revealed as untenable when applied to the identity issue. The reconciliation of opposites collapses into contradiction; cultural synthesis becomes alienation; and the search for unity exposes the impossibility of wholeness. Wu thus emerges as a deeply tragic figure: one who seeks connection across cultures but is ultimately suspended between them, unable to inhabit either fully.

In short, like missionaries in earlier centuries, Wu becomes a mediator of knowledge between East and West. His position as a Chinese American is crucial. He occupies an intermediate space between two worlds: ethnically and culturally linked to China, while professionally integrated into American scientific institutions. Throughout the fiction, he works within an international scientific project, interprets Chinese realities for American characters, and thus occupies a liminal position between cultures. A cultural intermediary within the story, Wu thus embodies a recurring theme of the changing political context of 1970s Sino-U.S. relations.

4. Conclusion

Taken together, DeLillo’s *Ratner’s Star* reveals a complex engagement with the cultural and political transformations of the 1970s, particularly the shifting dynamics of Sino-U.S. relations and the growing critique of Western centrism. Drawing on a wide range of contemporary news clippings—from archaeological discoveries in China to various Chinese cultural practices—DeLillo constructs a multilayered image of China that is at once historically grounded and imaginatively refracted. Through the character of Maurice Xavier Wu, these materials are transformed into a narrative exploration of syncretism. He embodies the convergence of disparate systems—science and mysticism, Chinese and American, East and West. Yet, as the novel progresses, this syncretic vision is increasingly destabilized. Wu’s effort to “become Chinese” exposes the limits of cultural interpretation: languages fail to fully connect, identities resist fusion, and institutional exchanges risk devolving into empty formalities. In this way, DeLillo exposes both the allure and the limitations of cross-cultural synthesis, suggesting that attempts to reconcile radically different systems of meaning may generate insight but also tend to produce misrecognition and distance, as reflected in the news

clippings he draws on. In this sense, Wu's predicament, suspended between cultures yet fully at home in neither, can be read as emblematic of a broader condition of intellectual and cultural dislocation in the context of Sino-U.S. rapprochement.

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Polyphonic Features in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*

Liying Wang

1. Introduction

God Help the Child (2015), Toni Morrison's eleventh and final novel, centers on a black-skinned girl named Bride, who struggles to free herself from childhood trauma. In the novel, the narrative point of view shifts frequently. The whole story is broken into fragments narrated by several characters from a first-person perspective rather than from an omniscient one. Divided into three parts, the novel comprises seventeen chapters, of which thirteen are titled after the characters and are narrated from their first-person perspectives. Every character, black or white, male or female, young or old, rich or poor, is endowed with the right to voice what he or she feels and thinks. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore Morrison's intention of endowing every character with an independent voice. Meanwhile, *God Help the Child* takes American society in the twenty-first century as the story background for the first time in Morrison's works. Unlike her previous novels, such as *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, which concentrate on African Americans' historical trauma caused by slavery or internalized racial discrimination, *God Help the Child* pays attention to social issues with more universality, including childhood trauma, child molestation, dysfunctional family relationships, and parenthood. Therefore, the shift of Morrison's attention and the way she expresses these new themes are also worthy of exploration.

In order to reveal Morrison's intention of endowing every character with a voice and the harmony between the form and theme in *God Help the Child*, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory on polyphonic novel is adopted in this paper. In exploring the polyphonic features reflected in the novel and revealing their cultural significance, this paper argues that *God Help the Child* shines a polyphonic feature in terms of the new authorial position and independent consciousnesses of protagonists, multi-voices, great dialogues, micro dialogues, and unfinalization. Specifically, Morrison places herself in a new authorial position in which she minimizes her absolute control over characters rather than staying in supremacy as a creator. The consciousnesses of protagonists remain independent and their multiple voices are preserved to sing together the theme of childhood trauma. Several great dialogues emerge among the author, the characters, and the audience. The protagonists' internal contradictions are presented in their micro dialogues. And the plot, characters, and ending of

the novel are unfinalized. These polyphonic features accentuate multi-voicedness, dialogicality, double-voicedness, and unfinalizability. Furthermore, this paper explores the cultural significance of these polyphonic features. To be specific, the polyphonic features in *God Help the Child* contribute to revealing the importance of utterance and dialogue as effective ways of healing trauma and reconstructing subjectivity; implying the necessity of introspection for one's self-development; highlighting the themes of universality about childhood trauma and love beyond the boundary of race, age, gender and class; indicating the transformation of African American identity toward a cosmopolitan citizen with the spirit of voluntarism, philanthropy and altruism; endowing the novel with the function of a cultural metaphor as patchwork quilt with its emphasis on pluralism, inclusiveness, and harmony between individuality and unity; and developing African oral tradition of storytelling by diversifying its participants, enriching its contents, and underlining call-and-response pattern. With polyphonic form, Morrison tactfully sheds light on the cultural implications of *God Help the Child*. Her integration of literary writing with social concerns endows the novel with artistic value and far-reaching significance.

2. Bakhtin's Theory on Polyphonic Novel

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), as a widely recognized Russian philosopher and literary critic, had a deep interest in the formation of the subject and in language as the “means in which ideologies get articulated.”¹ One of his contributions to literary criticism is his proposal of the notion of the polyphonic novel. Originating from the musical terminology, polyphony represents a musical form consisting of two or more lines of independent melody performed simultaneously. Opposed to polyphony, there are monophony—which includes only one single voice—and homophony, which is composed of one dominant melodic voice accompanied by chords. Polyphony distinguishes itself from monophony and homophony in that, within polyphony, each part maintains its independence in rhythm, stress, and tone while overlapping with one another and contributing to a harmonious integrity. In his classic work *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin originally introduced the idea of polyphony as a metaphor to elaborate on the novels of Dostoevsky in contrast with those of Tolstoy, and categorized novels into monologic ones and polyphonic ones. He highly appreciated Dostoevsky as the creator of the “fundamentally new”² novelistic genre—polyphonic novel—and considered its creation a great advance in “artistic thinking of humankind.”³

Novels of Tolstoy and most European writers, Bakhtin noticed, represent a monologic artistic world in which authors perform as the “absolute spirit” with “normative consciousness” and devote

¹ Mary Klages, *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2009), 135.

² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 7.

³ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 270.

themselves to accentuating a single unifying worldview.⁴ In these works, there would never emerge a “second autonomous”⁵ voice with equal value to the author's. The authors write about, make comments about, and draw conclusions about their characters whose voices are subordinated to the authors' “controlling purpose.”⁶ The utterances, psychological activities, and behaviors of these characters are all dominated by the authorial consciousness and explained from an omniscient point of view. However, contrary to monologic novels, Bakhtin held, Dostoevsky developed an original novelistic form featuring polyphonic. As he pointed out, a dialogical feeling “permeates”⁷ everywhere in Dostoevsky's novels, and the remarkable characteristic of his novels lies in the “plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices.”⁸ And Bakhtin provided a further illustration:

What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousness, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event.⁹

Rather than determine the plot and heroes' destinations according to his dominating will, Dostoevsky erases his authority from his heroes, giving them independent consciousnesses. Intentionally, he becomes a “witness”¹⁰ who only waits aside with curiosity to see what will happen next, and consequently, a “free play of different value systems”¹¹ is achieved. Moreover, a novel as a whole is constructed as a great dialogue in which Dostoevsky acts as an “organizer and participant”¹² instead of a judge. The protagonists are created with an ability to perceive the surroundings rather than as Dostoevsky's “voiceless slaves.”¹³ With their voices liberated, they remain independent and represent the subjects of their own opinions.

Furthermore, Bakhtin noticed that even in the soliloquies of Dostoevsky's heroes (for example, Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*), an “internal dialogization”¹⁴ can be sensed. This means that a hero's inner speech, although seemingly monologic, is in fact always filled with the voices of others. This is the way Dostoevsky prefers to present a hero's internal contradiction. Each individual

⁴ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 81.

⁵ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 56.

⁶ Raman Selden, et al., *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2004), 42.

⁷ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 265.

⁸ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 6.

⁹ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 6.

¹⁰ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 33.

¹¹ Raman Selden, et al., *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, 43.

¹² Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 72.

¹³ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 6.

¹⁴ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 237.

entering one's inner speech symbolizes certain viewpoints, positions, or solutions, and in debating with these voices, one tries to find an answer. Thus, this kind of soliloquy—which takes place within one's inner world and features polemic, conflicting, and dialogic—is defined as micro dialogue or double-voiced discourse.

In conclusion, a polyphonic novel refers to a novelistic genre in which, because of the absence of authorial domination, the protagonists are set free to have independent consciousnesses, and these consciousnesses—with equal value—co-exist and interact with one another. Bakhtin's ultimate pursuit—full recognition and participation in dialogue—is rather a “philosophical inquiry”¹⁵ into human life and nature than just a theoretical tool for literary criticism.

3. Polyphonic Features in *God Help the Child*

Based on the overview of the polyphonic novel, it is implied that the genre, with its advocacy of diversity, equality, dialogicality, openness, and inclusiveness as a unique advantage, can help reveal the relation between the form and motif of a novel. In this part, the polyphonic features reflected in *God Help the Child* will be analyzed from the perspectives of the new authorial position and independent consciousnesses of protagonists, multi-voices, great dialogues, micro dialogues, and unfinalization. These polyphonic features together accentuate multi-voicedness, dialogicality, double-voicedness, and unfinalizability.

3.1 The New Authorial Position and Independent Consciousnesses of Protagonists

Morrison endows *God Help the Child* with a polyphonic feature through placing herself in a new authorial position in which she minimizes her absolute control over characters instead of staying in supremacy as creator. To be sure, plots, circumstances, and protagonists come into being under the writer's creation. However, Morrison to her utmost elaborates the protagonists' subjectivity characteristics and maximizes their autonomy. Instead of objectively describing circumstances and making comments about these characters, she presents the plot within their fields of vision so that the circumstances, incidents, and objects seem all immersed in these characters' subjective feelings. The external world is exhibited in their “spirit and tone,”¹⁶ according to their own perceptions. Through subjectizing the plot, Morrison conceals herself from the novel, minimizes her authority, creates a subjective world for each character and provides them with their own initiatives to perceive the world and take actions. Consequently, the characters represent more the subjects of their own opinions than the objects of Morrison's artistic world. Dialogues among them function not only for characterization and story development, but more importantly for the expression of their self-consciousness. With independence and equal importance, these consciousnesses are parallel to and interact with one another.

¹⁵ Wayne Booth, Introduction to *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, by Mikhail Bakhtin, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxv.

¹⁶ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 99.

Moreover, Morrison refuses to regard herself as a sovereign and omnipotent creator and the characters as the submissive creations. Rather than a judge and an intervenor, she becomes a listener, bystander, and communicator, making no dictation on what they should do or any judgment about their behaviors. It is the characters who push forward the plot, rather than Morrison herself. It seems that the events are triggered by the consistent choices these characters have made rather than being developed according to Morrison's arrangement. She recovers the voices of the unheard and allows them to have their own right to represent themselves, take actions, and make decisions. For instance, the psychological activities, utterances, and behaviors of Bride, the heroine of *God Help the Child*, are freed from Morrison's domination and are explained from Bride's first-person point of view rather than from an omniscient one. For Morrison, Bride cannot be considered a substitute for Morrison herself, but another autonomous "I" whose independence and internal freedom are acknowledged as Morrison's. What matters shifts from how Bride appears in the fictitious world to how the fictitious world is perceived by Bride. Without her absolute control imposed over these characters, Morrison shows her unconditional respect for them and gives them equal importance. In addition, rather than directly giving definite solutions to problems, she leaves them to the characters to figure out. In the novel, the protagonists no longer serve as a "mouthpiece for [the author's] voice."¹⁷ Instead, they become the subjects of their own consciousness, acting and speaking according to their own will. They are endowed with the chance to become a "carrier of a fully valid word and not the mute, voiceless object of the author's words."¹⁸ They are created as heroes whose independence of consciousness and autonomy are affirmed by Morrison, and who primarily concentrate on their tasks of perceiving the world and obtaining knowledge about themselves and their surroundings. With voices liberated and autonomy affirmed by Morrison, these protagonists remain integrated and independent as persons in flesh with subjectivity and self-consciousness.

3.2 Multi-voices in the Novel

God Help the Child is polyphonic also for its free play of the multiple voices of characters. As Bakhtin pointed out, "a single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing. Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence."¹⁹ The ultimate aim of human beings' existence lies in endless dialogue and interaction with other consciousnesses. This requires a co-existence of various voices, emphasizing diversity and plurality rather than monotony. In *God Help the Child*, there are a variety of independent voices "singing variously on a single theme"²⁰—childhood trauma. The novel is composed of seventeen chapters, among which thirteen are titled after the protagonists' names and are narrated from a first-person perspective. Most of the incidents, such as Sweetness's tough treatment of Bride and Bride's false testimony against Sofia, are presented within several characters'

¹⁷ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 51.

¹⁸ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 63.

¹⁹ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 252.

²⁰ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 42.

fields of vision, revealing their own interpretations of a specific incident. The variety of viewpoints reflected on these protagonists is juxtaposed in the text, and how one of the characters feels and what he/she is thinking in a specific situation is revealed. Because of differences in class, race, gender and age, these protagonists' opinions on a specific incident differ from each other. However, despite the divergences, all of these voices are fully respected and given equal importance. These multiple voices interact with one another, assuring the presentation of a happening from different perspectives rather than from a single one.

As Bride's light-skinned mother, in her narration Sweetness expresses her ambivalent feelings for Lula Ann—her compromise to colorism and disgust for Lula Ann's dark skin accompanied by a harsh love and her pride in Lula Ann's success as a young African American woman. Sweetness has always been struggling in a dilemma where she is sensitive to the black skin of her daughter, while developing a harsh love for Lula Ann to protect her from getting hurt by the racially biased society. Meanwhile, influenced by deep-rooted colorism, although knowing it is not right, Sweetness has a hatred of Lula Ann's dark skin. Growing up in a society where colorism has permeated almost everywhere—sororities, neighborhoods, social clubs, churches, and even colored school—Sweetness acknowledges her feelings of envy towards her light-skinned family members. Her grandmother had often passed for white. Her mother would not be stopped from using white's toilets or trying on hats. Having seen the preferential treatment of her light-skinned family members, Sweetness begins to believe in privileges for skin color as the only way she can hold on to “a little dignity,”²¹ decency and a sense of superiority. With colorism carved in her mind, Sweetness cannot help but feel ashamed and disgusted since the moment she saw her newborn baby's midnight black skin. In the maternity ward, frustrated and embarrassed, Sweetness thought of abandoning the baby to an orphanage and even tried to suffocate it. She turned to bottle-feeding as soon as possible because having a “pickaninny”²² sucking her teat disgusted her. She cautiously avoids any potential touching of the Sudanese black skin, even when punishing. She even blamed Lula Ann's black skin for her broken marriage and her husband's leaving. However, on the other hand, as an inherent mother, Sweetness still felt hurt when noticing strangers frowning on Bride's blue-blackness and was determined to use her harsh love to protect her daughter from getting hurt by the racially biased society. As an abandoned African American mother, Sweetness knows well how hard it is to survive a society where colorism, racial injustice, bullying, harassment, and bigotry prevail. Knowing that making a living is never as easy as whites do, she always reminds herself that Lula Ann's skin color is “a cross she will always carry,”²³ and holds that the only way to help her blue-black-skinned daughter survive is to be tough, much tougher on her. Strict as she is, Sweetness never allows Lula Ann to call her Mama so that no unwarranted suspicion would arise. She always admonishes her that

²¹ Toni Morrison, *God Help the Child* (London: Vintage, 2015), 4.

²² Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 5.

²³ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 7.

obedience is the only survival choice. She warns her to always avoid white boys while crossing the street. Unlike ordinary mothers who educate their children in a tender way—loving and caring, hugs and kisses—Sweetness clings to a harsh love, “well-intended and necessary,”²⁴ even at the cost of the breakdown of the relationship with her daughter.

As that used-to-be Lula Ann, Bride conveys her thirst for love and care from her mother, guilt for her false testimony, and her absolute trust in Booker. Because of her blue-black skin, Lula Ann has felt abandoned and hated by her light-skinned parents since her childhood. She was treated like an enemy and abandoned by her father, who was firmly convinced that his wife must have fooled around with another man. She has never felt a tender touch from her mother, who always cautiously avoids any potential touching of her skin. She has even made mistakes on purpose, expecting to be punished by her mother's touch—a slap on her face or back. Moreover, she was allowed to call her mother only by “Sweetness” rather than by “mommy.” Growing up in a dysfunctional family, Lula Ann feels self-loathed and insecure and becomes extremely desperate for her mother's love. To please her mother, she committed false testimony in court, putting an innocent white woman Sofia in jail for child molestation. To Lula Ann's surprise, for the first time her mother smiled at her and even took her hand, giving her a momentary happiness. To conceal her self-loathing for her blue-black skin, escape from the nightmare-like childhood, and encourage herself to start a new life, Lula Ann changes her name to Bride. As a successful businesswoman with her own cosmetics brand, Bride encountered her best friend, a white girl named Brooklyn, who helps her run the company and is the only one she can trust “completely.”²⁵ A black man Booker is another person Bride came across and fell in love with soon afterwards. It seemed that there was a magic in him, attracting her to confide all her childhood secrets to him involuntarily. However, with Booker's sudden disappearance, Bride feels like she has returned to that abandoned, weak, and helpless Lula Ann and is confused and irritated by his word “You not the woman I want.”²⁶

Stuck in the misery of the murder of his brother Adam, in his narration Booker voices his cherishing of Adam, wrath for Adam's murder, complaints about the indifference of his family, condemnation of the racially biased society, sarcasm on campus life, and his affection for Bride. More than the oldest brother among the siblings, Adam was the one who seemed flawless in Booker's eyes, whose companion filled Booker's void inside and who entertained him with instructive humor. Booker can never forget the last time he saw Adam when he was skateboarding down the sidewalk in twilight, so energetic and adorable. However, following Adam's murder, Booker turned into a walking dead, who was irritated only by the racial profiling of the police. After receiving the plea for searching for Adam, the police immediately ransacked the Starberns' house to

²⁴ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 177.

²⁵ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 22.

²⁶ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 8.

see if the father had a police record, as though the anxious parents were suspicious and “at fault.”²⁷ The murderer had not been arrested until six years later. To everyone’s surprise, the serial killer turned out to be a retired auto mechanic living in the neighborhood while concealing his secrets of committing the sexually stimulated slaughter of six boys. Because his white skin was transparent and conveyed no specific message, even the police did not notice him—“the nicest man in the world,” easygoing, fastidious, and with a “welcoming, even attractive” smile.²⁸ Besides rage towards the racially biased society, Booker also felt disappointed by the indifference of his family. Seeing the family tolerating the fault of the police and gradually returning to its routine, Booker despaired of being the only one in the family who still could not forget Adam’s death, forgive the felony committed both by the murderer and the police, and move on to a painless life. Depressed enough, Booker regarded his campus life as boring and the curriculum about slavery and history as hypocritical. It was Bride—a blue-black lady in an all-white suit, whom he came across on the street—who saved him from cynicism, depression, and his obsession with Adam.

Sofia, the innocent white woman who was put in jail for Lula Ann’s false accusation of child molestation, tells her fifteen years of humiliation, obedience, isolation and endurance in *Decagon*, revealing her loneliness, helplessness, endurance, forgiveness of Bride’s fault, hatred of her strictly religious and aloof family, and her belated release from the direful past. Infamous for child molestation, Sofia was spat on even by other prisoners. Regarded as “the lowest of the low,”²⁹ she had suffered from torture during her fifteen years of imprisonment. Because of her sentence, Sofia had been abandoned by her family. She received only two letters of complaint from her husband. Her parents had never written, called, or paid a visit to her because as devout Christians, they would never admit a sinful criminal to be part of the family. On the first day of her parole, in the motel Sofia recognized Bride, who traced her and was offering financial aid, as the child who testified against her. At the moment she punched Bride’s face, Sofia felt refreshed, reborn and released. Finally, with the release of tears she was freed from the long years of grievance and hatred of Bride and her hypocritical family.

Rain, the green-eyed girl who saved Bride from a car accident and experienced childhood as tragic as Bride’s, shares with readers her reluctance to live with Evelyn and Steve, self-praise for her street life tips, loneliness, her favor and gratitude for Bride. Indocile as she was born to be, Rain fought back a man who regularly molested her and was kicked out of her home by her mother. As a girl who “wasted no time on self-pity,”³⁰ Rain started a street life with her smarts: finding out where public toilets were, escaping police, drunks, and drug dealers, and begging for food and money. Picked up by Evelyn and Steve, Rain felt reluctant living with them because although they were a

²⁷ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 114.

²⁸ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 118.

²⁹ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 66.

³⁰ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 103.

warmhearted couple sheltering her, they did not know how to soothe her pain and did not understand that what she really wanted was freedom and companionship. Rain had been clouded by childhood nightmares and loneliness until Bride came into her life. With Bride by her side, for the first time Rain felt companionship, comfort, echo and closeness. She was impressed by Bride's midnight black skin and toughness and was moved when Bride shielded her from danger without hesitation.

These multiple voices above make the diversification of the narrative point of view possible. Just like in real life, an event is usually experienced by more than one person simultaneously.³¹ For instance, Sweetness's maltreatment of Bride involves Sweetness as the agent and Bride as the patient, and Bride's false testimony against Sofia involves Bride as the injurer and Sofia as the victim. Thus, events in the novel are often unfolded from more than one point of view. Every protagonist, black or white, male or female, young or old, rich or poor, is enabled to voice their thoughts and feelings. Since at the end of the story no absolute conclusion is reached, the independence and value of each voice is preserved. Because of differences in class, race, gender and age, the standpoints of these protagonists on a specific incident diverge. Their multiple voices prevent the novel from "privileg[ing]"³² any of them and therefore ensure a fair presentation of a specific incident from various points of view. Therefore, these multiple voices can help readers shake off their preconceptions and enlighten them to perceive things from different perspectives. For example, some readers may condemn colorism for treating people unfairly based on the social meanings attached to skin color. However, Sweetness insists on some reasonability of colorism, arguing that light-skinned people like her need it for dignity. It is also improper to judge the way Sweetness raises a child. Some may blame Sweetness for being way too tough on Bride and bringing her unhealed pain. Nevertheless, Bride's transformation as an independent career woman lies in Sweetness's toughness, as her name indicates. Moreover, the question of victimhood is also worthy of discussion. Sweetness had maltreated Bride for her blue-blackness, but she was also a victim of colorism in her childhood. She may seem selfish for intimidating Bride into keeping silent on Mr. Leigh's child molestation, but she had to do it because if Bride reported to the police, they would lose their home. In addition, Bride used to be a helpless girl suffering from Sweetness's hatred and school bullying, but her silence about Mr. Leigh's child molestation brought a white boy lifelong sufferings and her false testimony made Sofia a scapegoat sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment. These characters show a complexity in their personalities—they were driven into a moral dilemma where they had to protect their own interests and struggled to make a living while being aware that sometimes they had to do it even at the cost of the happiness of others. This complexity makes it difficult for readers to define these characters or appraise their actions. Therefore, through their multiple voices, readers can approach a protagonist from different angles.

³¹ David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction: Illustrated from Classic and Modern Texts* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1993), 26.

³² Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, 26.

3.3 Great Dialogues in the Novel

As Bakhtin pointed out, with a dialogical feeling “permeat[ing]” everywhere, a polyphonic novel is “thoroughly dialogical.”³³ Various consciousnesses are always interwoven with each other. “To be means to communicate dialogically.”³⁴ The ultimate meaning of one’s existence lies in consistent dialogues with others. *God Help the Child* manifests a polyphonic feature in its great dialogues. According to Bakhtin, great dialogue includes not only the sentences and utterances within quotation marks in a novel, but also indicates a dialogic relationship “among external and internal parts and elements of [a] novel.”³⁵ The internal parts may refer to the text, plot, and protagonists of a novel, while the external elements may refer to the author, publisher, and readers. In *God Help the Child*, several great dialogues emerge among the author, characters, and audiences, together contributing to a dialogicality.

3.3.1 Great Dialogue between the Author and the Protagonists

As Bakhtin pointed out, in a polyphonic novel the author acts as an “organizer and participant”³⁶ in the great dialogue with heroes. In *God Help the Child*, Morrison initiates and participates in the great dialogue with protagonists as an organizer. As the host, she invites her characters to join the discussion she has initiated. She selects the topic for discussion and ensures that every character enjoys equal opportunity for voicing their opinions. She provides a platform for equal dialogues among the protagonists. In addition, as a neutral bystander and listener, Morrison neither intervenes in the communication, comments on the characters’ viewpoints, nor commands them to act. Instead, she merely listens to what they say and witnesses what happens. Rather than a judge or dominator, she only ensures that the discussion goes smoothly and draws no conclusion about the characters. Moreover, as a recorder without omnipotence, she is unable to provide all the detailed information about the characters. Instead, she can only record what they feel willing to confide. For instance, there is some information missing in the novel—how Rain views her mother, what Booker thinks of Sweetness, and how Booker’s family felt after his leave. These details are omitted because the mentioned protagonists are either not ready to confide yet or not intended to. Under Morrison’s arrangement, they participate in the dialogue and express their thoughts in turn.

3.3.2 Great Dialogue between the Protagonists and Audiences

The great dialogue between the protagonists and audiences is achieved through Morrison’s adoption of the first-person narrative and frequent shifts of the narrative point of view. Thanks to the two techniques, audiences are provided with the chance to get close to and interact with more than one character.

Because the whole story is narrated by more than one protagonist in first person, readers can

³³ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 265.

³⁴ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 252.

³⁵ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 40.

³⁶ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 72.

observe their psychological processes in various circumstances and understand how they view a specific incident. For example, readers can catch a glimpse of Bride's thoughts and feelings after Booker disappeared suddenly. Her mind has been occupied with his last words, "You not the woman I want."³⁷ She was too confused to figure out why he said it. All day long, she recalled their sweet love episodes and tried to find a clue in them. She was so anxious and desperate that only cursing him and shaving her face with the razor he left could soothe her. Not in the mood for business, she asked Brooklyn to take over her cosmetics company temporarily. Feeling herself almost at the edge of insanity, she finally set out toward his hometown and got herself prepared for any potential consequences this may entail.

Among the various narrations of the protagonists, Sweetness's is the most representative one that highlights the dialogic relationship between the narrator and the audience. In her storytelling, Sweetness prefers to address readers directly as "you" so that an invisible gap between them is eliminated. When explaining her hatred of Bride's black skin, she argues that "It's not my fault. So you can't blame me."³⁸ When confiding the reason for being tough on Bride, she persuades her audiences that "But you have to understand: I had to protect her."³⁹ Feeling an estrangement from Bride, with regret she admits that "Yes, I was tough on her. You bet I was."⁴⁰ Seeing Bride as a successful career woman, she expresses her ecstasy to readers, cheering, "Can you beat it?"⁴¹ At the end of the novel, she admonishes readers that "You are about to find out what it takes... when you are a parent."⁴² Addressed as "you" by Sweetness directly and frequently, readers may actually feel involved in a real dialogue with her during the reading. They may be touched by her confession, admire her courage, strength and wisdom as an African American mother, be impacted by her emotions, forgive her for her seemingly selfish choices, show sympathy for her, empathize with her ambivalence, express their approval or disapproval for her actions, and even feel convinced or suddenly awakened by her viewpoints. Meanwhile, as an individual with autonomy rather than a subordinated character, Sweetness expects readers to listen to her with patience, supposes what responses readers may make to her and accordingly adjusts her utterances, looks forward to readers' understanding, and even makes compromises and provides earnest advice for readers' good.

3.3.3 Great Dialogue between the Author and Audiences

Besides the two great dialogues mentioned above, the great dialogue between the author and readers is indicated in the dedication of *God Help the Child*. In the preface of the novel, Morrison notes "For You," implying this book is dedicated to anyone who might have an interest. As the author, she communicates with readers through the novel and implicitly expresses her concerns for

³⁷ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 8.

³⁸ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 3.

³⁹ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 41.

⁴⁰ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 178.

⁴¹ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 178.

⁴² Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 178.

social issues such as childhood trauma, dysfunctional family relationships, and child molestation. The novel as a whole represents her call to audiences, inviting them to respond to it. Meanwhile, as a response to Morrison's calling, readers may reconsider their estimations of the protagonists and begin to pay attention to these contemporary social issues. Without the authorial supremacy imposed on, instead of being forced to accept Morrison's sole interpretation of the novel, audiences are welcomed to comprehend it from various angles. During the bidirectional interaction, an equally dialogic relationship is established between Morrison and readers.

3.3.4 Great Dialogues among the Protagonists

The protagonists of *God Help the Child* are always in continuous dialogue with one another. Their interactions with others enable them to reknow themselves and recover from childhood trauma. Bride gains confidence in her blue-black skin after consultation with stylist Jeri. For a long time, she always felt herself defined by Sweetness's revulsion against her blue-blackness and used to be a vulnerable girl imprisoned in deep self-contempt and abhorring her Sudanese blackness as a curse. However, Bride gets to reknow herself after consultation with Jeri. The stylist offers her bold advice that neither makeup nor jewelry is necessary for her, and she should wear "only white and all white all the time"⁴³ so that her midnight-like blackness can be highlighted. Bride takes his advice and it makes a difference. Gorgeous like a "panther in snow,"⁴⁴ bathed in passersby's adoring and admiring looks, she distinguishes herself from women of other skin colors. She has been promoted as regional manager soon, and her own cosmetics brand YOU, GIRL rockets to a hit. Independent economically and psychologically, Bride feels reborn with self-esteem. Rather than a cross, now she considers her blackness a unique strength and makes the best use of it.

Booker feels comfort and relief from sorrow after having a heart-to-heart talk with his aunt Queen. Stuck in the misery of Adam's murder, Booker felt not only overcome with grief for losing his brother, but also an irrepressible wrath for the police's inaction. Moreover, seeing the Starberns conniving with the police and returning to their routines while the criminal remained unpunished, Booker was overwhelmed by disappointment and despair. By Queen's words of comfort, Booker's grief, rage and depression were soothed, and his conviction of never bidding farewell to Adam was reinforced. Moreover, after Booker's quarrel with Bride, Queen confronts him with the truth he has been afraid of admitting—he has hung on to Adam over the years only because he needs a "noble reason to fail" and a deep one to "feel superior."⁴⁵ He lets Adam's murder run his mind merely to find himself some excuses for his failure and escaping from bitter reality. He also realizes that he has been a coward with insolence who fears taking risks and merely gets accustomed to condemning the shortcomings of others. Queen also suggests to Booker that it is time to let go of Adam and to seize the opportunity for happiness. Awakened by her sincere admonishment, Booker stops blaming

⁴³ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 33.

⁴⁴ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 34.

⁴⁵ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 156.

everyone except himself, makes up his mind to let go of Adam, and obtains the courage to move on to a new life free of pain.

Bride feels her conscience soothed while Sofia releases herself from the direful past after their conversation and fight. Desperate for Sweetness's love, Bride committed false testimony in court, making the white woman Sofia a scapegoat in jail for child molestation. Since then, although seemingly carefree and successful, Bride has been living with guilt. Sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment in Decagon, Sofia has been abandoned by her aloof family and has pulled through prison life of torture, humiliation, isolation and endurance. On the first day of Sofia's parole, Bride followed her to the motel and tried to confess and compensate for her loss. Their conversation was interrupted by Sofia's fists with anger once she recognized Bride. Beaten by Sofia almost to death, Bride ran away with Sofia's forgiveness and a relief from guilt. Meanwhile, at the moment she punched Bride's face, Sofia had forgiven Bride's misdeed. With the release of tears she felt reborn and freed from fifteen years of grievance and hatred.

Both Bride and Rain feel a sheer companionship, comfort, echo and closeness from their communication. Seemingly carefree and innocent, Rain has been bearing alone the horrible memory of her childhood. The memory is so painful that she has concealed them even from Evelyn and Steve, the warmhearted couple who saved her from hunger, street violence and homelessness. Although the couple provides her with food and safety, Rain still feels a distance from them and is reluctant to let them into her inner world. However, she feels a magic in Bride with whom by her side, she tends to confide all her secrets to her "black lady"⁴⁶ so easily and spontaneously. Meanwhile, when listening to Rain talking about the episodes of her past, Bride finds to her surprise that she and the emerald-eyed girl share many commonalities. Neither of them has felt solicitude and love from their mothers. They have been hurt by adults, isolated from peers, and clouded by loneliness and helplessness. But they toughen themselves to overcome all the difficulties. During communication, for the first time their unspoken pain has been soothed and their loneliness dispersed. They feel an echo in their similar childhood experiences and can understand each other through telepathy.

These great dialogues among protagonists contribute to characterization. For instance, Bride's ever-changing personality can be perceived from her interactions with others. In her childhood, Lula Ann's committing false testimony against Sofia implies that she was so desperate for Sweetness's love and lacked the courage to confront herself with Mr. Leigh. She is characterized as a black-skinned girl, vulnerable and consumed by a strong self-loathing. However, in early adulthood, Bride's recognition of her blue-blackness as her pride and strength implies that she has turned into a tough and self-confident career woman. Although her temporary panic about Booker's unexplained leaving suggests that she still suffers from insecurity, Bride has become mature enough to handle the crisis. Her decision to find out his reason for leaving indicates that she has become courageous

⁴⁶ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 104.

enough to take risks.

3.4 Micro Dialogues in the Novel

The polyphonic feature in *God Help the Child* is indicated not only in great dialogues but also in micro dialogues. Bakhtin pointed out that a dialogic relationship can “permeate inside the utterance, even inside the individual word, as long as two voices collide within it dialogically.”⁴⁷ Micro dialogue refers to an internal dialogue with other consciousnesses that occurs within a protagonist’s mind. A character allows consciousnesses of others to enter his mind and inwardly debates with these voices. These thoughts and feelings are polemic, complementary, self-contradictory, and dialogic in nature, presenting a double-voicedness.

In Sweetness’s consciousness, she has always been arguing with the voices of imagined listeners and Bride. When telling her story, she tends to predict what listeners would respond to her and tries to convince them of her rightness. When it comes to her way of parenting, imagining listeners may condemn her for being way too tough on Bride, she admits that she was tough on her daughter while trying to persuade listeners to believe that she is not a bad mother and to understand her good intention of doing some hurtful things to her child. Besides the voices of imaginary listeners, Sweetness also debates with the imagined voice of Bride. Having learned of Bride’s pregnancy from the note she sent, Sweetness sinks into an internal dialogue with Bride. She praises her pregnancy as a “good move,”⁴⁸ assuming that Bride might take mothering as something easy. She warns Bride that raising a baby is more than lullaby-singing and diapering. Moreover, Sweetness has always swung between regret and self-consolation. Immersed in the memory of the past, she feels struck by remorse for her maltreatment of Bride. However, the feeling of repentance is too intense to bear, so she dashes off the painful memory and finds herself excuses to comfort her conscience. She feels soothed by reaffirming in her mind that being tough on Bride is necessary and well-intended, since this has helped her pull through difficulties and contributed to her success as an African American career woman.

As that used-to-be Lula Ann, although seemingly having escaped from the painful past, Bride has still been stuck in a self-contradiction in which she debates with the voices of imagined Lula Ann, Sweetness and Booker, and swings between self-esteem and self-loathing. Since she changed her name to “Bride” and took the stylist’s advice of wearing white all the time, Bride has felt a great change in people’s attitudes toward her blue-blackness. Back in her childhood, she always sensed a revulsion at her blackness, not only from neighbors but also from her mother. She had been bullied by classmates who imitated zoo monkeys in front of her and heaped a bunch of bananas on her desk. But now she has been bathed in passersby’s adoring and admiring looks. It is more a “glory”⁴⁹ than payback for her to see those tormentors drooling with envy. Her elegant blackness sells so well and

⁴⁷ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 184.

⁴⁸ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 178.

⁴⁹ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 57.

people have to pay for it. With her blackness becoming the hottest commodity, she got a quick promotion to the regional manager. So proud of her success, Bride sometimes has an inner conversation with imagined Lula Ann, asking her with ecstasy if she would have known she can be this popular and successful. With her cosmetics brand YOU, GIRL rocketing to a hit, Bride frees herself from the miserable past and feels reborn with self-confidence. However, deep inside herself Bride still remains as that self-contemptuous Lula Ann who was defined by Sweetness's disgust. Any unintentional word may trigger her fear of returning to that vulnerable child and break apart the vanity on which her self-confidence is built. After the sudden and unexplained breakup with Booker, Bride's mind has been occupied with his last words. Too confused to figure out why he said so, all day long she lets these words hover in her mind, guessing if she is not pretty enough, if she has done things he does not approve of, or if she does not have thoughts of her own. Booker's leaving brings Bride a feeling of returning to that abandoned and helpless Lula Ann, smashes her self-confidence and confirms again the lessons Sweetness has carved in her mind—the shallowness of the beauty of her blue-blackness and her cowardice. Only after she confesses her misdeed on Sofia does Bride feel strong and reborn, shake off the shackles of the past, and gain real self-esteem.

Thanks to these micro dialogues, readers can have the opportunity to monitor the protagonists' inner worlds, get familiar with their dispositions, and witness their self-growth. Rather than by being told about these characters, readers become acquainted with them by engaging in their “most intimate thoughts,” which are represented as “silent, spontaneous [and] unceasing streams of consciousness.”⁵⁰ For example, from Bride's internal dialogue readers can catch a glimpse of her thoughts and feelings after Booker's unexplained leaving. Her sadness, confusion, anxiety, anger, sense of betrayal, and suspicion are all exposed to readers without holding back. Her micro dialogue brings readers a feeling that they are “wearing earphones plugged into [her] brain.”⁵¹

3.5 Unfinalization in the Novel

Furthermore, the polyphonic feature in *God Help the Child* is also manifested in the unfinalization of the plot, protagonists and the ending. The “dialogic openness,”⁵² or the continuity of the dialogue, leads to unfinalizability in the polyphonic novel. Bakhtin pointed out that the polyphonic novel is unfinalizable in nature because of the “potential endlessness”⁵³ of dialogue. The genre, also a carrier of dialogues with “eternity,”⁵⁴ would lose its ultimate meaning once the dialogue comes to an end. The dialogue is neither for a closed completeness nor for one consciousness overwhelming the others, but for the co-existence of and consistent interaction among

⁵⁰ Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, 47.

⁵¹ Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, 47.

⁵² Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 272.

⁵³ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 252.

⁵⁴ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 252.

various value systems. It should, and would, never, “reach its ultimate aim or conclusion.”⁵⁵ It is not difficult to sense an indeterminacy permeating *God Help the Child*—the plot, protagonists and ending are finalized incomplete, leaving readers room for imagination and discussion.

3.5.1 Unfinalization of the Plot

The unfinalization of the plot of *God Help the Child* is embodied in the non-linear and fragmentary narration. Instead of being narrated in a chronological order, the series of events is presented in a non-linear narrative structure. The whole plot jumps between the past and the present, forward and backward, while the causes and effects of some incidents of each chapter remain unexplained. For instance, at the beginning of the novel a number of events are described in disorder—Sweetness had been tough on her blue-black skinned daughter; after quarrels Booker breaks up with Bride and disappears suddenly; Bride pays a visit to Sofia who has been sentenced to fifteen years’ imprisonment; in the motel Sofia beats up Bride almost to death; in her childhood Bride gave testimony against Sofia in court; irritated and hurt as she is, Bride starts her journey alone to find Booker. However, the causes of these events remain unclear until the plot reaches the middle.

As a result of the unfinalized plot, with the story developing, more and more questions and mysteries arise, accumulate and remain unanswered. These unsolved riddles not only mask the novel with an atmosphere of suspense but also arouse readers’ curiosity and bring them epiphany. During the reading, readers may gradually feel curious about why these characters behave in certain ways and about what happened and what will happen next. Driven by curiosity, readers may become active in finding out clues hidden between the lines to untie these puzzles. Moreover, at the end of the novel, Bride’s confession of her false testimony against Sofia and Booker’s confession of his obsession with Adam move the story forward to a climax. With truth uncovered at the last moment, readers may feel an unexpected impact from the heartbreaking truth and obtain an epiphany about the lifelong influence of childhood trauma on a person.

In addition, this non-linear and fragmentary narration also helps improve readers’ concentration on the text and motivates their initiative in participatory reading. Because the plot is developed in a non-linear narrative structure and the whole story is broken into fragments, it is difficult for readers to catch an overview of what is going on at first glance. It requires more attention than usual to focus on the text, or readers can feel lost in the next second. Meanwhile, the unfinalized plot arouses readers’ initiatives in the participatory reading. For example, when reading a novel narrated in chronological order and from an omniscient point of view, readers are no more than bystanders witnessing things happen. Contrarily, the time shift in *God Help the Child* arouses a number of questions and encourages readers to “make connections of causality between widely

⁵⁵ Zou Guangsheng, *Ziwo yu tazhe: Wenxue de duihua lilun yu zhongxi wenlun duihua yanjiu* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2009), 55.

separated events.”⁵⁶ Driven by curiosity, readers may show enthusiasm for collecting pieces of events dispersed everywhere, piecing together these fragmentary incidents to make sense, reconstructing the panorama of the whole story from these fragments, and unveiling the truth. With initiatives motivated, readers may feel delighted in the participatory reading, and their understanding of the novel may be deepened.

3.5.2 Unfinalization of the Protagonists

The protagonists in *God Help the Child* indicate a unfinalizability in the sense that as individuals with autonomy and self-consciousness, they will continue to change in the consistent dialogue with the consciousnesses of others. As Bakhtin emphasized, one never “coincides with”⁵⁷ oneself and thus it is impossible to apply to him the formula of identity $A=A$. Under the influence of the others’ voices, a character’s value system, identity, self-recognition and personality tend to change all the time, presenting a dynamic development rather than remaining static. As Bakhtin pointed out, the protagonists in a polyphonic novel always “sense their inner unfinalizability [and] capacity to outgrow.”⁵⁸ So long as an individual is alive, he is always aware that he is not “yet finalized, that he has not yet uttered his ultimate word.”⁵⁹ In *God Help the Child*, for example, Bride’s self-consciousness, identity and disposition have always been in change, and her self-recognition has always been altered in her interactions with others. In her childhood, Bride used to be a dark-skinned girl who had been stuck in deep self-loathing and self-contempt and took her Sudanese blackness as a curse. However, things have changed following her early adulthood. After taking the stylist’s advice of wearing only white, she turns into a career woman, strong, courageous, popular, successful and confident. Having become economically and psychologically independent, Bride starts a new life and feels reborn with self-esteem. Instead of a sin, she regards her blackness as an advantage and makes the best use of it. At the end of the story, Bride tells Booker that she is pregnant. With a new identity as a mother, Bride may confront new challenges, and her understanding of motherhood may change as well. Therefore, her thoughts, self-recognition, identity and personality are unfinalizable in nature.

3.5.3 Open-endedness of the Novel

Lastly, the unfinalizability of *God Help the Child* is also implicated in its open-endedness. Because the dialogue among various consciousnesses continues on endlessly, these voices will remain diverse and no voice will unify or dominate the others into a single one. Therefore, a polyphonic novel will never be concluded with a clear ending and it can only remain unfinalized. In *God Help the Child*, the ending is arranged as open-ended. At the end of the story, it is implied that the dialogues among the protagonists will continue to emerge. Bride and Booker get reconciled.

⁵⁶ Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, 75.

⁵⁷ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 59.

⁵⁸ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 59.

⁵⁹ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 59.

With surprise Bride tells Booker about her pregnancy. She also sends a note about this good news to Sweetness. The couple feel excited for becoming parents and look forward to the new life with their beloved baby. Since they had both suffered from childhood trauma, Bride and Booker may pay close attention to how to raise their child and to protect him or her from potential dangers. Moreover, since Bride has written to Sweetness, there is a chance that Bride may write to her again even and they may even get reconciled when Bride experiences firsthand how hard it is to be a mother. Meanwhile, as a business woman, Bride may need to take over again her cosmetics company and busy herself with formulating marketing strategies with Brooklyn. Meanwhile, other characters such as Sweetness, Sofia, Brooklyn, Evelyn, Steve and Rain will continue their lives as well. So long as they are alive, they will move forward with their dialogues and thus their life stories will remain unfinished. The unclosed ending suggests that although the novel comes to the end, the life stories of these protagonists will continue. This non-resolution gives birth to a “sense of life going on into an uncertain future,”⁶⁰ enables the story to keep its dynamic development rather than remaining finished, and leaves considerable room for free imagination.

4. Cultural Implications of the Polyphonic Features in *God Help the Child*

The social background against which the polyphonic novel came into being endows this novelistic form with certain social significance. Living in Russian society—which was overwhelmed by the intense conflicts arising from the development of early capitalism—Dostoevsky observed and captured the voices of different social classes. Since the contradictory nature of Russian society could no longer be fully expressed in a monologic literary form, Dostoevsky innovated the polyphonic form, within which he presented varied viewpoints of social classes. In his novels featuring polyphony, he included voices “loud” and “reigning” as well as those “still weak” but about to “ripen.”⁶¹ Thus, Dostoevsky’s polyphonic artistic world is considered the “purest and most authentic expression of the spirit of capitalism.”⁶² In this sense, *God Help the Child*, as a polyphonic novel, also bears certain social and cultural significance.

4.1 Healing Trauma and Reconstructing Subjectivity

The great dialogues among characters in *God Help the Child* reveal the importance of utterance and dialogue as effective ways of healing trauma and reconstructing subjectivity. Having suffered from unspoken pains caused by racism, colorism, and child molestation, almost every protagonist has been living under the shadow of childhood trauma. For example, although seemingly too merciless on Bride, Sweetness herself had been a victim of colorism as well. As for Brooklyn and Rain, one has toughened herself to get rid of the horrible memory of being molested by her uncle, and the other was regularly molested and had no choice but to start a life on the street.

⁶⁰ Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, 224.

⁶¹ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 90.

⁶² Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 19.

However, it is through dialogues with others that their hidden sufferings are healed. During conversations with others, out of spontaneity they gradually feel willing to reveal what happened to them and how they are feeling. They recall joys and sorrows of the past, regaining the courage to confront themselves with truths they used to escape from. This enables them to free themselves from the pains of the past in a real sense.

Moreover, the multi-voices of these characters imply that utterance and dialogue are not only effective in healing trauma, but also in recovering the voices of the unheard and reconstructing their subjectivity. The protagonists had been marginalized because of various factors such as race, age, class and gender. Living at the bottom of American society, they had been deprived of their own voices and forced to remain silent on the mistreatment, injustice and unfairness. For example, under Sweetness's intimidation, Bride kept silent on the landlord Mr. Leigh's child molestation because if she reported to the police, they would lose their home. No attention had been paid to the voices of the vulnerable, and gradually they had lost themselves in the society where racism and colorism prevailed. However, regardless of race, class, age and gender, Morrison's adoption of the multi-voices recovers the voices of these marginalized characters. With once unheard voices regained, they walk out of long silence, hold together, voicing the mistreatment they had received in their childhood and speaking out their denunciation of the racially biased society. In doing so, they have themselves reconstructed and subjectivity claimed.

4.2 Implying the Necessity of Introspection

In addition, the micro dialogues in *God Help the Child* imply the necessity of introspection for one's self-development. Introspection refers to a careful examination of one's own thoughts, feelings, and reasons for behaving in a particular way. In the novel, the process of introspection is conducted in the characters' micro dialogues. Every protagonist is involved in fierce internal arguments with others' viewpoints. Having taken in these external voices, the characters place themselves in a dilemma where their consciousnesses are interwoven with and influenced by them. As a result, they reflect on themselves, examine what they have done, revise their opinions about certain incidents, and renew their self-recognition. For example, after inward dialogues Bride tears off the label of Lula Ann and makes up her mind to bid farewell to the past. Through introspection she comes to realize that all the time she still lets others define who she is, although pretending to be a confident and independent woman, and that the only way to get rid of the past and gain the real self-esteem is to confess her misdeed on Sofia. Similarly, Booker sinks into an introspection in which he obtains the courage to face his cowardice and resolves to let go of Adam's death. Therefore, through these micro dialogues it is indicated that introspection is indispensable for one's self-development.

4.3 Highlighting the Themes of Universality

The multi-voices of the protagonists in *God Help the Child* contribute to highlighting the motifs of universality, which is about childhood trauma and love beyond the boundary of race, age,

gender and class. As Bakhtin remarked, the purpose of the author who adopts a polyphonic form must fall on the “passing of a theme through various voices.”⁶³ With the American society in the twenty-first century as the story background, Morrison shifts her focus from African Americans’ historical trauma caused by slavery, racism, or internalized racial discrimination to childhood trauma, a social issue with more universality. With childhood trauma as the theme of the novel, Morrison presents its lifelong influence on a person through the multiple voices of the protagonists who come from different ethnic groups, underlining that childhood trauma has become an interracial problem in contemporary American society and therefore requires sympathy as well as urgent attention from the public. She also explores the roots of childhood trauma, including racial discrimination, colorism, child molestation, and dysfunctional family relationships.

In addition to childhood trauma, universal love is also at the center of the novel. Through interactions with others, a borderless love has been cultivated among the protagonists. For instance, Bride has established a friendship and absolute trust with Brooklyn regardless of their race. It is Evelyn and Steve, the white couple, who soothed Bride’s fear and saved her from a car accident. Without any hesitation, Bride protects the green-eyed Rain from birdshot. Through the multiple voices of these characters, it is highlighted that only love can be the cure for childhood trauma and prevent innocent children from tragedies. Moreover, these multiple voices also play a crucial role in calling forth readers’ sense of civic responsibility and calling upon them to pay attention to the contemporary social issues mentioned, to show their concerns for the marginalized minorities, and to develop a universal love that transcends the boundary of race, class, gender and age.

4.4 Indicating the Transformation of African American Identity

The great dialogues among, and unfinalization of, the protagonists in *God Help the Child* indicate that in the twenty-first century, African American identity tends to transform toward a cosmopolitan citizen with a spirit of voluntarism, philanthropy and altruism. In the novel, the unfinalization of the characters makes it possible for them to search for a new identity rather than remain fixed. As individuals with autonomy and self-consciousness, they continue to change in consistent dialogues with others. Accordingly, their value systems, viewpoints, personalities and identities change, and their self-recognition is renewed. Therefore, the self-identities of characters in *God Help the Child* demonstrate a dynamic development rather than remaining static.

The concept of cosmopolitanism was first proposed by Diogenes, one of the representative figures of ancient Greek cynicism. He held that regardless of political affiliation, all human beings belong to a “single community based on a shared morality,”⁶⁴ and that a person who adheres to this so-called cosmopolitanism can be regarded as a cosmopolitan. As the systematic development of Diogenes’s cosmopolitanism, the Stoics perceived the idea of cosmopolitan citizen from a

⁶³ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 265.

⁶⁴ Hu Zeyuan, *Cong minzu zhuyi zouxiang Shijie zhuyi: Duowei shiye xia de yezhi yanjiu* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2016), 192.

philosophic perspective and encouraged people to “take human rights as an issue beyond the boundary of nations.”⁶⁵ Because of its emphasis on universal human morality and virtue such as justice, fairness, democracy, freedom and humanity, the Stoics cosmopolitanism attaches less importance to nationality, religion, history, race and gender, and is also known as moral cosmopolitanism. Following the Stoic approach, this paper explores the transformation of African American identity toward a cosmopolitan citizen in *God Help the Child* in a moral sense. With its stress on “universal personhood”⁶⁶ instead of national belonging, the core idea of moral cosmopolitanism is that every human being deserves equal humanity care regardless of their nationality. For moral cosmopolitanism, the ultimate unit of its moral concern falls first on a person instead of on ancestry, tribe, religious community, or nationality. Every human being alive, rather than some privileged groups such as men, aristocrats, or WASP, shall enjoy an “equal position of moral caring,”⁶⁷ which should be valid on a global scale and no discriminatory practice should intervene even if nationality or any other factors change.

In *God Help the Child*, great dialogues among the protagonists contribute to awakening their cosmopolitan consciousness. Every character had been through a painful childhood. It is through the interactions with one another that these protagonists realize that they are not the only one who had suffered from the miserable childhood. The shared experiences of childhood trauma bring them a sense of companionship and connection to others, and the collective memory about it turns into the “civic bond”⁶⁸ among them. During conversations they gradually learn to empathize with and even show sympathy for others with different skin colors and from different social groups. For instance, although Bride is a rich African American woman and Rain is an emerald-eyed girl with a “bone-white”⁶⁹ face who lives at the bottom of the society, from their interactions both of them feel a sheer companionship, comfort, echo and closeness. Although he cannot forgive the inaction of the racially biased police, Booker does not transfer his hatred to whoever is white. He still feels pity for a white boy molested by Mr. Leigh and even admonishes Bride that she should have reported his nastiness to the police so that the boy would be rescued. Clearly, these protagonists not only care about themselves, but also tend to express their concern for persons of ethnic groups different from theirs and begin to pay attention to contemporary social issues such as colorism, child molestation, and dysfunctional family relationships. Meanwhile, they have learned to rethink their civic responsibility, pondering over what efforts they can make as capable adults to protect innocent

⁶⁵ Song Qiang, *Shijie gongmin jiaoyu sichao yanjiu* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2018), 58.

⁶⁶ Keith Faulks, *Citizenship*, trans. Guo Zhonghua (Changchun: Jilin chubanshe, 2009), 115.

⁶⁷ Gillian Brock, *Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Account*, trans. Wang Bo, and Ding Yi (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 2014), 12.

⁶⁸ Zhang Cuimei, *Gongmin shenfen rentong yanjiu* (Beijing: Zhongguo zhengfa daxue chubanshe, 2013), 44.

⁶⁹ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 83.

children from dangers and hurts. Knowing that they are parents now, Bride and Booker feel a sense of responsibility emerging from inside, which urges them to take the happiness of others into consideration and to create a safer and healthier environment for the growth not only of their own baby but also of children of all ethnic groups. As social members with conscience, they reach a consensus that it is their urgent obligation to eliminate any kind of discrimination based on race, gender or class so that an “error-free” social circumstance can be guaranteed where children are free of threats of “kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing and abandonment.”⁷⁰ Therefore, these protagonists can be considered cosmopolitan citizens in respects of their spontaneous willingness to care about and promote the happiness of others, namely their “voluntarism, philanthropy and altruism.”⁷¹ Inspired by the dialogues with one another, these characters show a tendency to identify themselves with cosmopolitan citizens who view the human rights of others as important as theirs, pay attention to the sustainable development of human beings as a whole, recognize the primacy of public interest over their own, feel willing and morally obligated to devote themselves to the welfare not only of African Americans but also of people from all social groups, share the civic responsibility for creating a safer and healthier environment for children’s growth, and cultivate a universal love that is based upon mutual respect and transcends the boundary of race, gender, age and class.

4.5 Endowing the Novel with Function of Cultural Metaphor as Patchwork Quilt

Furthermore, the unfinalization of the plot and the multi-voices in *God Help the Child* endow the novel with the function of a cultural metaphor as patchwork quilt with its emphasis on pluralism, inclusiveness and harmony between individuality and unity. The unfinalization of the plot is achieved in fragmentary narrations. These narrative fragments voiced by the protagonists from different ethnic groups can be compared to the pieces of fabrics of a quilt. Developing along childhood trauma as the main tone, these narrative fragments are integrated into a unity and together compose the novel itself. Therefore, the process of narrating can be regarded as the quilting and the novel itself as a complete patchwork quilt.

Originally, the patchwork quilt is a warm-keeping bedcover composed of remnants of fabric in different textures, shapes, colors and sizes. It takes several steps to make a patchwork quilt—collecting some leftover pieces of fabric, cutting them into scraps, selecting from the scraps, sewing these miscellaneous pieces of fabric together into blocks with certain patterns, sewing the blocks into a quilt and stuffing it with cotton, and then encasing the raw edges of the quilt and decorating it with applique. Since American colonial period, the patchwork quilt had been a common social pastime for women from ethnic minorities and had evolved into a carrier via which women

⁷⁰ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 175.

⁷¹ Zhang, *Gongmin shenfen rentong yanjiu*, 64.

“transfer[ed] significant messages” and “emphasize[d] their points of view quietly.”⁷² Naturally, the patchwork quilt and quilting had turned into indicators of sisterhood. Having sensed a similarity between quilting and literary creation, feminist critics introduced the quilting into literary criticism as a literary metaphor. Nowadays, not limited to the old-time practical purpose, the patchwork quilt has become a representative folk art often associated with the United States as a symbol of American society and culture. It has evolved into a “humanized and democratized art form”⁷³ that has replaced the melting pot as the new metaphor of American cultural identity, advocating the coexistence of unity and multiplicity. Regarded as its distinguishing characteristic, the patchwork quilt shines a “promise of creating unity among disparate elements, of establishing connections in the midst of fragmentation.”⁷⁴

In the sense of a harmonious relationship between fragments and fusion, *God Help the Child* shows a remarkable resemblance to the patchwork quilt. Regardless of race, gender, class and age, all of the characters in the novel are provided with an equal opportunity to narrate their own life stories. The multiple voices of these marginalized people exhibit individuality and uniqueness. Their incomplete narrations can be compared to the pieces of fabric of a quilt. Developing along childhood trauma as the theme, these narrative fragments are integrated into a unity and compose the novel itself. Therefore, the process of narrating can be compared to quilt-making and the novel itself to a finished patchwork quilt. Similarly, the novel can function as a cultural metaphor as a patchwork quilt, implying a dynamic balance between unity and diversity and highlighting multiplicity and inclusiveness. Through the multi-voiced strategy, Morrison achieves a harmonious unification based on the respect for the differences among the multiple individual voices. She recovers the voices of the unheard of different social backgrounds and enables them to represent themselves and maintain their individuality while joining together into a complete whole. In this sense, the patchwork quilt-like multi-voiced narration also suggests Morrison's advocacy of pluralism in contemporary American society. *God Help the Child*, as a polyphonic novel, can be seen as Morrison's earnest call for a more equal, freer, more inclusive, and more diverse American society in which neither a dominant culture would overwhelm and unify the subcultures into a single one, nor any ethnic minority culture would be marginalized. The culture, traditions, interests, convictions, and lifestyles of every ethnic group are recognized, respected, and valued rather than marginalized or discriminated against. Every ethnic group would be able to integrate into contemporary American

⁷² Jiao Xiaoting, *Dream of Dreams: Quilting Aesthetics and Toni Morrison's Artistic Appeal* (Kaifeng: Henan University Press, 2008), 9-10.

⁷³ Van E. Hillard, “Census, Consensus, and the Commodification of Form: *The NAMES Project Quilt*,” in *Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern*, ed. Cheryl B. Torsney, and Judy Elsley (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 117.

⁷⁴ Margot Anne Kelley, “Sisters' Choices: Quilting Aesthetics in Contemporary African American Women's Fiction,” in *Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern*, ed. Cheryl B. Torsney, and Judy Elsley (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 56.

society while maintaining its uniqueness. Cultural diversity and heterogeneity are preserved when various ethnic cultures can co-exist in harmony. Mutual respect, understanding, and solidarity come into being that transcend the boundary of race, gender, class and age. Considering that the leftover pieces of fabric are revived and endowed with new meanings after being sewn together, it is safe to say that the novel may imply that only through connection and reconciliation with others can the pains of an ethnic group be healed and its essence be renewed over time.

4.6 Developing African Oral Tradition of Storytelling

In *God Help the Child*, the multi-voices of protagonists, the great dialogue between characters and readers, and the great dialogue between Morrison and readers make contributions to developing African oral tradition of storytelling. Oral narratives, including myths, legends, folktales, folk songs, and other forms of verbal art, punctuate the “independence of African American cultural identity,”⁷⁵ and are regarded as an important means of “maintaining the continuity and stability”⁷⁶ of traditional African cultures. They together play an indispensable role in preserving and transmitting African knowledge, faith, values and religious rituals from generation to generation, and more importantly, providing the roots for indigenous written literature. As one of the forms of oral narratives, storytelling is presented in *God Help the Child* with new meanings. The action of storytelling is not exclusive anymore to African American protagonists themselves like Sweetness and Bride. Instead, all the characters are invited to join in the storytelling regardless of their race, class, gender and age. For instance, although they are white and from the lower class, Brooklyn and Rain are still provided with the chance of narrating their childhood experiences. The participation of storytellers from varied ethnic groups and their multiple voices indeed help to diversify the African oral tradition. Meanwhile, the subject of storytelling is no longer limited to African American historical trauma. Topics with more universal concern come into focus, such as childhood trauma, colorism, child molestation, dysfunctional family relationships, and parenthood. This certainly enriches the contents of the African oral tradition.

In addition, the call-and-response pattern—the antiphonal interaction manner derived from African American chanted sermons—is also manifested in the novel. The pattern is defined as the “spontaneous verbal or nonverbal” interactions between the storyteller and listener in the oral narratives.⁷⁷ In *God Help the Child*, the whole story is narrated from a first-person perspective by several characters, and some of them, such as Sweetness and Bride, prefer to address readers directly as “you” so that a dialogic and interactive relationship between the narrator and audiences is achieved. Readers may feel actually involved in a real dialogue with a protagonist during her

⁷⁵ Yang Zhongju, and Wang Hongkun, *Heise zhi shu: Molisen xiaoshuo chuanguo yu heiren wenhua chuantong* (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2007), 81.

⁷⁶ Bernard W. Bell, *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches* (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2007), 73.

⁷⁷ John F. Callahan, *In the African-American Grain: The Pursuit of Voice in Twentieth-Century Black Fiction* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 15.

storytelling and make responses to her narration. Moreover, the novel itself represents Morrison's heartfelt call to readers, inviting them to respond to it and interpret it from diverse viewpoints. Thus, with the call-and-response pattern that features participatory, dialogic and interactive, not only the idea of "equality, cooperation and dialogism"⁷⁸ of traditional African culture, but also its oral tradition of storytelling are highlighted.

In conclusion, with polyphonic form, Morrison tactfully sheds light on the social and cultural implications of *God Help the Child*. Her integration of literary writing with concerns for social issues endows the novel with artistic value as well as far-reaching significance.

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⁷⁸ Ji Min, *Meiguo heiren nüquan zhuyi shiyu xia de nüxing shuxie* (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 2011), 199.

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1930 年代の日・中の「歴史」創作について (4)

——「満洲国」言説の知の考古学的分析——

伊 勢 芳 夫

1. はじめに

「1930 年代の日・中の『歴史』創作について」の (2) と (3) においては、本論で提案する「歴史」創作とその「正典化」のメカニズムの理論の有効性の検証として中国側の英語によるプロパガンダと日本/満洲国側の英・日本語によるプロパガンダの比較検証を行った。そして「1930 年代の日・中の『歴史』創作について」の (4) と (5) においては、「歴史」創作における修辞学的側面に絞って検討する。そのため、まず情報操作のレトリックの入門書ともいえるべき George Orwell の *Animal Farm* を分析することで情報操作の手法を検証する。

ところで、*Animal Farm* を論じようとする場合、“Looking Back on the Spanish War”で示された報道と客観的真実に対する Orwell の認識を確認する必要があるだろう。

……人生の早い段階で、いかなる出来事も新聞において正しく報道されることはないということに私は気づいていたが、スペインに来て初めて、事実と何の関係も持たないどころか、ありふれた嘘において暗示されるような「事実との」関係性さえも持たない新聞報道を目にした。……¹

この種のこと「世界中のカトリック系の新聞と反動的な新聞が捏造し、熱心なフランコ支持者が信じているスペイン内戦へのロシア軍の参戦の嘘」は私にとって恐ろしいことだ。なぜなら、それにより客観的真実という概念そのものが世界から消え去りつつあるのではないかと感じるがよくあるからだ。結局のところおそらくは、それらの嘘、あるいはいずれにせよ同様の嘘が歴史に入り込んでしまうだろう。スペイン内戦の歴史はどのように描かれるのだろうか。もしフランコが権力の座に留まれば、彼が任命した者たちが歴史書を書き、(私が取り上げた点にこだわっていえば)「スペイン内戦の際にスペイン国内に」存在すらしていなかったロシア軍が「参戦していたことが」歴史上の事実となり、それ以

¹ George Orwell, “Looking Back on the Spanish War,” *Homage to Catalonia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p.234. 本稿の George Orwell の著作からの引用はすべて筆者による日本語訳を記載する。

降何世代にもわたって学童たちはそれについて学ぶことになるだろう。そうではなくて、ファシズムがついに敗北し、かなり近い将来に何らかの民主的政府がスペインに復活すると仮定するとして、その場合でも、戦争の歴史はいかにして書かれることになるのであろうか。フランコはどのような記録を後に残しているであろうか。[共和国人民戦線] 政府側に保管されていた記録を回収することができるとさえ仮定するとして——たとえそうだとっても、戦争の真実の歴史はいかにして書かれることになるのであろうか。というのは、私がすでに指摘したように、[共和国人民戦線] 政府もまた大いに嘘を弄していたからである。反ファシストの観点から戦争の大まかな真実の歴史を書くことはできるが、それは党派心に偏った歴史になり、あらゆる細かな点において信頼性に欠けるだろう。しかし、結局のところ、何らかの歴史が書かれるだろうし、戦争を実際に覚えている人たちが亡くなった後には、その歴史が広く受け入れられることになるであろう。そういうわけで、実際上、嘘が真実となるのである。²

“Looking Back on the Spanish War” からの上掲の引用に記されたような歴史創作の「嘘」に関する Orwell の深い認識——ナチスやファシストたちは嘘の歴史を語るのであるが、しかしながら嘘を語るのは彼らだけとは限らない——は、1937 年にファシズムと戦うため義勇兵として参戦したスペイン内戦でのバルセロナにおける経験から得られたものであった。そしてその経験をつぶさに記したのが *Homage to Catalonia* というルポルタージュであるのだが、それは単に Orwell が実際に見聞したことを忠実に記した記録にとどまらず、スターリンが支配するソビエトによる情報操作、及びそれに呼応する左翼系新聞によって創作されたスペイン内戦の「事実／歴史」に対する力強い対抗言説となっている。そこでは、いかに客観的・真実が強者の歴史創作の過程で歪められ、隠蔽され、そしてそのように創作された「歴史」観が流通・消費され、その「歴史」観が現実の政策に反映されるか——バルセロナにおける人民戦線 (Popular Front) 内の内紛がファシストの命令の下でマルクス主義統一労働者党 (POUM) によって引き起こされたと左翼系新聞によって一方的に喧伝され、そして、ファシズムに対抗し革命を推し進めようとした POUM の兵士や義勇兵たち (アナーキストやトロツキー主義者) が反ファシズムの同志であるはずの政府側の命令で逮捕され、処刑されたか——を、Orwell は読者に「客観的・真実」として訴えかけようとしている。

このようなスペイン内戦に参戦した経験から Orwell が目の当たりにした歴史創作の現実と、さらにスターリンのソビエトにおける大量粛清や圧政についての情報をも踏まえ、革命直後の自由で平等な楽園のような状態から、指導的立場にある一部の者によって革命の理想が悪用され全体主義化が進行していく中でいかに人民が隷属していくかの過程を寓話という手法で再現したのが *Animal Farm* である。しかしながら、寓話化することによって、単にスターリンのソ連を糾弾するだけの政治小説であるだけではなく、より普遍的なレベルにおいて、歴史／過去が権力者によって都合よく書き換え／改変され、その書き換え／

² “Looking Back on the Spanish War,” *Homage to Catalonia*, p.235.

改変された「歴史／過去」観が現実の政策に反映されていくメカニズムを暴き出した点で、現実社会の世論誘導の実態を知る有効な手引書になっている。それは、単にファシズムや Kommunismus のような全体主義を前提とする社会体制のみならず、たとえ民主主義を標榜する社会であっても、決して無縁なメカニズムではないのだ。

次節以降、動物たちの反乱（革命）前の the Manor Farm と反乱（革命）後の Animal Farm が物語内でいかに描かれているかを比較することでその両者の体制の違いを考察する。

2. 言説空間の囲い込み

Animal Farm の物語は、Mr Jones による専制的な the Manor Farm における動物（家畜）たちの反乱（革命）の全段階から始まる。

死期が迫った雄豚の Old Major は前日の晩に見た夢を話したいということで the Manor Farm の動物たちを大きな納屋に召集する。Old Major は動物たちを前にして、家畜としてはかなりの長寿に恵まれた生涯のなかで得られたイングランドに生きる動物の惨めな生活と人間による苛烈な搾取の実態に関する認識を述べた後、そのような地獄のような境遇を打開するための方策として諸悪の根源としての人間に対していかなる妥協もせず反乱（革命）を起こすことを彼らに鼓吹し、さらに、もし反乱（革命）が成功した場合の動物社会の在り方と守るべき戒律を説くのである。そしてその後で、前日の晩に見た夢の話として来るべき動物の国の姿を描いた “Beasts of England” を歌って聞かせる。この3日後に Old Major は亡くなるが、その演説によって大いに感化された動物、特に豚たちは、反乱（革命）のための準備を始めるのである。

反乱の日は予想外に早く、期せずして訪れる。夏至祭の前夜(Midsummer's Eve)に、Mr Jones はしこたま酒を飲み、彼の従僕たちの方はいえウサギ狩りに興じて家畜に餌を与えることを忘れてしまう。そこで激しい空腹に耐えかねた動物たちの不満が一気に爆発し、その結果、動物たちの反乱が勃発し、Mr Jones と4人の従僕たちは農場を追われてしまうのである。このように思いがけず反乱（革命）は成功し、農場は動物たちのものとなり、the Manor Farm を改め動物たちによる動物のための Animal Farm が誕生する。しかしながら反乱（革命）後の Animal Farm は、当初の楽園のような自由で平等な動物社会から、物語の進行に伴い動物たちの格差が広がり、かつてのように作物や労働力が搾取されるようになり、遂には人間化した豚たちによる独裁体制へと変質する。

ここで注目したいのは、the Manor Farm と Napoleon が権力を掌握した Animal Farm は何れも専制的な体制なのであるが、前者は力と恐怖によってのみ動物たちを押さえつける体制であるのに対して、後者はさらに世論誘導（文化的拘束力）により物理的だけではなく心理的にも動物たちを呪縛する全体主義体制なのである。一方 the Manor Farm の方はいえ、あの Old Major の演説の日に「その夜、the Manor Farm の Mr Jones は鶏小屋には鍵をかけていたが、あまりにも酔っぱらっていて家畜の出入り穴を閉めるのを忘れていた。」³と書か

³ George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951), p. 5. 以下の *Animal Farm* からの引

れているが、このようなずさんな管理（統治）はおそらく常態化しており、それゆえ動物たち同士の情報交換が容易にできたのであろう。つまり、the Manor Farm は専制的であるとしても、被支配者たちに反乱（革命）の密談を許すような言説空間の閉鎖性の不完全な体制であったといえるだろう。

このような the Manor Farm の言説空間の閉鎖性の不完全さから被支配者層の反乱がおこった事例として、1857 年に勃発した「インドの大反乱」が想起される。「インドの大反乱」に関しては、何故 Meerut の一部隊でのインド人傭兵の反乱が他の地域のインド人を共時的に共感させながら広大なインド亜大陸の各地にまで広まった背景として、イギリス支配への反乱を呼びかける符丁としてのチャパティがインド中の村々に配られるというような、支配者の監視を潜り抜けて共通の言説を流通させるコミュニティ/場が密かに作られていたとイギリス人女性作家の Flora Annie Steel が *On the Face of the Waters* で暗示していることを「1930 年代の日・中の『歴史』創作について (1)」で言及した。そしてまさに the Manor Farm においても、動物（家畜）たちの間に Mr Jones の圧政に対する不満を共有するコミュニティ/場が密かに形成され、そのコミュニティ/場での支配者への対抗言説の爆発的増大により反乱をいつでも誘発するような不満の飽和状態になったのである。そして人間たちの怠慢により家畜に餌が与えられず、そのため動物たちの飢えが我慢の限界を越えたときに反乱（革命）がおこり、あっけなく Mr Jones の専制的な the Manor Farm は崩壊する。

しかしながら反乱（革命）により誕生した Animal Farm は、当初こそ指導的立場にあった Snowball と Napoleon の下で Old Major の教えを忠実に守って自由で平等な動物社会が実現されていくかに思われたのであるが、実際には Napoleon とその配下の豚たちにより、密かに且つ着実に Animal Farm の全体主義化が進められていく。その方法は、暴力装置の構築と巧妙な世論誘導であった。そして前者の暴力装置の構築には、その準備段階において洗脳教育が重要な役割を果たす。

委員会を通してすでに何らかの世界観を持つ動物たちを説得して自己の思想に共鳴させる Snowball 流のやり方よりも、Napoleon は生まれ立ての子犬を隔離して育てるのである。(pp. 31-2) おそらく彼にとって都合の良い世界観を子犬たちに植え付けることによって盲目的に従う構成員を作ること、完全な指令系統の構築を図ろうとしたのであろう。実際そのように洗脳教育を受けた犬たちは単に Napoleon に盲従するだけではなく、暴力装置として彼の親衛隊となり、一般の動物たちを恐怖をもって服従させ、また反体制分子に対しては粛清を行使することによって、完璧な閉鎖空間としての全体主義体制を作り出すための道具となる。因みに、これと同様の洗脳教育は次作の *Nineteen Eighty-Four* でも党の少年たちに対して行われており、それは Oceania の全体主義体制を維持する重要な役割を担っている。⁴

用及び言及箇所はこの版の頁数を本文に記入する。

⁴ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), pp. 22-3 を参照。

このようにして、Old Major の世界観と思想に感化された動物たちによる反乱（革命）により誕生した自由と平等な Animal Farm ではあるが、Napoleon の完全指揮下にある強力な暴力装置によって無辜の動物たちも含め対抗勢力は粛清され、一般の動物たちは恐怖で従わせられることにより次第に専制化が進行していく。もっとも全体主義の完成までは、表面的には Old Major の教えと齟齬がないように見せかけるため、Napoleon とその共謀者たちの巧緻で狡猾な世論誘導のメカニズムが密かに働いているのである。

3. 世論誘導のメカニズム

Animal Farm の動物たちを世論誘導するツールは「言語（英語）」である。Orwell の作品において完璧な世論誘導が言語によって可能なのは、以下の *Nineteen Eighty-Four* からの引用に明言されているように、思考——意識すらも——が言語に依存しているという前提からきている。したがって思考は言語によってのみ成立するがゆえに、言語をコントロール下に置くことで動物たちを内側からコントロールすることが可能になるのである。

Newspeak の目的は、Ingsoc の信奉者に相応しい世界観と思考習慣に表現手段を提供するだけでなく、それ以外のすべての考え方を不可能にすることであった。Newspeak が完全且つ最終的に採用され、Oldspeak が忘れ去られたとき、異端的な思考——つまり、Ingsoc の原理から逸脱する思考——は、少なくとも思考が言葉に依存する限り、文字通り思考不能になるように意図されたのだ。……⁵

Animal Farm おいて、Old Major の教えは Snowball、Napoleon、そして Squealer によって Animalism という思想として体系化され、(p. 16) そしてさらに 豚たちにより the Seven Commandments に集約される。このように、反乱直後の農場は平等で自由な動物たちの共同体が誕生するのであるが、次第に、動物たちに与えられる言語情報は Squealer によって独占的に配信されるようになる一方、Napoleon とその配下の犬たちによって Napoleon と対立する Snowball は粛清されたうえ、(pp. 47-8) 災いが起こるごとに彼の仕業とされる。こうして当初の自由な言論の場は消滅していき、動物たちの農場は独裁化されていくのである。

それでは、どのように言語情報の独占と Old Major の教えの記録 (the Seven Commandments) を巧みに利用して、Napoleon は Animal Farm の独裁化を進めていったのであろうか。それは端的に言うと虚偽、隠蔽、そして記録のシフト（ずらし）、あるいは場合によってはそれらを組み合わせるというような情報操作を利用することで世論誘導を行うことによって遂行されるのである。

それでは、世論誘導のための情報操作のレトリックが Animal Farm でいかに利用されているかを具体的に見てみよう。

上述したように、動物たちに与えられる言語情報は Squealer という Napoleon 一味のスプ

⁵ *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 237.

ークスマンによって独占的に配信される。彼のことを「黒を白にする」という者があるように、(pp. 15-6) Squealer は Old Major の説いた教え (the Seven Commandments) に反するような Napoleon 及び豚たちの所業が発覚すると動物たちのところへやってきて、豚たちの所業そのものを否定するのではなく、それらの行為はやむを得ず、あるいは犠牲的精神の下でやっているにすぎない、何故なら、そうすることが他の動物たちのためになるからであるという風に、実際の行為に対してではなく、それを行う動機を捏造する。たとえばミルクやリンゴを豚たちが独占するという事実そのものを虚偽の言い訳で隠蔽しようとしても、いずれはその嘘が発覚する可能性は十分にあるが、その行為自体を認めたくて the Seven Commandments に反するような利己主義や特権からではなく、豚たちが頭脳労働者として動物全員に昼夜奉仕するための栄養補給として仕方なく消費しているのであり、もし自分たちがその役割を果たせなければ Jones が舞い戻ってくるのだという虚偽の動機を説明する。(pp. 32-3) これは極めて巧妙な虚偽(捏造)のやり方である。なぜなら、動機という心理現象は他者の目からは見えないのでその真偽を見抜くことは極めて困難であるからだ。

一方、記録されていない過去の事実に関しては、動物たちの記憶が曖昧であることを利用して Squealer は真実を改竄したストーリーを動物たちに語る。たとえば、Animal Farm からいなくなって久しい Snowball について、彼の Animal Farm の建国における功績や、Jones たちが農場を取り返しに来た際の the Battle of Cowshed における Snowball の死をも恐れぬ英雄的行為の事実を改竄し、彼を the Battle of Cowshed の英雄であるどころか真っ先に逃げ出した臆病者であり、さらにそもそも彼は最初から Jones のスパイであったと吹聴し、憎むべき裏切り者としての Snowball 像を動物たちに植え付けようとする。(pp. 69-72) 一方で Squealer は、本来は Snowball の功績であったものを悉く Napoleon の功績にすり替えていく。

ついでながら Squealer の弁舌の特徴としてもう 1 つ付け加えると、次の引用にみられるように、彼は抽象的な語彙を使うことで聞き手をはぐらかそうとする。

……これは tactics と呼ばれるものだ と Squealer は言った。尻尾を振りつつあちこち飛び跳ねながら陽気に笑って「tactics だ、同志たちよ、tactics だ！」と、彼は何度も繰り返した。動物たちはその言葉が何を意味するのかよくわからなかったが、Squealer が説得力を持って話しかけたのと、たまたま一緒にいた 3 頭の犬が非常に威圧的にうなり声を上げたこともあり、彼らはそれ以上質問することなく彼の説明を受け入れた。(p. 52)

Squealer は独裁者の意のままに世論操作に協力するマスメディアの寓意だけではなく、抽象的で空疎な言葉を弄して大衆を煙に巻く知識階層を皮肉っていると思われる。⁶

次に取り上げるのは言語使用によるものではなく、むしろ言語を使わない／使わせない、

⁶ 同時代の英語と知識階層に対して Orwell がどのように考えていたかについては、知識人による英語の「悪文」の幾つかの例を批判的に分析した“Politics and the English Language”という一文が参考になるであろう。George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, volume IV., eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 156-70.

つまり情報の隠蔽、もしくは検閲、そして発言妨害による世論誘導である。

情報の隠蔽のなかでも最も卑劣なのが体を酷使し続けたため働けなくなった荷馬車馬の Boxer を廃馬解体業者に売りさばいた事実を Squealer が獣医の世話を受けるという虚偽の下に隠蔽し——ロバの Benjamin には真相を知られてしまうが——それを押し通したことであろうが、(pp. 102-7) *Animal Farm* ではそれ以外にも様々な情報が隠蔽されて動物たちに知らされない。おそらく、逃走させた Snowball に関しても重要な情報が隠蔽されていると思われる。さらに単に情報を隠蔽するだけではなく、Napoleon の従属者による強権的言論弾圧や発言妨害が行われる。子犬を洗脳教育によってゲシュタポのような暴力装置にして言論弾圧をする一方、密かに支援者を増やすことに Napoleon は巧みで、手懐けた羊たちには委員会での Snowball の発言の際にスローガンを連呼させて聞こえなくさせたり、(p. 43) Snowball を支持するような意見が出てくると議論そのものを中断せざるを得ないほどの騒音を発せさせたりすることで異論を封殺する。(p. 77)

次に取り上げる情報操作のレトリックは、*Animal Farm* の中で使用される世論誘導の策略で最も秀逸ともいえる the Seven Commandments をそれらの文言を都合よくシフトさせながら反復させていくレトリックである。

The Seven Commandments が最初に大きな納屋の壁に白いペンキで書かれた際、以下のよう

……過去 3 か月間の研究により、Animalism の原則を the Seven Commandments に縮約すること

に成功したと、豚たちは説明した。これらの the Seven Commandments はこれから壁に刻まれるであろう。それらの戒めは、Animal Farm のすべての動物がこれ以降永遠に従って生きなければならない不変の法律となるものである。…… (p. 23)

このように the Seven Commandments は、Old Major の長年にわたる動物の惨めな生活実態の認識とその原因に対する洞察を基にした、人間の排除（革命）後の農場社会とそこに生きる動物たちのあるべき姿（Animalism）を集約したものであるが、しかしながらスローガンにすることにより前提となる認識や洞察が省略され、それらは動物たちの記憶に託されることになる。しかしながら、豚や Benjamin を除いて、多くの動物たちのリテラシーは極めて低い。殊に羊や雌鶏やアヒルなどはリテラシーも低いうえに記憶力も弱くまともに the Seven Commandments を誦んじることすらできないので、Snowball は長考の末、Animalism の基本原理として “Four legs good, two legs bad.” の 1 つに圧縮したほどであった。(pp. 30-1)

この豚以外の動物たちのリテラシーの低さや記憶力の悪さこそが、言説空間の閉鎖性に加えて、豚たちによる世論誘導の策略が見事に成功していくための必要不可欠な要因であった。つまり、Napoleon たちは動物たちのおぼつかない語学力や記憶力を悪用し、長い時間をかけて彼らの記憶を塗り替えていく。それにより、当初の the Seven Commandments に反するような豚たちの所業が、むしろ戒めに合致するとされる。たとえば、戒めの 4 番目

は “No animal shall sleep in a bed.” であったが、豚たちが農場の母屋のベッドで眠るようになったことを雌馬の Clover が知った時、腑に落ちない彼女は自分では読めないのを読むことが比較的達者な白山羊の Muriel に壁に書かれてある 4 番目の戒めを読んでもらうと、そこには “No animal shall sleep in a bed *with sheets*” と書かれてあった。Clover は “sheets” に言及されていたことを思い出すことはできなかったのだが、そこに書かれてある以上納得してしまうのである。(pp. 59-60) このように記録を改竄することによって、おぼつかない語学力や記憶力しか持たない動物たちの記憶を塗り替えていくのである。さらにこの手法により、根本原理である “Four legs good, two legs bad.” ですら最終的に羊たちに “Four legs good, two legs *better*! Four legs good, two legs *better*! Four legs good, two legs *better*!” と唱えさせることに成功する。それを裏付けるように、壁に書かれている文字も the Seven Commandments からわずか 1 つの戒め、すなわち、 “ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL/BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE/EQUAL THAN OTHERS” へとシフトされていたのである。(p. 114)

このような世論誘導を巧みに使って Napoleon と配下の豚たちは、物語の最後では Animal Farm の完全なる支配を達成する。そしてそれを祝うかのように近隣の農場主を招いて農場の母屋で宴会が催されるのだが、招かれた農場主の 1 人である Mr Pilkington がスピーチの中でずっと “Animal Farm” と言及し続けたことに対し Napoleon が次のように訂正をしたことが記される。

……もちろん彼 [Mr Pilkington] がそのことを知る由もなかったのであるが——というのも Napoleon である自分がここで初めてそのことを発表するのだから—— “Animal Farm” という名前は廃止されたのだ。今後、この農場は “Manor Farm” として知られることになるだろう——自分が信じるに、それこそが本来の正しい名前である。(p. 119)

4. 旧「Manor Farm」から新「Manor Farm」へ

前節において、Napoleon とその配下の豚たちが、虚偽、隠蔽、そして記録のシフト（ずらし）、あるいは場合によってはそれらを組み合わせるといような情報操作を行うことで、低いリテラシーと記憶力に劣る動物たちを思いのままに世論誘導しながら Animal Farm の独裁化を進めていったことを概観した。

こうして Animal Farm は名実ともに廃止される。新たな体制の農場では、2 本足で歩き服を着た豚たちが人間たちと酒を飲み、数年前には Animal Farm からいなくなっていたカラスの Moses は舞い戻ってきて以前のように宗教的樂園を吹聴する。(pp. 99-100) その意味で、旧体制の回帰がなされたといえるかもしれない。ただし、完全に旧に復したわけではない。本稿の最初でも述べたように、Mr Jones の旧「Manor Farm」と Napoleon の新「Manor Farm」は何れも専制的な体制ながら、前者は力と恐怖だけで動物たちを押さえつける不完全な体制であったのに対して、後者はさらに世論誘導（文化的拘束力）により物理的にも心理的にも動物たちを呪縛する全体主義体制なのである。

それでは、Napoleon の新「Manor Farm」の全体主義体制において、Mr Jones の旧「Manor Farm」のように Old Major の再来が現れ、それに触発されて被支配者たちの反乱（革命）が起きる可能性はないのであろうか。この点に関して参考になるのが、*Nineteen Eighty-Four* に一部が組み込まれている Emmanuel Goldstein が書いたとされる著書 *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* に記述されている専制的な体制が崩壊する要因についての以下の分析である。

しかし、階級社会を恒久化させる問題は、これ〔経済的不平等を恒久化させる問題〕よりも一層奥深い問題だ。支配層が権力の座から転落する筋道は 4 つあるのみだ。外部から征服されるか、あまりにも非効率な統治のために大衆が反乱を起こすか、強力で不満を抱いた中間層の出現を許すか、または支配者が統治を続ける自信と意欲を喪失するかのいずれかである。これらの原因は単独では機能せず、通例 4 つすべてがそれぞれにある程度存在している。[したがって] これらすべてを防ぐことのできる支配階級は永久に権力の座に留まるであろう。結局のところ、決定的な要因は支配階級自身の精神的態度なのである。⁷

上記の 4 つの原因を *Animal Farm* に当てはめると、旧「Manor Farm」の独裁者であった Mr Jones は、訴訟で損をして意気消沈した結果酒におぼれるようになり、非効率な農場経営を行い動物たちの不満を買い、強力で不満を抱いた優秀な豚たちが出現することで——訴訟で損をしたことを「外部から征服される」に含めると——4 つの原因がそろい支配者から転落したのであった。それに対して、Napoleon らによって構築された新「Manor Farm」は元の専制的な体制に回帰しただけではなく、同じ支配者として周りの人間の農場主と呉越同舟のような関係を築くことで侵略の憂いを除き、(pp. 116-20) 物理的にも心理的にも動物たちを呪縛する極めて効率的な支配体制を維持し、中間層の出現を許さず、独裁者としての自信と意欲を強く持つことで、Big Brother の Oceania に先駆けて、永続する階級的で専制的な体制を作り上げたのである。

5. おわりに

本稿での試みは、*Animal Farm* が寓意的にスターリンのソビエトを批判した作品、あるいは、ファシズムをも含めた全体主義国家を風刺した作品であるという観点から検証したのではなく、いかにして永続する階級的で専制的な体制——完全なる全体主義体制——が作り上げられるかという視点で分析を行った。そして分析の結果、洗脳教育の下で強力な暴力装置を構築することで反主流派の粛清や恐怖政治を行うとともに、情報統制と情報の捏造や隠蔽、そして単純化された革命の理念や戒め (the Seven Commandments) の記録をシフトしながら社会の構成員の記憶を改変していく——つまり、歴史の絶えざる改竄——といった世論誘導のレトリックにより、全体主義体制を強固なものにする——「1930 年代の日・

⁷ *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 164.

中の『歴史』創作について(2)」で言及した——「文化的ヘゲモニー」を *Animal Farm* において確立することで新「Manor Farm」が誕生したのである。

このような文化装置について留意すべきことは、*Animal Farm* が寓意した実際のスターリン・ソビエト体制の「文化的ヘゲモニー」が持っていた言説的な影響力は、当該の全体主義国家だけにとどまらず、広く世界に拡散する力があったということである。そのことに関して、*Animal Farm* の前書きとして Orwell が準備していた文章“THE FREEDOM OF THE PRESS”のなかで、⁸当時のイギリスの知識階層の間に流通していた優勢な言説によりソビエト批判がイギリスの文壇でいかに忌避されていたかが強い筆致で述べられている。

今のところ、ソビエト・ロシアに対する無批判の称賛こそが支配的な正統性により要求されるところのものである。このことは誰もが知るところであり、ほぼすべての者がそれに基づいて行動している。ソビエト体制に対するいかなる手心を加えない批評も、ソビエト政府が隠蔽したいであろう事実のいかなる暴露も、ほぼ出版不可である。……

1941 年以降、大半の英国の知識階層がロシアのプロパガンダを鵜呑みにし、反復するその卑屈さ加減といったら、もし彼らがそれ以前のいくつかの機会でも同様の「卑屈な」振る舞いをしてこなかったとしたら、本当に驚かされたことであろう。次から次へと物議を醸す問題についてロシアの見解が検討もされず受け入れられ、そして歴史的真相や知的良識を完全に無視して発表される。ほんの一例を挙げると、BBC はトロツキーについて言及せずに赤軍創設 25 周年を祝った。これはネルソンに言及せずにトラファルガーの海戦を祝うのと同程度の正確さだったが、英国の知識階層から何ら抗議も起きなかった。……

上掲の 2 つの引用にみられるような当時のイギリスの知識階層に対する Orwell の批判が必ずしも見当外れではないことは、*Animal Farm* のモデルとしてスターリン・ソビエトが容易に連想される *Animal Farm* の出版が困難を極めただけでなく、イギリスの知識階層のスターリン・ソビエトに対する卑屈なほどの追従を直截に批判したこの前書きとして予定していた文章が *Animal Farm* の出版の際に掲載されなかったことから容易に想像がつくであろう。まさにこのような国家権力の検閲によらない知識階層の自己検閲による言論抑制こそが、作品が描き出した文化の拘束力の実態なのである。

今回の「1930 年代の日・中の『歴史』創作について(5)」においては、「1930 年代の日・中の『歴史』創作について(4)」で検証した情報操作の手法を踏まえ、日・中の「歴史」創作を修辞学的側面から考察する。

⁸ “THE FREEDOM OF THE PRESS”は、インターネット上の The Orwell Foundation の Homepage を参照。<https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/the-freedom-of-the-press/>、(最終閲覧日 2026 年 5 月 14 日)

Allusion, Meaning, and Temporality in the Correspondence of the Universal House of Justice

In his journey he seeth all differences return to a single word
and all allusions culminate in a single point.¹

He also saith: “We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings;
each one of these meanings we can explain.”²

Amin Ghadimi

1. Time and Text

“I am going away from your city, but I leave my heart with you. My spirit will be here,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá assured the gathering in Boston, Massachusetts, on May 25, 1912. “I will pray for you, asking divine assistance, and then say farewell.” He attested in his prayer: “Verily, these servants are turning to Thee, supplicating Thy kingdom of mercy. Verily, they are attracted by Thy holiness and set aglow with the fire of Thy love.”³

Some forty years earlier, in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, his most important text, Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s father, who appointed him successor to the religion he inaugurated, wrote from his place of exile and incarceration in the city of ‘Akká, in anticipation of his passing nineteen years later, in 1892:

Let not your hearts be perturbed, O people, when the glory of My Presence is withdrawn, and the ocean of My utterance is stilled. In My presence amongst you there is a wisdom, and in My absence there is yet another, inscrutable to all but God, the Incomparable, the All-Knowing. Verily, We behold you from Our realm of glory, and shall aid whosoever will arise for the triumph of Our Cause with the hosts of the Concourse on high and a company of Our

¹ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gems of Divine Mysteries: Javáhiru’l-Asrár* [translator unidentified, but published by the Bahá’í World Centre], last modified August 6, 2023, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahaullah/gems-divine-mysteries/gems-divine-mysteries.pdf?6916a9ac>, pdf p. 9.

² Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude* [1861–1862], trans. Shoghi Effendi, last modified January 6, 2026, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahaullah/kitab-i-iqan/kitab-i-iqan.pdf?a6b43b11>, pdf p. 62. The reference is, it appears, to Muhammad.

³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Huntington Chambers, Boston, Massachusetts,” May 25, 1912, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, comp. Howard MacNutt, last modified December 11, 2025, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/promulgation-universal-peace/promulgation-universal-peace.pdf?8c61bb7e>, pdf no. 54, p. 87.

avored angels.⁴

Some forty-five years after ‘Abdu’l-Bahá left Boston, Shoghi Effendi, grandson of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, whom ‘Abdu’l-Bahá appointed in his Will and Testament as his successor and as Guardian of the Faith, wrote to believers in the United States on September 21, 1957, in the final words of what appears to be his final major communication with them, and one of his final major communications altogether, before he himself suddenly went away—passed away—in November 1957: “May He [‘Abdu’l-Bahá], Who through the irresistible operation of the will of His almighty Father [Bahá’u’lláh], called this community into being, nursed it in its infancy through the inestimable benefits conferred by a divinely appointed Covenant [...]—may He, through His watchful care and unfailing grace, continue to sustain them, individually and collectively.” That sustenance, Shoghi Effendi exhorted, would need to carry Americans forward in “the unfoldment of the Divine Plan which He has primarily entrusted to them.”⁵

And on November 25, 2021, to a worldwide gathering to commemorate a hundred years since the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Universal House of Justice, the present-day head of the Bahá’í administrative order, wrote,

Beloved friends, on this Day of the Covenant we all look to its Centre and recall the life and Person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, a Figure Whose very being was the embodiment of the Covenant, that pivotal centre of unity for all humankind, binding together the multitudinous peoples of the earth. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, that Mystery of God ... is surely watching over and aiding His loved ones, ever casting His eye of protection over them.⁶

Two days later, the House of Justice wrote in an apostrophe to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, as if he were there, watching over it, its “pledge of fidelity to You, for our vow to uphold the Covenant that You ‘proclaimed, championed and vindicated’, for our wholehearted expression of loyalty to Your timeless guidance and expositions, to Your fervent entreaties and exhortations.”⁷

* * *

⁴ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*, last modified June 17, 2025, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauddin/kitab-i-aqdas/kitab-i-aqdas.pdf?45da1db7>, pdf p. 16. The text is translated by the Bahá’í World Centre, though the translator is not indicated on the file.

⁵ Shoghi Effendi, “Heights Never Before Attained,” September 21, 1957, in *Citadel of Faith: Messages to America 1947 – 1957*, last modified July 24, 2023, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/shoghi-effendi/citadel-faith/citadel-faith.pdf?1ff9c25b>, pdf p. 87.

⁶ The Universal House of Justice, “377: Centenary Commemoration of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá,” November 25, 2021, in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 2001–2022, The Fifth Epoch of the Formative Age* (Bahá’í Publishing, 2024), p. 831. Available at <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/muhj-2001-2022/muhj-2001-2022.pdf?baeb0d92>.

⁷ The Universal House of Justice, “378: Tribute to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on the Centenary of His Passing,” November 27, 2021, in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 2001–2022*, p. 835.

Something curious is happening with time in these passages: a spirit remaining despite a physical parting; a beholding despite an absence; a promise of aid amid that absence; an unfailing grace, sustained, through multiple departures; an eye of protection ever cast, a century after that eye was physically shut; guidance and expositions that are timeless. The passages speak of present presence and future absence and yet also of future presence and thus present pasts, and, confoundingly, by implication, of present futures. Across the passages, time passes, and the passages concern themselves with the passage of time, yet they concern themselves with the non-passage of time, with absent presences, timelessness.

Through the passages themselves occurs the passage of time as past passes into present and future. The passages seem to induce passage, the passage of time and of times into and through one another and then into a new temporality altogether. Each passage asserts its temporal difference from the other passages, yet together they imply their essential similitude, their identity. They imply that similitude, they mediate this passage of time, inasmuch as they seem to allude to one another: the later texts alluding not only to the earlier ones, but the earlier ones appearing, once time has passed, to anticipate the later ones.

Quite clearly, these references to presence after absence, presents through pasts, are not mere figures of speech. And certainly, they do not appear to be but words of mollification, intended to placate grief with a fanciful promise of eternity at a moment of separation. What, then, is happening, temporally, in and across these passages? What did Bahá'u'lláh mean in proclaiming that there is a “wisdom” in his “absence” different from that of his “presence” even as he asserted that he would continue to “behold” people from on high amid his ostensible absence? What did ‘Abdu’l-Bahá mean when he told the friends assembled in Boston “my spirit will be here” even after he left? What did Shoghi Effendi mean when he implored that a physically absent ‘Abdu’l-Bahá himself might, through his “watchful care and unfailing grace,” “sustain” his American addressees? And what did the Universal House of Justice mean when it impressed on those gathered to commemorate his passing that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was “surely watching over and aiding” them, that his “guidance and expositions” were “timeless”? And then into this apparent congeries of temporalities, with its plain and unshrinking singling out of Americans, why does the Universal House of Justice follow with the problem of global space: that he who was, or rather is, the “embodiment of the Covenant,” who “ever casts his eye of protection,” is a “pivotal centre of unity for all humankind, binding together the multitudinous peoples of the earth”?

That is our ultimate puzzle here. Why is it and how is it that the Covenant, a term with whose definition itself we must grapple, but which is one and the same as the person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, insofar as he is the “embodiment of the Covenant,” as the passage above indicates—why and how does the Covenant function as the pivotal center of unity for all humankind? What connects these two ostensibly separate problems: the Covenant and the unity of humanity? The passages suggest that it

has something to do with time: the Covenant does something with time so that it acts as a center of unity for all humankind. But what?

That is too large a question to venture to answer here. Of the argument that the temporality that is the Covenant induces the oneness of humanity inasmuch as it is a temporality, that the textual reordering of temporality engenders a spatial and metaphysical reordering of and binding together of the multitudinous peoples of the earth, I will content myself with trying to demonstrate here just the first dimension: that passages of text in fact mediate the passage of time and occupy themselves with the generation of a new temporality through the device of allusion, which reflects, draws upon, and might itself engender the Covenantal forces essential to human oneness. As a matter of rudimentary logic, this minor claim suffices for now, I think: if it is the case that the Covenant involves a reconfiguration of temporalities, and if it is the case that the Covenant is the pivot of the oneness of humanity, then it presumably must be the case that a reconfiguration of temporalities has something integral to do with the pivot of the oneness of humanity, even if the reason for that syllogism is unclear. Of course, that does not mean that the only thing that the oneness of humanity entails is a reconfiguration of temporalities, nor does it mean that the only thing that the Covenant entails is that reconfiguration. But it does mean that temporality must be part of the question and part of the answer, or rather part of my interpretation at present, an interpretation that of course is blinkered and might evolve, indeed should evolve, on further research and contemplation.

To construe the Covenant as a temporality, and to suggest, as I will here, that the correspondence of the Universal House of Justice with believers in it across the world today generates that temporality at least in part through its allusive content, might be to shift the focus of received interpretations or common understandings of the Covenant slightly. A basic, prevailing perception of the Bahá'í Covenant might focus narrowly, and no doubt appropriately, on the question of personal and institutional successorship and authority within the Faith: every believer in the Bahá'í Faith must accept a certain succession of authority to preserve the unity of the Faith, and that authority will safeguard and perpetuate unity. Bahá'u'lláh, in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and in a text today referred to as the Kitáb-i-'Ahd, or in English "the Book of the Covenant," appointed his firstborn son, Abbas Effendi, titled 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as his successor and designated him the interpreter of his word. He explicitly indicated that successorship would not pass directly to the half-brother of Abbas Effendi. In New York City, in the 1910s, during an epochal journey to North America, 'Abdu'l-Bahá declared to a group of American believers, according to the testimony of one witness, "I am the Covenant, appointed by Bahá'u'lláh. ... Go forth and proclaim, 'This is the Covenant of God in your midst.'"⁸ He thus holds the appellation of the "center of the Covenant," and New York City is known today in Bahá'í thought

⁸ The Universal House of Justice, *Century of Light*, published 2001, last modified April 29, 2022, <https://www.bahai.org/library/other-literature/official-statements-commentaries/century-light/century-light.pdf?f91c3a81>, pdf p. 15.

as the “City of the Covenant.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá himself, in a three-part series of texts that constituted his Will and Testament, ordained and developed the administrative order of the Faith anticipated by Bahá’u’lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and other texts and thus extended the Covenant. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá appointed Shoghi Effendi, his grandson, as the Guardian of the Faith and his successor within the administrative order. He endowed the Guardian with powers of authoritative interpretation. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also called for the establishment of the Universal House of Justice, an elected body that would govern and legislate for the Faith, and he delineated the basic system for its election and functioning. The death of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1921 passed the reins of the Faith to Shoghi Effendi and to the administrative order, and the death of Shoghi Effendi in 1957 terminated succession in the Guardianship and led to the election of the Universal House of Justice in 1963. Today, the Universal House of Justice serves as the sole, highest authority of the Faith globally.

The “Covenant” refers, at the most rudimentary level, to the faithfulness of the believer to this chain of authority, which is responsible for maintaining the integrity and unity of the Faith. Throughout the history of this Covenant, opposition to and dissent from the chain of succession occurred, particularly and predictably after the deaths of each of the individual authorities, but no formal rupture in the structure of the religion resulted. Much extant scholarship on the Covenant focuses on this history of unity and dissent, often relating the content of the texts ordaining the Covenant to their specific historical contexts. In other words, there is a reading of the Covenant concerned with its political and institutional history, a reading in which we might understand the Covenant in a sociopolitical sense: an agreement between authority and people that each would recognize and support the other.

Such a factual or empirical description in itself might suggest that this institutional-history or political-history approach is at once indispensable and incomplete, that the institutional question itself suggests more abstract dimensions of the Covenant that go beyond a question of authority and governance in itself. In general, all political systems have cultural and intellectual dimensions: what is the political culture or intellectual system ordained by this institutional system? What might it mean to look at the Covenant as a *culture* or indeed as a *mentality*? Any system of governance, if it is to function as such, cannot be a mere imposition of administrative structures; it must be a system of thought, a pervasive way of interacting with reality, that permeates the consciousness of people who accept its legitimacy not only as a matter of politics but in their day-to-day life as a matter of common sense—a system embedded in the very time of life. How does that system arise? More specifically, if the Covenant is only a political question of the authority to which all must be faithful—and again, there is no question that that is what it is at the most rudimentary level—it is difficult to try to fathom what it means that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá “is” the Covenant: how can a single individual be a succession of individuals and institutions at the same time? It makes ready sense to understand the Covenant not only as having temporal dimensions, an obvious point inasmuch as the Covenant involves succession,

but as itself a temporality, a configuration of or conceptualization of time that becomes a means of thinking and looking at the world common to all people who subscribe to it. In fact, that interpretation seems necessary for any attempt to comprehend an institution whose very intent is to transcend temporal contingency.

It might be that this expansion of a scholarly conception of the Covenant away from only institutional history toward questions of time results itself from the passage of time, from the development of the Covenant over history. The ostensible crises of succession, or the ferocity of the disputes over the Covenant in its earliest days, seem less like urgent crises as time passes. Things that appeared earlier in history as grave, foundational perturbations appear in hindsight as just that: problems that occurred historically. The Universal House of Justice itself, in its reflection on a century of the Covenant, a reflection that is concerned with but is not predominantly focused on sources of institutional legitimacy, observed that adherents to the Covenant become “impervious,” as the institution of the Covenant has developed over time, to “the types of attacks and misrepresentations that, in an earlier era, had threatened the Faith’s very existence and purpose.”⁹ The consequent shift in perspective is not a limitation of historical hindsight: it is the whole point of historical knowledge, in this context. The retreat into the past of existentially significant dissent, while it remains crucial as a matter of historical knowledge and its hortatory relevance to the present day, gives way to and opens space for other perspectives on the Covenant, including its generative rather than purely defensive mechanisms, its cultural and mental rather than only political dimensions. That, of course, is true of all history and all History: the imbrication of cultural and political systems requires historical time both to develop and to apprehend.

To survey the land once again, then, our concern here is to construe the Covenant as a mentality, and specifically as a culture of time that is integral to institutional successorship in the political dimensions of the Covenant, a particular reordering of the temporal world that is meant to permeate the consciousness of those who choose to subscribe to the Covenant. That temporality of the Covenant is not only reflected in but perhaps generated in part by the texts that the House of Justice writes to those who adhere to or are otherwise associated with the Covenant: the correspondence of the House of Justice both instantiates and generates the temporality of the Covenant. And it does so especially through the literary feature of allusion: the allusions to prior texts draw from and perpetuate a particular temporal order in the texts that extends to a temporal order in mentalities.

That is the extent of our exploration here, but as mentioned, the ultimate pay-off of such an investigation is to suggest one hypothesis for how the oneness of humankind is meant to be engendered by the Covenant. It is of course the case that if all people are loyal to a single center of authority by

⁹ The Universal House of Justice, *Reflections on the First Century of the Formative Age, “To the Bahá’ís of the World,”* November 28, 2023, https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20231128_001/20231128_001.pdf, pdf p. 6.

their own voluntary, autonomous will, then all people will be by that very fact united, but if, as argued here, the Covenant is a temporality, then why is that new temporality necessary for such a unification? There are at least three more steps that take us from allusion to an answer to that question; let us broach them quickly without exploring them in depth. First, there is a need to justify this very approach to reading in itself. To put the question rather starkly, is this not a complete waste of everyone's time and energy, going around and tracing allusions in some sort of vain, idle task of exegesis and hermeneutics? And does it not fly in the face of the very content it depicts? Bahá'u'lláh himself condemns fruitless ventures into purported learning that "begin with words and end with words," emphasizing that learning must be for "progress and advancement"¹⁰; Shoghi Effendi, reflecting on this injunction, expresses disdain for "fruitless excursions into metaphysical hair-splittings" and interprets this specific condemnation by Bahá'u'lláh as referring to "theological treatises and commentaries that encumber the human mind rather than help it to attain the truth."¹¹ Is the following exercise not that very sort of fruitless excursion? The question itself, and the justification of this approach to reading it calls for, demand a reckoning with the theory of reading and meaning that underlies the investigation: if meaning is generated, as the investigation implies, at least in part allusively, then what can we abstract, at the level of theorization and generalization, about the nature of meaning, or of the "truth" of texts and its attainment, in the writing of the Universal House of Justice? How does investigating allusion lead to the attainment of the true meaning of texts, and what does that suggest about the act of reading in the Faith? To answer those questions, we will need to consider how the technique of allusion is itself allusive: how Bahá'u'lláh asserts that his texts themselves have two layers of meaning. It then follows that there must be multiple levels of reading insofar as meaning is generated at multiple levels and through the interaction of texts arising from different times. This theory of reading the meaning in texts bears on the status and meaning of the act of reading itself in the Faith: Bahá'u'lláh writes that a failure to read daily what he describes as the Holy Word is tantamount to a violation of the Covenant itself. Why? A theory of reading and meaning can contribute to an understanding, or perhaps is needed for an understanding, of how the act of reading is associated with the Covenant and Covenantal truth in Bahá'u'lláh's order and is associated with problems of change and continuity over time. We will briefly touch on these questions toward the end of this investigation.

This theory of reading and of meaning then suggests problems of method. The methodological approach here exists, of course, in inextricable relationship with the subject. What appears here largely as an assumption—that the allusions in the texts refer to a stable system of meaning that has remained intact across time—should not be an assumption: it requires justification both in and of itself and because it leads to a particular methodology in how that conceptual history is studied. Indeed, the argument here about allusion might hinge on a particular methodological approach that enables the

¹⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, pdf p. 83, n. 110.

¹¹ *ibid*

argument because of its assumptions—and whose assumptions seem rather fogeyish: a notion, say, reminiscent of Arthur Lovejoy’s “unit-ideas,” of concepts that seem to retain coherency through time and outside of context. To reckon with this generation of meaning across time, then, is to enter into important, productive debates in the fields of the history of ideas, the history of concepts, and intellectual history, or their German counterparts of *Ideengeschichte* and *Begriffsgeschichte*, about how to understand the nature of ideational and conceptual continuity over time and the stability or instability of ideas through or outside of contexts. This engagement with foundational disputes in the field of intellectual history is important in both directions: if the argument is faulty, the method must be as well, and the other way around. Or to put it another way: the argument below assumes that the writers of the texts themselves are assuming a certain kind of stable intellectual history of concepts, and it therefore adopts that same assumption in its own analysis, but it is not obvious nor should it be taken for granted that either of those assumptions is correct: they require justification. And indeed, it is also true that it is not at all clear that meaning itself is as stable as might be assumed below: there is a need for greater sensitivity to what changes and what does not, and why it does, in the history of the concepts, and the debates at the core of contextualism and conceptual history provide the means for that sensitivity. All that is sidestepped in this initial foray into this topic.

And insofar as these debates are fundamentally historical, not literary, because allusions are inherently temporal acts, they lead to an argument about the nature of temporality and an understanding of temporality within the texts. That is, if it is the case that meaning is generated through relatively stable concepts that extend through time and then take on new and other meanings as they are deployed in contingent contexts, then that implies that a certain temporal order is being disrupted and reconstituted through the invocation of the Covenant. We reach the ultimate argument here: that the use of allusion to generate meaning through the Covenant leads to a generation of a particular system that intertwines the past and the present; time itself collapses into itself through the allusive generation of meaning through the Covenant—and that collapse and regeneration of time are part and parcel of the very conception of the oneness of humankind inherent in the Covenant. To reach this ultimate destination requires a consideration of theories of time and temporality in modernity, especially influential concepts of how the generation of both nations and empires entailed the generation of particular conceptions of temporality and how the Covenantal understanding of time interacts with or is distinct from these time-space configurations. A fuller intellectual understanding of the temporality of the Covenant rests on connecting it to scholarly literature on the relationship of temporality with modernity, with nations and nationalism, with imperialism, with postcoloniality, with globality, and with forms of political organization in general—but we will not engage in that connecting here. In short, then, to move from textual allusion to global oneness, from text to time to space and being, requires steps through a theory of reading and meaning; a theory of methodology that addresses conceptual stability and change over time in or out of textual contexts; and a theory of time

and temporality themselves and their relationship to space and political form.

To return now to our narrower, original problem of allusion and the generation of Covenantal temporality, of text and time: From what sources are we to examine this problem? Let us turn only to a few allusions in the Riḍván message of 2025, an ideal place to start because it would appear to be a terrible place to start. Every year at Riḍván, the most important Bahá'í festival, which commemorates Bahá'u'lláh's declaration of his mission in Baghdad in April 1863, the Universal House of Justice writes a message to the Bahá'ís of the world with news and updates, exhortations and encouragement. The 2025 Riḍván message is a short, 700-word, five-paragraph "report," in its own words, on the "progress" of the Bahá'í Faith, which at the time was three years into a global nine-year plan for the advancement of the Faith.¹² In length and in content, the 2025 message appears relatively insignificant compared to Riḍván messages of years prior. And it is easy to ignore in the deluge of other correspondence from the House of Justice in the decade or so leading into it. In 2016, the House of Justice commemorated with landmark messages the centenary of the Tablets of the Divine Plan, documents that will be discussed below. And in addition to the messages in 2021 marking the centenary of the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which we have already encountered, it corresponded on the major historical milestones of the bicentenary of the births of Bahá'u'lláh and his forerunner, the Báb, in 2017 and 2019, respectively. In 2021, it wrote at length to mark the completion of a quarter-century series of global plans, summarizing twenty-five years of Bahá'í history, and declared the completion of an entire epoch of the Divine Plan of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the first such declaration since 1963. And it marked, in 2022, the opening of a new phase in what is known as the Formative Age of the Faith. All this occurred in the context of an entirely new calendrical system the House of Justice ordained and applied universally in 2014 in another correspondence. Amid this profusion of letter-writing in general, and letter-writing specifically concerning the problem of time, it must seem at best strange to focus on a message of, by contrast, seemingly negligible historical import.

But that ostensible insignificance might itself be instructive. For one, the Riḍván message of 2025 is manageable, especially insofar as it is short and includes no obvious declarations of history-defining making or breaking in time. If even in a text of this relative smallness such vast allusions to time and temporality are at play, then surely all this must be unfolding at an even grander scale in larger texts. But more important than mere practicality or convenience, or such reckless extrapolation, the very fact that a particular kind of temporality is being intimated and generated through temporally destabilizing allusions in places where it might seem least likely or it seems entirely unimportant is entirely the point: our concern here is not with the temporality of grand moments marking history, however obviously important they might be, but in how temporality arises from the interstices of even

¹² The Universal House of Justice, "To the Bahá'ís of the World," Riḍván [April 20] 2025, https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20250420_001/20250420_001.pdf.

the most apparently routine of texts, in which we find that in fact there is nothing routine at all. It is here, in the apparently negligible, apparently forgettable moments of apparently customary global correspondence, that time is disrupted and rearranged; it is in the regular progression of time, not only in the marking of historical epochs, that a new temporality arises, that the received, ordered temporal life of humanity itself is disordered and reordered. So let us turn to Riḍván 2025.

2. Allusion A: favored angels

“May you be granted success,” the House of Justice writes to close its message of Riḍván 2025. It continues: “For this we beseech the sovereign Lord; for this we implore His unfailing aid; for this we entreat Him to send forth His favoured angels to assist each one of you.” And the message ends.¹³

It is customary for the Universal House of Justice to write a concluding supplication in its correspondence on behalf of its addressee. The content of its supplications often alludes to that of similar supplications by Shoghi Effendi, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and Bahá’u’lláh in their correspondence. Let us, for the sake of brevity, bracket a comparative investigation to corroborate that general point. If it is true that the content of the supplications is thus allusive, then it follows that the act of supplication is also in itself allusive: Shoghi Effendi, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and Bahá’u’lláh themselves frequently included prayers and supplications for the addressee in their correspondence, and the very act of doing so now alludes to those acts. And from that point it follows that correspondence in itself is an allusive form of textuality. Shoghi Effendi appears to have written only one book in his lifetime, a history of the Faith titled *God Passes By*. All his other book-length treatises and commentaries are correspondences addressed to specific people or groups of people. Much of the word of Bahá’u’lláh and the interpretations of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá are the same. The genre requires contemplation: the texts do not appear as proclamations to an undefined, inchoate public sphere but as targeted communications addressed to specific people. Thus the content, the act, and the form are each allusive. Let us focus on content for now.

The supplication to conclude the correspondence from Riḍván 2025 leaves the reader with an obvious puzzle: What are “favoured angels”? It is not immediately evident from context what, at the level of ontology, an “angel” is, nor does a background grasp of the basic thought or teachings of the Bahá’í Faith proffer a ready answer. Further complications arise from corollary questions: What makes the supplicated angels “favoured,” and are other angels not favored? One then wonders about the mechanisms by which those favored angels are sent forth and how it is that after their dispatch they render assistance.

The puzzle, it turns out, is helpful because it is unhelpful. Or to put the matter less skittishly, the problem is intellectually generative insofar it spurs an exploration that ultimately displaces the

¹³ *ibid*, pdf p. 2.

original problem by demonstrating its gratuitousness or irrelevance. At the level of meaning, it matters rather little what a favored angel actually is; it matters quite a bit how its meaning is generated through context, and what “context” means. Venturing to know what favored angels are doing in the text in which they *mean* does not require an investigation into knowing what favored angels are doing in the realm of existence in which they *are*. That of course is not to say that there is no such thing as a favored angel, that it is a purely discursive construction; nor is it to resort to a theoretical position in which meaning or representation is entirely independent of reality, that meaning and reality are distinct realms of being altogether. Rather, it is to concede that the process of deciphering meaning in the text prompted by the entry of favored angels into it in itself yields insights even without a definitive conclusive answer about what the angels are. In short, if somewhat in bombast: our problem here is less metaphysics than epistemology, or perhaps just exegesis.

Because it is not independently clear what a “favoured angel” might essentially be, we must resort to context to decipher meaning, context in two senses. First is the constellation of other concepts within which the favored angels are situated in the immediate text. That very suggestion that there is a constellation of “concepts” in this invocation suggests the second context: the allusive context. The conceptual meaning of “favored angels” and thus of the passage as a whole relies on the function of allusions to the concept in other texts, and thus the conceptual history of each term hinges on and is intertwined with the intertextual allusions that the deployment of the concepts invokes. (Again, all this requires sharpening with theories of allusion, meaning, and conceptual history; we are bracketing that for the time being.)

It is clear enough, at the basic level of immediate context and literal denotation, that favored angels are entities dispatched by the “sovereign Lord” to provide assistance and bring about “success.” The favored angels, insofar as they render to “each one of you” assistance proffered by the sovereign Lord, appear to mediate the relationship between the sovereignty of an all-powerful Lord and the immediate agent who brings about success, which is the individual as such: “you” and “each of you.” The passage thus establishes a triangular configuration of three agents among whom the favored angels negotiate: the sovereign Lord, who dispatches the angels to bring about success; the individual, who benefits from that assistance and executes success; and the Universal House of Justice itself, which “entreats” the Lord for the dispatch, or summons those angels forth. The sending forth of the favored angels perhaps deepens the triangular configuration into pyramidal one.

To make sense of the relationship thus established, we must take a detour through two other puzzles implicated in the original one set out above. What is success, that thing the favored angels precipitate? Why is it that the House of Justice calls for success when, it turns out, it has denounced a version of the concept elsewhere? That puzzle leads to a second: why is the “sovereign Lord” the object of this beseeching, imploring, and entreating? Why is it that that particular nomenclature is invoked here? Why is the rather feudalistic invocation of a lord, and the sovereignty of the lord,

relevant, and what does that have to do with angels? To state the problem at a slightly higher level of abstraction, then, this short invocation turns on a cluster of overlapping problems: the very fact of supplication and the party who is supplicating; the target or nature of the supplication; and the content of the supplication. Each, it turns out, is allusive in its own right.

Let us start with the outcome: success. The notion of “success” might seem to be an odd one to invoke. Bahá’u’lláh appears to write frequently and emphatically on the notion that it is processes rather than outcomes on which the individual must place value, particularly in relation to the expansion of his Faith. “If ye be aware of a certain truth, if ye possess a jewel, of which others are deprived, share it with them in a language of utmost kindness and goodwill,” Bahá’u’lláh exhorts his reader. “If it be accepted, if it fulfill its purpose, your object is attained. If anyone should refuse it, leave him unto himself, and beseech God to guide him. Beware lest ye deal unkindly with him,” he admonishes.¹⁴ And again, Bahá’u’lláh commands his followers, “Teach ye the Cause of God,” yet he follows quickly with this stricture: “Beware lest ye contend with anyone ... If your hearer respond, he will have responded to his own behoof, and if not,” he proceeds, “set your faces towards God’s sacred Court, the seat of resplendent holiness.” He exhorts his reader in this context: “Dispute not with anyone concerning the things of this world and its affairs.”¹⁵ If it is the act and not the outcome that matters, then what is “success”? The mere act of “sharing jewels”?

Indeed, in 2014, the Universal House of Justice itself deplored, in this same context of the expansion of the Faith, “narrow conceptions of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ that breed freneticism or paralyse volition,” conceptions it called “completely at odds” with the “capacity for learning” it seeks to inculcate. The notion of developing “capacity” for a communal process of learning about growth and expansion in a community necessarily implies, it suggested, that “everyone has a share in this enterprise” and “the contribution of each serves to enrich the whole.” Such a conception of knowledge and practice as communal work in progress to which all contribute “frees one from the fruitless search for a rigid formula,” it averred.¹⁶ Success, as the House of Justice itself acknowledged, in one sense appears antithetical to this process of learning.

What, then, is the more expansive “conception of success and failure” that does not contradict this orientation toward process, a conception so sacred it quite literally calls for favored angels? For indeed, just as the House of Justice does, Shoghi Effendi frequently and repeatedly spoke in thunderous, glowing terms of “success”—phenomenal success, magnificent success, marvelous success, spectacular success, signal success, brilliant success, total and resounding success—and occasionally wrote, particularly to American believers, that he appreciated and was delighted with

¹⁴ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, last modified June 12, 2025, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauallah/gleanings-writings-bahauallah/gleanings-writings-bahauallah.pdf?1b9ce445>, no. CXXXII, pdf p. 90.

¹⁵ *ibid*, no. CXXVII, pdf p. 85.

¹⁶ The Universal House of Justice, “223: Ridván Message 2014,” in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 2001–2022*, pp. 499 – 500.

their work and was praying for their “success.”¹⁷ And perhaps most strikingly of all, it is for success that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá prays in his *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, a collection of fourteen messages he wrote to believers in the United States, Canada, and Greenland in the 1910s exhorting them to propagate the Faith globally:

I fervently hope that in the near future the whole earth may be stirred and shaken by the results of your achievements. The hope which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá cherishes for you is that the same success which has attended your efforts in America may crown your endeavors in other parts of the world, that through you the fame of the Cause of God may be diffused throughout the East and the West, and the advent of the Kingdom of the Lord of Hosts be proclaimed in all the five continents of the globe. The moment this Divine Message is carried forward by the American believers from the shores of America, and is propagated through the continents of Europe, of Asia, of Africa and of Australia, and as far as the islands of the Pacific, this community will find itself securely established upon the throne of an everlasting dominion. Then will all the peoples of the world witness that this community is spiritually illumined and divinely guided. Then will the whole earth resound with the praises of its majesty and greatness.¹⁸

“Should success crown your enterprise,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá promised, then “America will assuredly evolve into a center from which waves of spiritual power will emanate, and the throne of the Kingdom of God, will, in the plenitude of its majesty and glory, be firmly established.”¹⁹

The very notion of success in 2025 alludes to a long intellectual history of the concept internal to the Faith and its Covenant, and the very supplication for success invokes similar supplications by Shoghi Effendi and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. What is this system of meaning, then, in which the call for success lies, a system of meaning that flips something “antithetical” to the principles of the Faith into something sacred? The House of Justice concludes its discussion on success in 2014: “When effort is expended wholly for the sake of God then all that occurs belongs to Him and every victory won in His Name is an occasion to celebrate His praise.” It appears to be this precise point that lies in the target of supplication, the “sovereign Lord.” The invocation of the sovereignty of the Lord suggests not only a sense of bonds of loyalty and subordination between the individual who executes success and that entity for whom he executes it, the Lord, but also at least two other critical concepts in the notion of

¹⁷ Shoghi Effendi, “October 21, 1948: Appeal to Entire Community to Persevere,” in *Citadel of Faith: Messages to America 1947 – 1957*, pdf p. 32.

¹⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “7: Tablet to the Bahá’is of the United States and Canada,” April 11, 1916, in *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, [translator unidentified], last modified June 12, 2025, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdu-baha/tablets-divine-plan/tablets-divine-plan.pdf?961e7cc3>, pdf p. 11.

¹⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “11: Tablet to the Bahá’is of the Central States,” in *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, pdf p. 23.

“sovereignty”: first, of course, that the success or victory that is attained “belongs to God,” that it is the Lord who bears dominion and possession over whatever lies under his sovereignty, and second, and perhaps more important, that the Lord is ultimately independent of whatever successes that might occur within his dominion, that he is self-sufficient and not susceptible to external meddling, as in the sovereignty of a nation. It is the Lord who grants success for the benefit of those who seek to execute it, not he who benefits from the success of others. When success is understood narrowly as something the individual engenders and claims as his or her own, then it is “at odds” with the concepts of the Faith, according to the House of Justice; when viewed as belonging to a sovereign Lord, it is sacred.

And thus the concept of the individual in the passage—“each of you”—is tempered: the individual acts as an agent of success, but success belongs to that which is sovereign, which is not the individual. For indeed, the individual, like success itself, is it at once condemned and extolled across the writings of the authorities of the Faith. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá warns, “One must become evanescence itself and be healed of every disease of the self, in order to become worthy of thralldom to the Threshold of the Almighty.”²⁰ And the House of Justice, in its commemoration of him on the hundredth anniversary of his death, recalled his injunction that the individual must be “‘totally self-effaced and evanescent’ so that ‘he may teach with the melody of the Concourse on high.’”²¹ Indeed, of the individual who has “not the slightest trace of egotism or private motives,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá declares, “know ye for a certainty that this individual will be supported and reinforced by heaven.” Yet he continues: “But if he show the slightest taint of selfish desires and self love, his efforts will lead to nothing and he will be destroyed and left hopeless at the last.”²² Shoghi Effendi echoes these admonitions frequently. And yet he also writes to American Bahá’ís of their supreme role, *qua* individuals, in propagating the Faith:

This challenge, so severe and insistent, and yet so glorious, faces no doubt primarily the individual believer on whom, in the last resort, depends the fate of the entire community. He it is who constitutes the warp and woof on which the quality and pattern of the whole fabric must depend. He it is who acts as one of the countless links in the mighty chain that now girdles the globe. He it is who serves as one of the multitude of bricks which support the structure and insure the stability of the administrative edifice now being raised in every part of the world. Without his support, at once whole-hearted, continuous and generous, every measure adopted, and every plan formulated, by the body which acts as the national

²⁰ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’í Sacred Writings* [translator unidentified], <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauddin/bahai-sacred-writings/bahai-sacred-writings.pdf?ec9d57c8>, ch. 15, no. 12, pdf p. 185.

²¹ The Universal House of Justice, “378: Tribute to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on the Centenary of His Passing,” November 27, 2021, in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 2001–2022*, no. 378, p. 833.

²² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, trans. a Committee at the Bahá’í World Centre and by Marzieh Gail, last modified February 22, 2026, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/selections-writings-abdul-baha/selections-writings-abdul-baha.pdf?37123f3b>, no. 35, pdf p. 30.

representative of the community to which he belongs, is foredoomed to failure. The World Center of the Faith itself is paralyzed if such a support on the part of the rank and file of the community is denied it. The Author of the Divine Plan Himself [‘Abdu’l-Bahá] is impeded in His purpose if the proper instruments for the execution of His design are lacking. The sustaining strength of Bahá’u’lláh Himself, the Founder of the Faith, will be withheld from every and each individual who fails in the long run to arise and play his part.²³

Success, narrowly understood, is entirely at odds with the Faith, yet it is extolled; the individual, when it turns inward to itself, becomes a source of destruction, but otherwise, it is that indispensable actor without which the Faith itself is doomed—amid these ostensible contradictions, favored angels appear as those entities that mediate between the sovereignty of the Lord the notion of the individual self, of “each of you,” affirming and tempering the latter by associating it with the former and thus bringing about success. That seems clear enough as a solution to our question of what favored angels are.

But such an answer is intellectually unsatisfying. At one level, it is too obvious. In the context of the sentence, that is quite plainly the function of the angels; there is little other conceivable reading. More important, the answer remains incomplete: why must it be a “favored angel” and not something else that mediates that relationship? How is it that, what is the mechanism by which, “favored angels” mediate the relationship between the sovereignty of the Lord and the autonomy of the individual self? The inadequacy of our answer up to here appears starkly in light of Shoghi Effendi’s reference, in his communication with Americans, to the “Author of the Divine Plan Himself,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who is “impeded in His purpose” by dereliction on the part of the individual, in this context the American individual. What it means that the “sustaining strength of Bahá’u’lláh” is “withheld” from the individual if the individual does not act seems readily intelligible: at the level of text, it appears to mean the same thing as favored angels not being dispatched. But the active withholding of sustenance is not the same thing as impediment.

It is here that the allusive function of the favored angels and their conceptual history, and the precipitating of Covenantal forces through their invocation, become significant: they open up realms of new meaning. Favored angels play their mediating role, at least at the level of meaning, through their allusive functions, in the context of the Covenant—“favored angels” unleash the forces of the Covenant throughout the text just as, at the level of practice, those same favored angels unleash the victory-inducing forces of the sovereign Lord in the operation of the Covenant. Or to restate the point in slightly different terms: if the supplication for “favoured angels” is intended to call for success through the sovereignty of the Lord, the invocation achieves that very purpose in the text by loading

²³ Shoghi Effendi, “July 28, 1954: American Bahá’is in the Time of World Peril,” in *Citadel of Faith*, pdf p. 72.

the text with Covenantal meaning—and by collapsing time, as we will see shortly.

Shoghi Effendi linked the notion of “success” specifically to the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. He wrote to the believers in the United States in 1924 explaining “our duty, our first obligation,” which was located in “the secret of the success of the Cause we love so well”: to “choose to tread carefully His path,” that is, the path of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Let us summon up the passage at length for the sake of clarity:

Let us recall, and seek on this sad occasion the comfort of, the last wishes of our departed yet ever-watchful Master [‘Abdu’l-Bahá]:—

“It behooveth them not to rest for a moment, neither to seek repose. They must disperse themselves in every land, pass by every clime, and travel throughout all regions. Bestirred, without rest, and steadfast to the end, they must raise in every land the triumphal cry ‘Ya Bahá’u’l-Abhá!’ (O Thou the Glory of Glories). ... The disciples of Christ forgot themselves and all earthly things, forsook all their cares and belongings, purged themselves of self and passion, and with absolute detachment scattered far and wide and engaged in calling the peoples of the world to the divine guidance; till at last they made the world another world, illumined the surface of the earth, and even to their last hour proved self-sacrificing in the pathway of that beloved One of God. Finally in various lands they suffered glorious martyrdom. Let them that are men of action follow in their footsteps!” [italics in original text]

Having grasped the significance of these words, having obtained a clear understanding of the true character of our mission, the methods to adopt, the course to pursue, and having attained sufficiently the individual regeneration—the essential requisite of teaching—let us arise to teach His Cause with righteousness, conviction, understanding and vigor. [...] Let us too bear in mind the example which our beloved Master has clearly set before us. [...]

If we all choose to tread faithfully His path, surely the day is not far distant when our beloved Cause will have emerged from the inevitable obscurity of a young and struggling Faith into the broad daylight of universal recognition. This is our duty, our first obligation. Therein lies the secret of the success of the Cause we love so well. Therein lies the hope, the salvation of mankind. Are we fully conscious of our responsibilities? Do we realize the urgency, the sacredness, the immensity, the glory of our task?²⁴

²⁴ Shoghi Effendi, “Letter of November 24th, 1924,” in *Bahá’í Administration: Selected Messages 1922 – 1933*, accessed March 2026, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/shoghi-effendi/bahai-administration/bahai-administration.pdf?86be10e7>, pdf pp. 37 – 38.

The notions of “emerging from inevitable obscurity” and “of a young and struggling Faith” seem clearly intended to be historically contingent, bound to the moment of 1924 and to Americans: the idea of a day not being too far off delimits that specific, immediate objective. But there is little sense that Shoghi Effendi’s statement of the “secret of the success of the Cause” is temporally contingent: success is, as a matter of generality, to “choose to tread faithfully His path.” And to do so requires individual regeneration, the forgetting of the self, the purging of the self from the self.

The passage Shoghi Effendi cites to explain the “path” of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, which is nothing other than the “secret of the success of the Cause,” comes from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and Testament: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá enjoins on those who follow him to arise “bestirred, without rest, and steadfast to the end,” and he refers back to the dispensation of Jesus to illustrate that “path.” Insofar as the secret of success is to follow in the path of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and insofar as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is the “embodiment of the Covenant,” or *is* the Covenant, it must necessarily be that the secret to success means to follow in the path of the Covenant, that very entity ordained in the Will and Testament; indeed, in the very next paragraph of the Will, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá appoints Shoghi Effendi as his successor. And if it is the case that favored angels mediate the relationship between the individual and the sovereign Lord by bringing about success, then it must be that they do so through their association with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, because to follow the path of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is the secret to success. All that means nothing other than the association of the individual with the Covenant and with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá through the individual’s regeneration and forgetting of the self and through the forces of the favored angels.

In other words, favored angels appear to be agents of Covenantal forces, and to follow the conceptual allusions through the intellectual history of the concepts deployed leads us back to the person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. And so we find the operation of the text mirroring the operation of the concepts it invokes: the text demands and itself achieves the same thing, but at two different levels. Just as the call for success requires the abnegation of the self and the pursuance of the path of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, so too does the text itself abnegate itself by deploying allusive meaning and surrendering itself and its meaning to the path and in the path of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

A series of next steps follow. To state the entire chain of allusion and meaning once more: if, thus, it is the case that favored angels mediate the relationship between the individual and the sovereign Lord by bringing about success through their association with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, which means nothing other than their association with the Covenant, or in other words, if they appear to be agents of Covenantal forces—if this much is true, then it is also the case that the favored angels function as a medium by which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in his capacity as the Servant of Bahá, the literal meaning of what Shoghi Effendi calls “the magic name ‘Abdu’l-Bahá,” and in his capacity as the Center of the Covenant, links the individual and the sovereign Lord to each other through the Manifestation of that Lord, Bahá’u’lláh himself.

Unsurprisingly, then, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in his capacity as the embodiment of the Covenant, deflects these conceptual allusions to him to Bahá’u’lláh through explicit reference to the very passage in which Bahá’u’lláh promised the dispatch of favored angels and the perpetuity of his absent presence past his own passing. “He is the All-Glorious,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asseverates, a statement that appears intended, among other things, to embark by setting the ontological system of the world aright and that by implication avers his own mysterious ontology within that system, an ontology he described as “utter nothingness” before the All-Glorious. He then continues:

Although the Sun of Truth may outwardly be veiled by the clouds of concealment, were one to look with a perceiving eye, listen with a hearing ear, and ponder with an awakened heart, it would become evident that the splendours of the Most Great Light have grown stronger and the rays of the lamp of God waxed brighter, that the waves of His most mighty Ocean have surged higher and the outpourings of the heaven of His bounty have become more abundant and manifest. For, until now, the veil of the human temple hath been an impediment to beholding the Sun of Truth. But now, wholly sanctified from all earthly things, that resplendent Orb and Day-Star of the highest heaven shineth forth above the Supreme Horizon and beameth bright from the all-glorious Realm. This is His explicit text: “Verily, We behold you from Our realm of glory, and shall aid whosoever will arise for the triumph of Our Cause with the hosts of the Concourse on high and a company of Our favoured angels.”

Even as was clearly seen in the advent of past Manifestations, only after Their ascension did the greatness of the Cause of God and the sovereignty of His Word become clear and evident.²⁵

We have arrived back at the passage with which we started this investigation, in which Bahá’u’lláh speaks of the “wisdom” of his “absence”:

Say: Let not your hearts be perturbed, O people, when the glory of My Presence is withdrawn, and the ocean of My utterance is stilled. In My presence amongst you there is a wisdom, and in My absence there is yet another, inscrutable to all but God, the Incomparable, the All-Knowing. Verily, We behold you from Our realm of glory, and shall aid whosoever will arise for the triumph of Our Cause with the hosts of the Concourse on high and a company of Our favored angels.

²⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Light of the World: Selected Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* [translator unidentified], <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/light-of-the-world/light-of-the-world.pdf?fa187e57>, no. 43, pdf pp. 39 – 40.

Bahá'u'lláh stresses that the fullness of the wisdom of his “absence” is “inscrutable to all but God.” Perhaps that inscrutability is linked to the appellation of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the “mystery of God”: the inscrutability of this absence is one and the same as, or maybe contains within it, the inscrutability of the person, rank, and identity of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá himself. This unknowability notwithstanding, Bahá'u'lláh promises that he remains attentive and will send forth his “favored angels” in his absence. It must be, then, that within this system of meaning the “favored angels” and the concept of “success” open up through allusion, the favored angels somehow transport the force and status of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá into the present to engender success, which means nothing other than to proffer access to Bahá'u'lláh and thus to the sovereign Lord through the forces of the Covenant.

The instability of temporality that results from this passage from Bahá'u'lláh thus paradoxically produces stability. After declaring that he has withdrawn—or, more exactly that the glory of his presence has been withdrawn—and after prognosticating his “absence,” Bahá'u'lláh appears to imply that he is not absent at all: that after absence, he continues to “behold you” from “his realm of glory” with a promise of—and this seems crucial in our system of allusion and meaning—“triumph.” The temporality here appears to be dual, then: an eternity or transtemporality in the “glory” of Bahá'u'lláh that does not obstruct his ability to “behold,” and the contingency of his earthly life, which comes to an end and results in absence. The reference to this concept of “favored angels” within this system of meaning therefore necessarily associates them with the Covenant. And thus the supplication for the favored angels by the Universal House of Justice in 2025 on behalf of the individual, whose action engenders success, suggests that the House now functions in the role of standing in for Bahá'u'lláh in his “absence” yet in his simultaneous presence; the House of Justice calls here upon Bahá'u'lláh, who continues to “behold” from on high, and it does so through the association of favored angels with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, which means their association with the Covenant. In short, the allusion to “favored angels” is an allusion to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, which is an allusion to the Covenant, which leads to Bahá'u'lláh and which is channeled by the House of Justice in its very supplication for those angels.

We still do not know what “favored angels” are in their ontological essence, but the system of meaning that their allusive deployment opens up suggests that they are agents, then, of temporality or perhaps more specifically of transtemporality. That the textual feature here is allusion and not simply an invocation of a particular concept or conceptual history relates to the argument that it is somewhat beside the immediate point what “favored angels” essentially are. It seems reasonable to assume, for example, that “the Concourse on high” and the “favored angels” that bring about triumph in the passage above from Bahá'u'lláh have the same purpose and are functionally similar entities. Indeed, in a supplication from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the Tablets of the Divine Plan on behalf of the American and Canadian believers that the “Lord of the Kingdom” might “assist them, and with the cohorts of the Supreme Concourse, make them victorious,” the cohorts of the Supreme Concourse

rendering victory appear to be the same entities, ontologically and conceptually, as the favored angels bringing success in the supplication of the Universal House of Justice. But the specific nomenclature the House of Justice deploys in this instance lights up, like in a switchboard, a distinct subset of passages within a broader system of meaning. Inherently associated with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá both through the conceptual history of the notion of “success” and, more importantly, through their invocation by Bahá’u’lláh of their role in his “absence,” these favored angels engender a continued presence through time despite absence: they create a present past. And their very invocation in the message from the House of Justice pulls them into the present: they are present, in the text, beholding. We thus find dual transtemporalities operating through the allusion, at the level of existence and at the level of meaning and text, and those two realities become intertwined into one.

And indeed, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá pulls the notion of success into the future, disrupting temporalities further: “The full measure of your success is as yet unrevealed,” he wrote to the American believers in his Tablets of the Divine Plan in 1916, “its significance still unapprehended. Erelong ye will, with your own eyes, witness how brilliantly every one of you, even as a shining star, will radiate in the firmament of your country the light of Divine Guidance, and will bestow upon its people the glory of an everlasting life.”²⁶ And Shoghi Effendi, quoting apparently Bahá’u’lláh, assures the American believers: “Let them not, for one moment, forget that the *‘Faithful Spirit shall strengthen them through its power,’* and that *‘a company of His chosen angels shall go forth with them, as bidden by Him Who is the Almighty, the All-Wise’*” (italics in original).²⁷ (It is worth noting, quickly, how replete in all these references, too, are allusions to the United States, the exceptional role of the Americans. We are bracketing, for now, the question of in what circumstances, and why, allusions to the Covenant might be allusions to Americans.)

The future ‘Abdu’l-Bahá thus prognosticated, through the invocation of the concept of “success,” appears in the present moment of the invocation of success and angels for “each one of you.” Correspondence following the message of Ridván 2025 then pulls this temporal string ever forward. In a letter to the Bahá’ís of the world dated January 4, 2026, the House of Justice wrote,

The devoted, spirited, diverse efforts being made to carry to every receptive heart what the True One has revealed—to offer hope to a trouble-gripped humanity, to offer the means of being a conscious agent in the work of worldwide spiritual renewal—are an abiding cause for admiration and wonder, for rejoicing and gratitude.²⁸

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²⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, December 25, 1938, accessed March 2026, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/shoghi-effendi/advent-divine-justice/advent-divine-justice.pdf?33dfa5fd>, pdf p. 28.

²⁸ The Universal House of Justice, “To the Bahá’ís of the World,” January 4, 2026, https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20260104_001/20260104_001.pdf.

Here, too, the House of Justice piles on more realms of allusive meaning, not least that of a “world spiritual renewal,” allusive meaning that would require a long detour again. Let us focus on one instructive, relevant case: the phrase “admiration and wonder,” or its inverse of wonder and admiration, and the point that it is “efforts” that act as the subject of the sentence, the force that acts as a “cause” of admiration and wonder—a cause that is “abiding,” that transcends time, despite the very contingency of the time being discussed. Here, too, the allusive meaning returns to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Center of the Covenant.

It turns out that the very emotions of “admiration and wonder,” which the House of Justice indicates that it feels, are themselves allusive, reaching beyond the specific moment in which they occur and the contingent efforts that cause them, suggesting that those contingent efforts, too, link to something beyond contingency. Shoghi Effendi wrote often of “admiration and wonder” as the specific set of emotions he experienced; the allusion implies that House of Justice feels that exact same thing that Shoghi Effendi himself felt. It was often in response to the exploits of American believers that Shoghi Effendi wrote with these feelings. He conveyed, for example, in a cablegram in the midst of the Second World War, “DELIGHT ADMIRATION WONDER” at the “AMERICAN BELIEVERS’ BRILLIANT FEAT” in achieving goals he had set for them and observed “PERSIAN FAMILIES EMULATING EXAMPLE AMERICAN TRAILBLAZERS.”²⁹

If the House of Justice invokes the emotions of Shoghi Effendi, and if the House of Justice felt those emotions in response to “efforts” of contemporary people to spread “what the True One has revealed,” then in response to what did Shoghi Effendi claim those emotions? The reference to Americans might itself adequately suggest that, unsurprisingly, Shoghi Effendi wrote of “admiration and wonder” to speak of the labors of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the United States. The consequence of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “outburst of activity” in journeying to the United States, Shoghi Effendi chronicled in his history of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s voyage, was “to dumbfound His followers in East and West with admiration and wonder” and thus “to exercise an imperishable influence on the course of its future history.”³⁰ The specific allusive network established by this invocation of these twin emotions might imply both the similitude of the subjects feeling the emotions and the essential identity of what is igniting those emotions: the exertion of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in journeying to the United States to spread what the “True One has revealed,” carried forward in the exploits of the American believers who followed in his path during the time of Shoghi Effendi, and then in the “Persian families” who emulated the Americans,

²⁹ Shoghi Effendi, “112: Bahá’í Communities East and West,” May 25, 1943, in *This Decisive Hour: Messages from Shoghi Effendi to the North American Bahá’ís 1932 – 1946*, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/shoghi-effendi/decisive-hour/decisive-hour.pdf?074f559c>, no. 112, pdf p. 59.

³⁰ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* [1944], last modified July 22, 2024, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/shoghi-effendi/god-passes-by/god-passes-by.pdf?584df987>, ch. XIX, pdf p. 160.

and then, during the time of the House of Justice, all the “diverse efforts” across the world. In short, what appear to be words of praise from the House of Justice for people today in essence allude back to what is the “secret” and source of “success”—‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in his capacity as the Center of the Covenant. Perhaps even more than the “efforts” themselves, the Covenant-infused allusion from the House of Justice invoking “wonder and admiration” at those efforts renders imperishable what Shoghi Effendi calls the “imperishable influence” of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s voyage to the United States.

Indeed, of that voyage, Shoghi Effendi writes again, just paragraphs later, with this same turn of phrase, as if to cement the association of those emotions with that voyage: “During these travels ‘Abdu’l-Bahá displayed a vitality, a courage, a single-mindedness, a consecration to the task He had set Himself to achieve that excited the wonder and admiration of those who had the privilege of observing at close hand His daily acts.”³¹ It is as if, when the House of Justice speaks of “efforts being made to carry what the True One has revealed” being an “abiding cause” of “admiration and wonder,” it is speaking—abidingly, transtemporally—at once of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and of what it is witnessing in that moment as it “observ[es] at close hand” the exertion of the world Bahá’í community. Because the allusive, subjective admiration and wonder of those who witnessed ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and of the House of Justice are the same, there is an implication that the objective works of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the efforts being made today are also not only similar but in fact essentially the same: the House is witnessing ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as it witnesses present-day efforts. This identity in no way implies that the contingent executors of the acts are identical—they certainly are not—but rather that in fact, it is ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Covenantal, favored-angelic forces at work when those efforts are made, that all “efforts” to “carry ... what the True One has revealed” find their origin in the signal efforts toward that end of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in his journey to the West and his ordaining of his Tablets of the Divine Plan. Indeed, as the House of Justice wrote at the time of the centenary of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing, “Every community-building endeavour undertaken today, every educational activity and every outreach, carries with it the hope of communicating, through our own efforts, a token of the same love He showered upon every soul.”³² There is a collapse of time, then, through the agency of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and his Covenant. “Today,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá himself wrote, “the Lord of Hosts is the defender of the Covenant, the forces of the Kingdom protect it, heavenly souls tender their services, and heavenly angels promulgate and spread it broadcast.”³³ That “today” is a day that has continued into the present: by summoning favored angels, the House of Justice makes the today of the “heavenly angels” interminable.

Such a reading is reinforced by what the House of Justice means by “what the True One has revealed.” That phrase is not an allusion; it is a direct quotation of Bahá’u’lláh that the House of Justice

³¹ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, pdf p. 161.

³² The Universal House of Justice, “378: Tribute to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on the Centenary of His Passing,” November 27, 2021, in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 2001–2022*, no. 378, p. 833.

³³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, no. 192, pdf p. 96.

inserts in the previous line of the message: “It is the concern of the True One to reveal and the concern of the people to spread what hath been revealed.” The House of Justice ends the quotation there in its correspondence. But it is not hard to find the next sentence of the passage from Bahá’u’lláh from which that quotation is extracted: “He will, verily, promulgate His Cause by the hands of His scattering and well-favoured angels.”

3. Allusions B and C: “seed of the Faith” and “hearts aglow”

Whatever they might be in essence, then, “favoured angels” mediate between individual endeavor and the omnipotence of the sovereign Lord to engender success by linking the individual to the person of Bahá’u’lláh through the person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, which means through the institution of the Covenant—such is the allusive meaning in the deployment of “favoured angels.” The angels are what, in the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, enable the “splendours of the Most Great Light [to] have grown stronger and the rays of the lamp of God [to have] waxed brighter,” for “only after [Bahá’u’lláh’s] ascension did the greatness of the Cause of God and the sovereignty of His Word become clear and evident.” Through their association with the Covenant, these favored angels serve a temporal function: to bridge contingency and non-contingency in the temporal realm, to aid in bringing the finitude of the lifespan of the Center of the Covenant into the perpetuity of the institution of the Covenant. At the very least, that is what they achieve at the level of text: tying the past inextricably into the present, making the ostensible past present in the passage of the text. It very well might be that the act of inserting them into the text in that way seeks to engender the reality that it construes, that the purport behind the allusions is to unleash the Covenantal forces to which they themselves attest.

Indeed, Shoghi Effendi has written explicitly of the function of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the institution of the Covenant that he incarnated, that he *was*, in creating a new temporality, a commingling of multiple ages, progress along time yet also simultaneity along time—both “continuity” and “intertwining.” That function appears to devolve specifically on the Universal House of Justice insofar as it was that institution that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, following Bahá’u’lláh, ordained in the Will and Testament to which Shoghi Effendi refers. Shoghi Effendi wrote,

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Who incarnates an institution for which we can find no parallel whatsoever in any of the world’s recognized religious systems, may be said to have closed the Age to which He Himself belonged and opened the one in which we are now laboring. His Will and Testament should thus be regarded as the perpetual, the indissoluble link which the mind of Him Who is the Mystery of God [i.e., ‘Abdu’l-Bahá; this gloss is my insertion] has conceived in order to insure the *continuity* [my italics] of the three ages that constitute the component parts of the Bahá’í Dispensation. The period in which the seed of the Faith had been slowly germinating is thus *intertwined* [my italics] both with the one which must witness

its efflorescence and the subsequent age in which that seed will have finally yielded its golden fruit.³⁴

The naturalistic imagery in this reference to the temporality that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá generated or generates, at once creating a succession in the organic development of the Faith over time yet braiding together the ages of that sequential process, leads us to another system of meaning that the allusions of the 2025 Ridván message open up. Those allusions refer to actual, witnessed examples of the “success” that the favored angels engender, of the way in which “the Most Great Light” continues to radiate after it has withdrawn, of the way in which the “efflorescence” of the “seed of the Faith” occurs. The present-day, new “progress” that the House of Justice describes in 2025 itself alludes back to other times before that progress; it is intelligible through other times, and it is, then, an example of the very “intertwining” of ages of which Shoghi Effendi speaks in his reference to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and his Will and Testament, insofar as the Universal House of Justice itself is a product of that Will and Testament. The House of Justice observed in 2025:

Striking breakthroughs have occurred in varied climes, where significant progress had not previously been witnessed, as the seed of the Faith has yielded new green shoots and the capacity for working with many souls at once has begun to emerge. These advances have often been made possible by devoted pioneers who, hearts aglow with the love of their Lord, have hastened to posts on the home front and abroad in impressive numbers.³⁵

We have broached up to this point the question of how various moments across time operate together in a single moment of text through allusion, or how allusion in the text generates multiple times and out of them a unified temporality. Here, we encounter a related but inverse problem: how within a single moment of global time exist multiple different ages, or how prior to the text multiple times coexist and how the text resolves and reconciles those variegated times into one. Or to put it otherwise: whereas the question with “favored angels” was how the time of Bahá’u’lláh and of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá carry into the present day through allusions, and how the present day involves the interaction of those various times in a new temporality, here we wonder how in a single moment in the present, progress has been made variably in different parts of the world, resulting in a global contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous; in some places “germination” has not occurred *yet*, whereas in other places “efflorescence” has *already* been witnessed. Indeed, the rest of the quoted paragraph of the Ridván message discusses places where the growth process has gone further, places

³⁴ Shoghi Effendi, “The Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh,” February 8, 1934, in *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh: Selected Letters*, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/shoghi-effendi/world-order-bahauallah/world-order-bahauallah.pdf?81c344ef>, pdf p. 65.

³⁵ See footnote 12.

that have advanced past further milestones of progress. The role of the Covenant, which is nothing other than the role of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, mediates and balances this multiplicity of stages of progress that coexist in a single moment of global time and generates unity out of them. The various “periods” of the Faith that the mind of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá “intertwines” do not only exist in different moments of history and then co-exist in a single moment of time; they exist disparately yet simultaneously in different spans of space, insofar as the implication of the passage above appears to be that places where the seed has not yet germinated still exist in a period prior. Of course, the problem of time as mapped onto space in this way is of immense significance in postcolonialism, and a thorough discussion of how the conception here differs from that or those discussed in postcolonial theory is warranted. That, though, is a question for another time.

We can speak, then, of three simultaneously existing temporalities that together constitute the single encompassing temporality engendered by the Covenant: Temporality A, the forward, linear progression of the Faith through ages, or through phases of germination, efflorescence, and fruition; Temporality B, in which these latter two ages are “intertwined” through the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá with the first age of germination insofar as the influence and power of Bahá’u’lláh associated with that age of germination persist into the future through ‘Abdu’l-Bahá; and Temporality C, in which an axis of space is introduced into the progression of time and germination, efflorescence, and fruition insofar as different places across the world in a single moment of time exist varyingly in a state of germination, or efflorescence, or fruition.

We can add to these three sub-temporalities, all of which fall within what is called in the Bahá’í Faith the “Lesser Covenant,” or the relationship of Bahá’u’lláh to the administrative order through the person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Temporality D, which brings that entire system internal to the Faith into a relationship with the “Greater Covenant”: an intertwining of the present religious dispensation with religious dispensations prior, something at which we have already glimpsed through ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s reference in the Tablets of the Divine Plan to the disciples of Jesus.

The allusion of the “seed of the Faith” in the passage from Riḍván 2025 quoted above turns on the interaction among these four temporalities, and out of that allusion these four configurations of time become, in Shoghi Effendi’s words, “intertwined”; the resonance between the organic metaphor Shoghi Effendi uses to explain the intertwining of time engendered by the Covenant and the metaphor of the “seed of the Faith” deployed by the House of Justice calls for consideration, then, on how the Universal House of Justice fits in with or indeed perpetuates this intertwining in its relationship to the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. As we did with the favored angels who concluded the correspondence of Riḍván 2025, we encounter here another rather obvious, rather rudimentary question: what is the “seed of the Faith,” why does the Faith have a “seed,” and why does the House of Justice seem so committed to this metaphor as to extend it with “varied climes” and “new green shoots”?

“Seeds” is hardly an obscure metaphor or an abstruse allusion; it is a familiar, central metaphor in the writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá generally and in the Tablets of the Divine Plan especially. That “the seed of the Faith” is an allusion seems without doubt; the question remains, what does it mean?

Just like that of favored angels, the allusive content of seeds first mediates the relationship between the individual and the sovereign Lord, between effort and success, or, in more abstract terms, the relationship between agency and structure. Across several of the Tablets of the Divine Plan, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to the believers as “farmers” whose role is to plant seeds; the bounty of God is rain that enables those seeds to grow. In one of the tablets, he wrote plainly, “A person declaring the glad tidings of the appearance of the realities and significances of the Kingdom is like unto a farmer who scatters pure seeds in the rich soil. The spring cloud will pour upon them the rain of bounty.” And he continued, “Appreciate ye the value of this time, and be ye engaged in the sowing of the seeds, so that you may find the heavenly blessing and the lordly bestowal.”³⁶ There is, then, a mediation between volition and bounty: it is the rain that is responsible for the efflorescence of the seeds, it is the soil that has already been enriched, but in both turns of phrase, it appears that the agentive act of sowing in itself precipitates the rain, or more accurately, precipitates the significance of the rain, that because the seed has been sown, the rain will fall meaningfully, consequentially. Individual agency summons forth the favored angels, summons forth the rain, but it is the transcendental force of the rain that engenders growth.

In this and seemingly every other invocation of seeds ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes in the Tablets of the Divine Plan, the notion of planting seeds has a stark temporal dimension to it, as it does, of course, in the natural world. There is a time to plant the seed—“appreciate yet the value of this time,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá exhorts—and then a time for harvest, times that are ordained well before the time of planting itself, entirely independent of the farmer, again as in the natural world. The role of the farmer is to seize that opportunity. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote,

Now you must become heavenly farmers and scatter pure seeds in the prepared soil. The harvest of every other seed is limited, but the bounty and the blessing of the seed of the divine teachings is unlimited. Throughout the coming centuries and cycles many harvests will be gathered. Consider the work of former generations. During the lifetime of Jesus Christ the believing, firm souls were few and numbered, but the heavenly blessings descended so plentifully that in a number of years countless souls entered beneath the shadow of the Gospel. God has said in the Qur’án: “One grain will bring forth seven sheaves, and every sheaf shall

³⁶ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Tablet to the Bahá’is of the Southern States,” in *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, no. 2, pdf p. 3.

contain one hundred grains.”³⁷

With the invocation of both the Christian and the Islamic dispensations, and with a promise of harvests in coming centuries and cycles, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá ties the times of other religious dispensations into the temporalities within the Bahá’í dispensation. He ties, in other words, the Greater and Lesser Covenants together, both of which are latent in the seed. That ‘Abdu’l-Bahá links specifically this idea of seeds and their fruition to the days of Jesus is not incidental. In another of the tablets, in his message to the Bahá’ís of the central states of the United States to “sow divine seeds,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá alludes to Matthew 13:23, writing, “When the pure seeds are scattered in the good ground heavenly blessing and benediction is obtained.”³⁸ The allusion in 2025, then, to the “seed of the Faith” yielding “new green shoots” refers, unambiguously, to the Tablets of the Divine Plan from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “the secret of success,” and through that Center of the Covenant to the sweep of religious time, all of which are at play as the seed yields shoots. And it implicitly intimates the role of the House of Justice in measuring, configuring, and announcing that simultaneous movement through time and stillness in time.

The close association of the allusion of seeds primarily with the dispensation of Jesus, but also with the promise of Muhammad of vast efflorescence, points at once to the commonality of the Bahá’í dispensation with those of Jesus and Muhammad and to its difference. To an audience in Boston, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reportedly said:

From the seed of reality religion has grown into a tree which has put forth leaves and branches, blossoms and fruit. After a time this tree has fallen into a condition of decay. The leaves and blossoms have withered and perished; the tree has become stricken and fruitless. It is not reasonable that man should hold to the old tree, claiming that its life forces are undiminished, its fruit unequalled, its existence eternal. The seed of reality must be sown again in human hearts in order that a new tree may grow therefrom and new divine fruits refresh the world. By this means the nations and peoples now divergent in religion will be brought into unity, imitations will be forsaken, and a universal brotherhood in reality itself will be established.³⁹

The leap here from time to space is crucial: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá moves from the renewal of the seed of the reality of religion over time to the fruition of that seed as global unity, a “universal brotherhood” that that very temporal thrust yields. Combining this conception of the temporality of seeds and the spatiality and ontological unity it enables with the question of what distinguishes the Bahá’í

³⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Tablet to the Bahá’ís of the Northeastern States,” in *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, no. 1, pdf p. 2.

³⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Tablet to the Bahá’ís of the Central States,” in *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, no. 3, pdf p. 4.

³⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Talk at the Tremont Temple at the Unitarian Conference, Boston, Massachusetts,” no. 52, pdf p. 84.

dispensation from dispensations prior, despite their being of the same seed, leads to the question of the administrative structure of the Faith—indeed, to the Covenant. In another context in which he writes of the elected assemblies in the administrative order he has launched, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá impresses on his interlocutors that the institutions of his administrative order have “neither peer nor likeness in the cycles gone before,” and he curiously turns back, in this context of asserting the uniqueness of the assemblies of the Faith, which “have for their defender, their supporter, their helper, their inspirer, the omnipotent Lord,” to commonalities with the days of Jesus to assert that the fruition will this time be different:

Look ye not upon the present, fix your gaze upon the times to come. In the beginning, how small is the seed, yet in the end it is a mighty tree. Look ye not upon the seed, look ye upon the tree, and its blossoms, and its leaves and its fruits. Consider the days of Christ, when none but a small band followed Him; then observe what a mighty tree that seed became, behold ye its fruitage. And now shall come to pass even greater things than these, for this is the summons of the Lord of Hosts, this is the trumpet-call of the living Lord, this is the anthem of world peace, this is the standard of righteousness and trust and understanding raised up among all the variegated peoples of the globe; this is the splendor of the Sun of Truth, this is the holiness of the spirit of God Himself. This most powerful of dispensations will encompass all the earth, and beneath its banner will all peoples gather and be sheltered together. Know then the vital import of this tiny seed that the true Husbandman hath, with the hands of His mercy, sown in the ploughed fields of the Lord, and watered with the rain of bestowals and bounties and is now nurturing in the heat and light of the Daystar of Truth.⁴⁰

The invocation of the efflorescence and fruition of the seeds of the Faith through the institutions of the Faith and through a temporality that is at once cyclical and progressive relates to the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, inasmuch as that Will and Testament ordained the institutions of the Faith and thus enabled the perpetuation of the Divine Plan of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá for the expansion of the Faith. The metaphor of seeds and their fruition into trees and fruits links, then, the expansion and consolidation of the Faith, features of the Tablets of the Divine Plan, to the administration of the Faith, features of the Will and Testament. “‘*Fear not*,’ are His [‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s] reassuring words foreshadowing the rise of the Administrative Order established by His Will,” Shoghi Effendi recalled, citing words reminiscent of Bahá’u’lláh’s own words of solace foreshadowing his passing, “‘*fear not if this Branch* [i.e. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: this gloss is my insertion] *be severed from this material world and cast aside its leaves; nay, the leaves thereof shall flourish, for this Branch will grow after it is cut off from this world below, it shall reach the loftiest pinnacles of glory, and it shall bear such fruits as will*

⁴⁰ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, no. 40, pdf p. 34.

perfume the world with their fragrance” (italics in original text).⁴¹ That similar metaphors of trees, seeds, and fruits are deployed in reference to the administration, to the Covenant, and to the Will and Testament, on the one hand, and to the expansion of the Faith, to the Divine Plan of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and to the Tablets of the Divine Plan, on the other, does not appear coincidental. Shoghi Effendi himself suggests the reciprocal relationship between the strength of the Covenant and the outward spread of the Faith. He makes an important claim: the vindication of the Bahá’í administrative order and the Covenant, especially as distinct from the administration of the dispensations of Christianity and Islam, yields “the success of the efforts which believers in every land are now exerting for the establishment of God’s kingdom upon the earth. Few will fail to recognize that the Spirit breathed by Bahá’u’lláh upon the world ... can never permeate and exercise an abiding influence upon mankind unless and until it incarnates itself in a visible Order, which would bear His name.”⁴²

If the metaphor of seeds as deployed in a single moment in 2025 contains then within it the temporalities of the time of Jesus, of the prophecies and promises of Muhammad, and of the Tablets of the Divine Plan from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and if it thus intimately associates the expansion of the Faith, as chartered in those Tablets, to the administrative order, as chartered in the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, thus intertwining the Greater and Lesser Covenants with each other and with the Tablets of the Divine Plan, it is indeed unsurprising that this same notion of seeds and of the temporality associated with them constituted a major metaphor in the Ten Year Plan embarked upon in 1953. With that plan, Shoghi Effendi called for a “planetary spiritual crusade,” the propagation of the Faith across the entire world. The first global plan for the Bahá’ís of the world, it concluded with the establishment of the Universal House of Justice in 1963, on the centenary of the declaration of Bahá’u’lláh and the closing of what Shoghi Effendi called the first epoch of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Divine Plan. Let us look at how this metaphor of seeds appears in that context; let us do so as a means of discerning the infusion of the temporal order of the plans of Shoghi Effendi into those of the House of Justice and the House of Justice’s reading of that temporal order into the empirical, rather delayed “germination” to which it testifies in 2025.

In a lengthy message in 1953, Shoghi Effendi identified ‘Abdu’l-Bahá himself, “the Author of the Divine Plan,” as the “marshal” of the Ten Year Plan despite his having passed away thirty-two years before its launch. And he explained, in reference to the Ten Year Plan, “The charter directing its course is the immortal Tablets that have flowed from the pen of the Center of the Covenant Himself.” The very nomenclature, by varyingly identifying ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s through his capacities as the marshal of the expansion of the Faith and as the Center of the Covenant, two distinct but related identities

⁴¹ Shoghi Effendi, “The Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh,” February 8, 1934, in *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh: Selected Letters*, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/shoghi-effendi/world-order-bahauallah/world-order-bahauallah.pdf?81c344ef>, pdf p. 66.

⁴² Shoghi Effendi, “The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh: Further Considerations,” March 21, 1930, in *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh: Selected Letters*, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/shoghi-effendi/world-order-bahauallah/world-order-bahauallah.pdf?81c344ef>, pdf p. 9.

bearing on, respectively, propagation and administration—the nomenclature thus links the Will and Testament to the Tablets of the Divine Plan. Shoghi Effendi continued:

So vast, so momentous and challenging a crusade that will, God willing, illuminate the annals of the second epoch of the Formative Age of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, and immortalize the second decade of the second Bahá'í century, and the termination of which will mark the closing of the first epoch in the evolution of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Divine Plan, will, in itself, pave the way for, and constitute the prelude to, the initiation of the laborious and tremendously long process of establishing in the course of subsequent crusades in all the newly opened sovereign states, dependencies and islands of the planet, as well as in all the remaining territories of the globe, the framework of the Administrative Order of the Faith, with all its attendant agencies, and of eventually erecting in these territories still more pillars to share in sustaining the weight and in broadening the foundation of the Universal House of Justice.⁴³

What did it mean that a “decade,” a clearly demarcated, contingent span of time, would extricate itself from that very contingency and sprawl across and outside that span of time? This “immortalization” of contingent time Shoghi Effendi specifically associated with the establishment of the Universal House of Justice: it was because that decade would consummate, through the propagation of the Faith, in the founding of the House of Justice and the expansion of the administrative order that the decade would be transformed into a temporality beyond definitude, indeed finitude. The sprawling single sentence in which Shoghi Effendi explicates this immortalization, in its very literary construction, signals at once the vastness of the challenge, the laborious and “tremendously long process,” and the literal culmination, meaning the culmination of both the sentence itself and the process it describes, in the Universal House of Justice—a culmination that is but a prelude to the future.

He continued:

Then, and only then, will the vast, the majestic process, set in motion at the dawn of the Adamic cycle, attain its consummation—a process which commenced six thousand years ago, with the planting, in the soil of the divine will, of the tree of divine revelation, and which has already passed through certain stages and must needs pass through still others ere it attains its final consummation.⁴⁴

⁴³ Shoghi Effendi, “All-America Intercontinental Conference – First Message,” May 1953, in *Messages to the Bahá'í World 1950–1957: A Supplementary Collection* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971), no. 69.

⁴⁴ *ibid*

To restate the point: Shoghi Effendi identifies the establishment of the Universal House of Justice and the development of the administrative structures supporting it with the fruition, or the start of the final consummation, of the planting of a seed thousands of years prior. That establishment was enabled by the expansion of the Faith, the spreading of the seeds of this Faith and not of “revelation” in general, through a plan marshalled by an ostensibly absent ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. And that very plan was in this way “immortalized” to constitute a paradoxically recurring prelude to future crusades that would strengthen the administrative order and the Covenant. The Universal House of Justice itself identified the Nine Year Plan in which the message of Riḍván 2025 was a brief progress report as “reminiscent of the demands that the Guardian made of the Bahá’í world at the outset of the Ten Year Crusade,” implying, it seems that it was one of the “subsequent” plans anticipated by Shoghi Effendi in this very passage.⁴⁵

All this lies in the single reference to the seed of the Faith. In that metaphorical seed, much as in nature itself, lie multiple temporalities, both the potentialities of the future and the deposit of the past which produced the seed, all of which are opened up by the deployment of the seed as an allusion in the present. Much remains still unexplored here, but let us reiterate the basic point: that the allusions of the Universal House of Justice in its explication of the expansion of the Faith intertwine the present age with the age of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá through its perpetuation of the Covenant, and in that very intertwining, generate a new temporality in which the past of the administrative order under the Guardian and the plans of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá continue on into the present. That past itself is intimately linked to the age of Jesus and of his disciplines and in the promises of Muhammad, which find their consummation in the present. That consummation occurs varyingly in different parts of the world and at different times, just as seeds germinate at different times in different places, but insofar as they all occur within the temporal order chartered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who mediates these temporalities, they are harmonized in an orderly system. There are, in other words, four different temporalities that collapse into one under the House of Justice and through its correspondence. And inasmuch as these four temporalities are all associated with the spatial growth and propagation of the Faith just as a seed is inherently associated with growth, from the intimate relationship between time and space, between the administrative order of the Faith and its global expansion and consolidation, between the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Tablets of the Divine Plan, comes the fruition of global unity.

Having raced, or stampeded, through this network of meaning in which the allusion of the seed operates, let us return to a narrower problem in the original passage from Riḍván 2025 in which that allusion appeared. The House of Justice observed in that passage that “these advances,” that is, the germination of the seed of the Faith in new places, “have often been made possible by devoted pioneers who, hearts aglow with the love of their Lord, have hastened to posts on the home front and abroad in impressive numbers.” At the basic level of syntax, the phrase “hearts aglow with the love of

⁴⁵ The Universal House of Justice, “384: The Nine Year Plan,” December 30, 2021, in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 2001–2022*, p. 863.

their Lord” feels like a pause in the temporal thrust of the sentence, an insertion from another place, a moment’s rupture in the time of the sentence between the “advances” and the “hastening,” a brief respite before that hastening. For indeed, the turn of phrase reflects a disruption in temporality. There, too, is another allusion: hearts aglow. And this allusion perhaps introduces a final temporality, Temporality E: that of the eternity of the non-contingent Lord, that ultimate target of supplication, which exists outside of human time altogether.

“These are the days of seed sowing,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá declared to an audience just steps away from what is today the 66th Street stop on the 1 Train in New York City in April 1912. If 1912 marked the days of seed sowing, then the House of Justice declared in 2025 that that seed had at last begun, in some places, to yield new green shoots. “Do you appreciate the Day in which you live?” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asked. He referred to a “timely seed,” one whose “fruitage and flower shall be the solidarity of mankind,” again linking this concept of temporality to the spatial unification of the world, using that very metaphor of verdure by which Shoghi Effendi demarcated but then intertwined the various ages of the Faith. And he enjoined upon those souls in New York City, those he charged with the seeding of the world: “With hearts set aglow by the fire of the love of God and spirits refreshed by the food of the heavenly spirit you must go forth as the disciples nineteen hundred years ago.”⁴⁶ We earlier encountered the allusion to the disciples of Jesus with the metaphor of the seed; the related metaphor of “hearts set aglow,” too, was one ‘Abdu’l-Bahá used throughout his travels in the United States: in Chicago, in Jersey City, in Washington, or in Cambridge, Mass., where he used that phrase—“aglow with the fire of the love of God”—to describe the attraction of the Báb to Bahá’u’lláh and to explain how Cantabrigians should “follow his heavenly example.” And strikingly, as we saw at the outset, he deployed that metaphor in his testimony to the “Lord” himself on behalf of Bostonians: “Verily, they are attracted by Thy holiness and set aglow with the fire of Thy love, seeking confirmation from Thy wondrous kingdom.” He spoke moments before that supplication of the abounding love he encountered on his voyages in America: “In your hearts I have beheld the reflection of a great and wonderful love. The Americans have shown me uniform kindness, and I entertain a deep spiritual love for them.”⁴⁷

As with favored angels, and as with seeds, the notion of “hearts aglow” examines the source of an individual’s success: what is it that engenders the ability to spread the seeds? In 1913, in London, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá drew from this metaphor in a broader theorization of the ontology of love, and stated, “In the world of existence there is indeed no greater power than the power of love. When the heart of man is aglow with the flame of love, he is ready to sacrifice all.” And Shoghi Effendi wrote, linking this love again to that secret of success that is the path of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Center of the Covenant,

⁴⁶ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Talk at the Studio of Miss Phillips, 39 West Sixty-seventh Street, New York,” April 12, 1912, in *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, no. 3, pdf p. 8.

⁴⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Huntington Chambers, Boston,” pdf p. 87.

the marshal of the Divine Plan:

Humanity, torn with dissension and burning with hate, is crying at this hour for a fuller measure of that love which is born of God, that love which in the last resort will prove the one solvent of its incalculable difficulties and problems. Is it not incumbent upon us, whose hearts are aglow with love for Him, to make still greater effort, to manifest that love in all its purity and power in our dealings with our fellow-men? May our love of our beloved Master [‘Abdu’l-Bahá], so ardent, so disinterested in all its aspects, find its true expression in love for our fellow-brethren and sisters in the faith as well as for all mankind. I assure you, dear friends, that progress in such matters as these is limitless and infinite, and that upon the extent of our achievements along this line will ultimately depend the success of our mission in life.⁴⁸

The general philosophical principle explicated here and alluded to in the reference to “hearts aglow” extricates the “advances” made by pioneers in helping the seed of the Faith germinate from the temporal contingency of that germination and locates them within the broad sweep of time: their love is that same love that disciples had for Jesus; it is the love that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá encountered and himself spread in the United States; and indeed, it is even the love the Báb had for Bahá’u’lláh. And thus, the allusion to a phrase ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi deployed situates present-day advances within a philosophy of human powers and potentialities, a philosophy that transcends time, that not only traverses religious dispensations but resides in the very fabric of reality. It obtains in and from a world independent of time.

It is worth mentioning again, even if in passing, that there is something exceptionally though not exclusively American in all these invocations. To a gathering in Chicago in 1912, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is reported to have “prayed in [its] behalf” that their “spirits may become aglow with the fire and illumination of His glad tidings, until these divine foundations may become established throughout the human world,” and he identified what these “institutions and foundations” were: first, “the oneness of humanity and love among mankind,” and second, “the Most Great Peace.” He averred: “This American democracy manifests capacity, showing forth readiness to become the standard-bearer of the Most Great Peace. May its hosts be the hosts of the oneness of humanity.”⁴⁹

And, of course, the metaphor itself originates in writings of Bahá’u’lláh, who associated it with the propagation of the Faith. “Be ablaze as the fire, that ye may burn away the veils of heedlessness and set aglow, through the quickening energies of the love of God, the chilled and wayward heart,” he enjoined, suggesting with the metaphor of the self-immolating, other-attracting

⁴⁸ Shoghi Effendi, “Letter of February 23, 1924,” in *Bahá’í Administration*, pdf p. 34.

⁴⁹ Abdu’l-Bahá, “Talk at Public Meeting Concluding Convention of Bahá’í Temple Unity,” April 30, 1912, in *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, no. 27, pdf p. 41.

fire precisely the abnegation of self we encountered with the favored angels.⁵⁰ In a letter to the Ottoman prime minister, he wrote, referring to another individual:

O thou who art set aglow with the fire of the love of God! ... We beseech God to confirm thee in His love and in His good pleasure, to assist thee in the promotion of His Cause, and to number thee with such as have arisen for the triumph of His Faith.⁵¹

“The divine bounties are flowing. Each one of you has been given the opportunity of becoming a tree yielding abundant fruits. This is the springtime of Bahá’u’lláh,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá impressed on the gathering in New York in April 1912. And he continued, “Consider me—in the years of my advanced age, burdened with physical infirmities—crossing the wide ocean to look upon your faces. It is my hope that through the life of the spirit you may all become as one soul, as one tree adorning the rose garden of the Kingdom.”⁵² The allusion of the seed, then, together with that of hearts aglow, returns to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Center of the Covenant, and perpetuates, immortalizes, his journey to America, asserting the essential origin of efforts at growth today in that mission he undertook.

Bahá’u’lláh himself had promised: “They that have forsaken their country for the purpose of teaching Our Cause—these shall the Faithful Spirit strengthen through its power. A company of Our chosen angels shall go forth with them, as bidden by Him Who is the Almighty, the All-Wise.” And after all, he had promised, even after the “presence” was “withdrawn,” “We behold you from Our realm of glory, and shall aid whosoever will arise for the triumph of Our Cause with the hosts of the Concourse on high and a company of Our favoured angels.”

4. Meaning and Reading

If the allusions in the correspondence of the Universal House of Justice thus point to vast systems of metaphor and meaning operating just beyond the surface of the text, they then demand a theory of both reading and of meaning, one that leads to a theory of temporality. Elaborating that full theory, and within it a theory of allusion, requires, of course, engagement with received theories of allusion and intertextuality. For the time being, let us bracket those and focus only on what appears within the Bahá’í episteme.

The House of Justice has itself presented its own explication of meaning, or its own guidance on how to read. It has called for readers to “strive to understand the totality of the vision conveyed in

⁵⁰ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, no. CLII, pdf p. 98

⁵¹ Bahá’u’lláh, “Súriy-i-Ra’is,” in *Summons of the Lord of Hosts: Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* [translator unidentified], last modified August 19, 2022, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauddin/summons-lord-hosts/summons-lord-hosts.pdf?c93c3bf1>, pdf p. 51.

⁵² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Talk at the Studio of Miss Phillips,” no. 3, pdf p. 8.

the messages” and observed that “difficulties often arise when phrases and sentences are taken out of context and viewed as isolated fragments.” Readers, it enjoined, must learn to “analyse but not reduce, to ponder meaning but not dwell on words, to identify distinct areas of action but not compartmentalize.”⁵³

A host of questions emerge. It might appear that the very allusive investigation conducted up to here might be the sort of “dwelling on words” that is itself discouraged; it might be that turns of phrase have here been “viewed as isolated fragments.” But that potential criticism can be countered with the injunction to “ponder meaning”—a task that surely involves the question of how meaning itself is generated, or what the sources of meaning in the text are. And insofar as “difficulties often arise” when phrases are “taken out of context,” we must ask, then what is “context”? Pulling a phrase out of the specific temporal contingency in which it was placed and situating it within a sweeping alleged conceptual history—does the foregoing discussion constitute placing words and ideas in context or pulling them out of context? And what does it mean, in this context of “context,” to “ponder meaning”? Even at the risk of being gimmicky, it must be fair to interpret the injunction to “ponder meaning” as including a pondering on the meaning of pondering meaning, or thinking about the boundary between generative investigation into the signification of text and barren hermeneutics. Surely, that in itself is not necessarily barren hermeneutics.

These problems are not fully resolvable here, but suffice it to return for the time being to the idea that the very deployment of allusion in the messages of the House of Justice is allusive. It is not only the content of the allusion that alludes; it is the very act or style of alluding that alludes, that follows in the course of the Covenant. Let us call this the allusion of allusion. And this allusion of allusion, insofar as the style itself is situated in the scope of the Covenant, suggests that allusion falls within the scope of “context” and “meaning” and does not involve fragmentary pulling out of context; it involves the generation of the “totality of the vision conveyed in the messages” insofar as that totality of the message includes texts beyond the text itself that are pulled into the text through allusion. We teeter on the edge of reading too far into the literalist denotation of the text, but that specific configuration—“the totality of the vision conveyed in the messages”—leaves the door open to the reading that the message independently does not wholly encapsulate the vision; the vision is rather conveyed through and not exclusively by the message.

“It is evident unto thee that the Birds of Heaven and Doves of Eternity speak a twofold language,” Bahá’u’lláh wrote.

One language, the outward language, is devoid of allusions, is unconcealed and unveiled; that it may be a guiding lamp and a beaconing light whereby wayfarers may attain the heights of

⁵³ The Universal House of Justice, “164: The Five Year Plan, 2011–2016,” December 8, 2010, in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 2001–2022*, p. 357.

holiness, and seekers may advance into the realm of eternal reunion. Such are the unveiled traditions and the evident verses already mentioned. The other language is veiled and concealed so that whatever lieth hidden in the heart of the malevolent may be made manifest and their innermost being be disclosed.⁵⁴

It does not, of course, necessarily follow that because Bahá'u'lláh and the “Doves of Eternity”—again, we might well notice the appeal to transtemporality Bahá'u'lláh asserts within this discussion of language—speak in this “twofold language,” therefore it must be that the House of Justice does the same. But we have ample reason not only from the foregoing content of the allusions but also in the allusion of allusion itself to suspect that it does. To state the point rather crudely, it appears that Bahá'u'lláh makes the simple assertion that some things are better said implicitly and other things must be said directly. That is true in Bahá'u'lláh's general explanations of language and also in his explanations of allusion, and we have grounds to imagine that both apply to the correspondence of the Universal House of Justice. Let us proceed with the latter before going to the former.

“It hath been decreed by Us that the Word of God and all the potentialities thereof shall be manifested unto men in strict conformity with such conditions as have been foreordained by Him Who is the All-Knowing, the All-Wise,” Bahá'u'lláh wrote. He continued:

We have, moreover, ordained that its veil of concealment be none other except its own Self. Such indeed is Our Power to achieve Our Purpose. Should the Word be allowed to release suddenly all the energies latent within it, no man could sustain the weight of so mighty a Revelation. Nay, all that is in heaven and on earth would flee in consternation before it.⁵⁵

Because the “Word” of God cannot be unveiled without consideration of the receptivity or capacity of those who take in the word, it has to be “concealed”—and, crucially, that “veil of concealment” is “none other except its own Self.” It would appear, though this interpretation is of course not certain, that insofar as “its own Self” here refers to the Word, that is, the Word itself must be its own veil of concealment, the allusive function of the text itself serves as this form of concealment.

In his “Words of Paradise,” a treatise that speaks of social issues and seems directed especially at the prosperity of Iranian society, Bahá'u'lláh speaks in pointed terms about the function of words and the role of the literary or the verbal in religious and social order. He bemoans, to conclude the treatise, those who “sally forth and utter calumnies” and who “cling unto misleading and reprehensible words.” “If these obstructing veils had not intervened,” he writes, referring to falsities as “veils,” then

⁵⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, pdf p. 62.

⁵⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, no. XXXIII, pdf p. 23.

in short order Iran would have been “subdued through the power of utterance” and would have “appeared in the plenitude of glory,” he writes. And of this utterance, he concludes: “In short, sometimes in explicit language, at other times by allusion, We said whatever had to be said.”

And in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, a text written decades before “Words of Paradise,” Bahá’u’lláh writes on this same theme, making the rather startling claim that perhaps the allusions themselves at times are even clearer than the straightforward text:

Notwithstanding all these consummate verses, these unmistakable allusions, which have been revealed in the “Most weighty Revelation,” the Trust of God amongst men, and despite these evident traditions, each more manifest than the most explicit utterance, the people have ignored and repudiated their truth, and have held fast to the letter of certain traditions which, according to their understanding, they have found inconsistent with their expectations, and the meaning of which they have failed to grasp.⁵⁶

Because of people’s own “expectations,” they fail to grasp the meaning of the text and also the allusions, which appear to be there precisely because people’s “expectations” withhold them from understanding explicit meaning. Indeed, just moments earlier in the same passage, Bahá’u’lláh avers:

Notwithstanding all these evident and significant traditions, all these unmistakable and undisputed allusions, the people have rejected the immaculate Essence of knowledge and of holy utterance, and have turned unto the exponents of rebellion and error. Despite these recorded traditions and revealed utterances, they speak only that which is prompted by their own selfish desires. And should the Essence of Truth reveal that which is contrary to their inclinations and desires, they will straightway denounce Him as an infidel [...].⁵⁷

This deployment of allusion as a necessary mechanism of meaning, in part because of the “conditions” in which utterance occurs, the need to “conform” that utterance to those conditions, and the “expectations” and “selfish desire” of the individual who fails to grasp meaning, leads to a broader philosophy of language. The philosophy is extremely difficult, so let us reproduce a relevant passage in full, make one or two passing comments, and move along:

No man of wisdom can demonstrate his knowledge save by means of words. This sheweth the significance of the Word as is affirmed in all the Scriptures, whether of former times or more recently. For it is through its potency and animating spirit that the people of the world have

⁵⁶ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, pdf p. 61.

⁵⁷ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, pdf p. 59.

attained so eminent a position. Moreover words and utterances should be both impressive and penetrating. However, no word will be infused with these two qualities unless it be uttered wholly for the sake of God and with due regard unto the exigencies of the occasion and the people.

The Great Being saith: Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation. As to its influence, this is conditional upon refinement which in turn is dependent upon hearts which are detached and pure. As to its moderation, this hath to be combined with tact and wisdom as prescribed in the Holy Scriptures and Tablets.

Every word is endowed with a spirit, therefore the speaker or expounder should carefully deliver his words at the appropriate time and place, for the impression which each word maketh is clearly evident and perceptible. The Great Being saith: One word may be likened unto fire, another unto light, and the influence which both exert is manifest in the world. Therefore an enlightened man of wisdom should primarily speak with words as mild as milk, that the children of men may be nurtured and edified thereby and may attain the ultimate goal of human existence which is the station of true understanding and nobility. And likewise He saith: One word is like unto springtime causing the tender saplings of the rose-garden of knowledge to become verdant and flourishing, while another word is even as a deadly poison. It behooveth a prudent man of wisdom to speak with utmost leniency and forbearance so that the sweetness of his words may induce everyone to attain that which befitteth man's station.

O friend of mine! The Word of God is the king of words and its pervasive influence is incalculable. It hath ever dominated and will continue to dominate the realm of being. The Great Being saith: The Word is the master key for the whole world, inasmuch as through its potency the doors of the hearts of men, which in reality are the doors of heaven, are unlocked. No sooner had but a glimmer of its effulgent splendor shone forth upon the mirror of love than the blessed word "I am the Best-Beloved" was reflected therein. It is an ocean inexhaustible in riches, comprehending all things. Every thing which can be perceived is but an emanation therefrom. High, immeasurably high is this sublime station, in whose shadow moveth the essence of loftiness and splendor, wrapt in praise and adoration.⁵⁸

What it means that language is an "essence" that "aspires" to something, and perhaps even more important, what the "Word of God" even means—these require far more thought. But it seems reasonable to conjecture that insofar as the crux of the passage focuses on a certain duality in language

⁵⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *Bahá'í Sacred Writings*, ch. 8, no. 5, pdf p. 110.

as essence and language as mechanism, that the essential ontology of language remains sanctified but that it must be “moderated” with “tact and wisdom” so that it can wield its inherent powers of influence—insofar as this is how language operates, the mechanism of allusion in itself functions as a “moderating” force that generates the influence of the text. As Bahá’u’lláh states elsewhere:

Utterance must needs possess penetrating power. For if bereft of this quality it would fail to exert influence. And this penetrating influence dependeth on the spirit being pure and the heart stainless. Likewise it needeth moderation, without which the hearer would be unable to bear it, rather he would manifest opposition from the very outset. And moderation will be obtained by blending utterance with the tokens of divine wisdom which are recorded in the sacred Books and Tablets. Thus when the essence of one’s utterance is endowed with these two requisites it will prove highly effective and will be the prime factor in transforming the souls of men.⁵⁹

Allusion performs this act of “blending,” the requisite for transformation and penetrating influence. Through allusion, the House of Justice enacts, instantiates, and perpetuates the “domination” of the “Word” over the “realm of being,” drawing out the temporal dimensions, in both senses of the word, of that domination as stressed in the promise that the Word “hath ever dominated and will continue to dominate the realm of being.” And through allusion, the House of Justice moderates its words, deposits in them the “master key for the whole world, inasmuch as through its potency the doors of the hearts of men, which in reality are the doors of heaven, are unlocked,” and endows them with the power “to transform the souls of men.” The very act of allusion alludes to the injunction in the “sacred Books and Tablets” to allude. Such is the allusion of allusion. This elevation of language over other forms of power as a mechanism of persuasion and influence is a result of “Our loving providence [that] surpasseth all things,” a “token of God’s bounty,” Bahá’u’lláh stresses.⁶⁰

In this context, it is not only language itself but the relationship of the utterance to the target of its use that takes on importance. It matters, then, to derive not only a theory of meaning but a theory of reading—a theory of how the meaning on the receiving end of the utterance interacts with the utterance itself, or how meaning is generated not only within the texts independently but in interaction with the reader, who is “transformed” by it.

It is probably an overstatement to say that the act of reading in itself is sacralized in the Bahá’í Faith, but at the very least, reading the sacred text appears to constitute a sacred act. That the Word of God is otherworldly in its nature and function—that “its meaning can never be exhausted,” that it is “endowed with such potency as can instill new life into every human frame,” that it is the “Elixir”—

⁵⁹ Bahá’u’lláh, *Bahá’í Sacred Writings*, ch. 8, no. 26, pdf p. 65.

⁶⁰ Bahá’u’lláh, *Bahá’í Sacred Writings*, ch. 8, no. 26, pdf p. 65.

demands little further elaboration for now.⁶¹ It does not necessarily follow from this point, but it does follow from this point, that therefore the act of reading that Word is endowed with spiritual significance. Of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, his weightiest book, Bahá'u'lláh himself states plainly: “Blessed the man who will read it, and ponder the verses sent down in it by God, the Lord of Power, the Almighty.” Bahá'u'lláh makes this link, this causative relationship between the potency of the Word and the significance of the act of reading, explicit: “It behoveth the friends in whatever land they be, to gather together in meetings ... and to read the verses of God; for it is God’s Words that kindle love’s fire and set it ablaze”—to make their hearts aglow with the love of their Lord, we might paraphrase. And in the mystical text *The Four Valleys*, Bahá'u'lláh offers a challenge account of a “grammarian” and alludes to the verse in the Qur’án, “Read thy Book: There needeth none but thyself to make out an account against thee this day.” He then avers, “One must, then, read the book of one’s own self, rather than the treatise of some grammarian.” What this means is not immediately clear; that reading in itself is important seems quite clear.

The injunction to read the “Word” occupies a place so paramount, indeed so sacred, in the Bahá’í system of knowing and being that it constitutes law. To “recite the verses of God every morn and eventide” is a law of Bahá'u'lláh, a law whose violation is tantamount to dereliction in the Covenant: “Whoso faileth to recite them hath not been faithful to the Covenant of God and His Testament,” Bahá'u'lláh writes.⁶² It seems clear from the broader context that this injunction to “recite” is an injunction to read. There is something rather elegant, perhaps, in ordaining reading itself in the “Most Holy Book,” but elegance is not the full story: rather, there is, it would appear, meaning in that act of enjoining reading in a book. Bahá'u'lláh states elsewhere, “Teach ye your children so that they may peruse the divine verses every morn and eve. God hath prescribed unto every father to educate his children, both boys and girls, in the sciences and in morals, and in crafts and professions. Thus have We instructed you in Our Most Holy Book, revealed by Us from Our all-hallowed Realm.”⁶³ And he states plainly: “Peruse ye every day the verses revealed by God. Blessed is the man who reciteth them and reflecteth upon them.”⁶⁴

The injunction in the Most Holy Book to read or at least to recite is followed by instruction or guidelines on how to read. Bahá'u'lláh writes:

Pride not yourselves on much reading of the verses or on a multitude of pious acts by night and day; for were a man to read a single verse with joy and radiance it would be better for him than to read with lassitude all the Holy Books of God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.

⁶¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, no. LXXXIX, pdf p. 55; no. LXXIV, pdf p. 44; no. XCIX, pdf p. 62.

⁶² Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, pdf p. 28.

⁶³ Bahá'u'lláh, “Additional Tablets and Extracts from Tablets Revealed by Bahá'u'lláh,” accessed May 2026, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauallah/additional-tablets-extracts-from-tablets-revealed-bahauallah/additional-tablets-extracts-from-tablets-revealed-bahauallah.pdf?3a51c048>, pdf p. 7.

⁶⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Bahá’í Sacred Writings*, ch. 5, no. 12, pdf p. 63.

Read ye the sacred verses in such measure that ye be not overcome by languor and despondency. Lay not upon your souls that which will weary them and weigh them down, but rather what will lighten and uplift them, so that they may soar on the wings of the Divine verses towards the Dawning-place of His manifest signs; this will draw you nearer to God, did ye but comprehend.⁶⁵

And immediately after this verse, Baha'u'lláh links the act of reading and the recitation of the divine verses to family and children: “Teach your children the verses revealed from the heaven of majesty and power,” he continues. There is a temporality inherent in the reading, in its being passed down across generations and across time.

If it is clear, though, that reading matters greatly, it is not immediately evident why a failure to read is tantamount to a violation of the Covenant itself, or, if we make a slight interpolation, that reciting the verses or reading the text constitutes faithfulness to the Covenant. This constitutes a crucial puzzle.

There are some obvious possibilities. A covenant implies an agreement: the Word is proffered, as one part of the agreement, and the reception and acceptance of those verses in the act of recital is the other side of that agreement. If both sides of the agreement are not satisfied, then it is not a covenant. That seems perfectly reasonable and perfectly satisfactory an answer. It also seems clear and indisputable enough that reading on a twice-daily basis, as required in the injunction to recite “every morn and eventide,” contributes to the prolongation of commitment to that covenant, to “steadfastness” in it.

But right there is a temporal dimension to the act of reading. Of course, it is not the case that the correspondence of the House of Justice falls under the umbrella of what Bahá'u'lláh refers to as “the verses of God.” But still, if we understand the Covenant, too, as a temporal system, then there are other realms of meaning in this linking of reading to the Covenant that emerge. In a sense, the individual’s interaction with the texts, the generation of meaning through the utterance and the reception of that utterance, contributes to the perpetuation of the Covenant: the act of reading both situates the reader in the temporalities that the texts generate and enables the reader to extend those temporalities further into the future. That is certainly not to say that the Covenant itself is contingent upon the reading of texts by people who claim to abide by it: it is not. But if, as we have seen, the vindication of the Covenant yields “the success of the efforts which believers in every land are now exerting for the establishment of God’s kingdom upon the earth,” then surely the act of reading is part of that “establishment” and is linked with the administrative order—and is linked to its propagation, insofar as reading sets the heart ablaze, aglow. Extricated from its contingent temporalities by its reading Covenantal allusions, the self itself becomes the locus of the Covenantal

⁶⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, pdf p. 28.

rearrangement of the temporal order.

The act of reading is in itself a transtemporal or intertemporal act, of course. Insofar as texts were necessarily written at a time prior to that at which they are read, the act of reading in itself brings the past into the present, in effect denying the pastness of the past and rendering it an absent present. It is, in other words, a means of creating simultaneity along time: one reads the text as if it were present. Here we begin to move to an argument that, again, is the ultimate effect of the Covenant but that we will not broach fully here: the relationship between reading and the imagination of community, as is well known in all the humanities, and how the particular kind of reading here both disrupts and reformulates that imagination of community. The act of an entire globe reading, in the contingency of time, every moment, every morning and evening, a text that is in itself intended, allusively, to traverse time, not a text with built-in obsolescence, generates both simultaneity along time and simultaneity across space. Such a theorization—and how, within it, the private act of reading texts deemed sacred is different from the communal public obligatory prayer of a prior time, or how the sacredness of simultaneity along time both exists with and contrasts with the homogeneous, empty time implied by daily reading, to specify but a few theoretical questions—requires more refinement, and its necessity for the generation of oneness requires much further investigation. But in short, it seems quite clear that the generation of global oneness has a significant dimension that hinges on the reorganization of time, and that that reorganization of time in turn is generated by the interaction between the Covenant and to the act of reading and the generation of meaning it entails.

5. Temporality

“The Prophets of God should be regarded as physicians whose task is to foster the well-being of the world and its peoples, that, through the spirit of oneness, they may heal the sickness of a divided humanity,” Bahá’u’lláh declared. And he observed: “Little wonder, then, if the treatment prescribed by the physician in this day should not be found to be identical with that which he prescribed before. How could it be otherwise when the ills affecting the sufferer necessitate at every stage of his sickness a special remedy?”⁶⁶

In his second epistle to Napoleon III of France, probably written in the year 1870 while he was incarcerated in ‘Akká, shortly before French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, Bahá’u’lláh addressed the “peoples of the earth,” enjoining them to hearken to the “Lord of all nations.” “Know ye of a certainty,” he assured them, “that the Dispensations of the past have attained their highest, their final consummation in the Law that hath branched out from this Most Great Ocean.” And he continued: “Regard ye the world as a man’s body, which is afflicted with divers ailments, and the recovery of which dependeth upon the harmonizing of all of its component elements.”⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, no. XXXIV, pdf p. 24.

⁶⁷ Bahá’u’lláh, “Napoleon III,” in *Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, pdf p. 28.

If that is the purpose of the Prophets of God, and if the “highest consummation” of all those Prophets lies in this moment, during which all the component elements of the earth must be harmonized, then we must return to our original question: how is it that the Covenant ordained by Bahá’u’lláh through ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, this blending and reordering of temporalities, achieves that harmonization necessary for the climax of human historical time? The Covenant, in Bahá’í thought, is the “pivot of the oneness of humankind,” and Bahá’u’lláh himself stated that it is this “spirit of oneness” that must “heal the sicknesses” that afflict humanity—that must, as he says later in that same passage, act as the “wholesome medicine” for a humanity “in the grip of manifold ills.” For “these are not days of prosperity and triumph,” he avers.⁶⁸ How, according to the idea of the Covenant itself, does the Covenant function as this remedy, as the mechanism for the “harmonizing of all of [the] component elements” of the world, as the “spirit of oneness” that will heal its ills?

The very fact that the House of Justice is associated with Bahá’u’lláh as his ultimate successor through the institution of the Covenant, which means nothing other than through the person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and his Will and Testament, requires that we consider how the House of Justice itself achieves this harmonizing of the component elements.

It must be that part of that answer lies in the question of temporality: the Covenant reorganizes time, globally, in a particular way in order to achieve “harmony” among the various “elements” of a variegated, diverse world. If, according to Bahá’u’lláh, “Dispensations,” spans of religious time, have “attained their highest, their final consummation” in day of Bahá’u’lláh, in his “Most Great Ocean,” and if Bahá’u’lláh explicitly declared that there is a “wisdom” in the “ocean of My utterance” being “stilled,” and that even amid that stillness Bahá’u’lláh continues, somehow, inscrutably, to “behold” the peoples of the earth, then something must be happening here with the very conception and organization of time itself. What exactly that is we have not solved here. But perhaps, at least, we have begun to explore an answer: we have seen that the meaning of the correspondence of the Universal House of Justice is generated at least partly through allusion, a technique whose deployment in itself is allusive. Allusion creates a certain simultaneity along time that suggests and possibly itself engenders a pulling of the past into the present, an intertwining of prior ages with the present and a promise of their perpetuation into the future. That simultaneity along time harmonizes the variegated temporalities of a world that exist along a variety of milestones and stages of progress toward the ultimate age of fruition promised by Bahá’u’lláh.

The problem, then, takes us to the station of the Universal House of Justice itself: its relationship to Bahá’u’lláh and how the House of Justice and Bahá’u’lláh are related in time and outside of time through the person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Let us return to and expand on a passage we have already encountered. Regarding ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Will and Testament, the former the Covenant itself and the latter the “Child of the Covenant,” Shoghi Effendi writes:

⁶⁸ *ibid*

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Who incarnates an institution for which we can find no parallel whatsoever in any of the world’s recognized religious systems, may be said to have closed the Age to which He Himself belonged and opened the one in which we are now laboring. His Will and Testament should thus be regarded as the perpetual, the indissoluble link which the mind of Him Who is the Mystery of God has conceived in order to insure the continuity of the three ages that constitute the component parts of the Bahá’í Dispensation. The period in which the seed of the Faith had been slowly germinating is thus intertwined both with the one which must witness its efflorescence and the subsequent age in which that seed will have finally yielded its golden fruit.

The creative energies released by the Law of Bahá’u’lláh, permeating and evolving within the mind of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, have, by their very impact and close interaction, given birth to an Instrument which may be viewed as the Charter of the New World Order which is at once the glory and the promise of this most great Dispensation. The Will may thus be acclaimed as the inevitable offspring resulting from that mystic intercourse between Him Who communicated the generating influence of His divine Purpose and the One Who was its vehicle and chosen recipient. Being the Child of the Covenant—the Heir of both the Originator and the Interpreter of the Law of God—the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá can no more be divorced from Him Who supplied the original and motivating impulse than from the One Who ultimately conceived it. Bahá’u’lláh’s inscrutable purpose, we must ever bear in mind, has been so thoroughly infused into the conduct of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and their motives have been so closely wedded together, that the mere attempt to dissociate the teachings of the former from any system which the ideal Exemplar of those same teachings has established would amount to a repudiation of one of the most sacred and basic truths of the Faith.⁶⁹

Of course, the passage pertains to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, not the House of Justice, and it seems wrong to assume that what applies to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá must apply automatically to the House of Justice. In fact, the opposite seems true in the Bahá’í episteme: Shoghi Effendi, who was appointed successor to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the Will and Testament, stated that it would constitute “nothing short of open blasphemy” to equate his own position with that of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “There is a far, far greater distance separating the Guardian from the Center of the Covenant than there is between the Center of the Covenant and its Author,” he wrote unequivocally.⁷⁰ Insofar as the Guardian and the

⁶⁹ Shoghi Effendi, “The Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh,” in *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh: Selected Letters*, pdf p. 65.

⁷⁰ Shoghi Effendi, “The Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh,” in *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, pdf p. 69.

House of Justice both operate within the administrative order ordained by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá himself in his Will and Testament, what applies to the Guardian in this specific matter presumably applies to the House of Justice as well.

Even with that understanding, there remains much that is curious in the above passage from Shoghi Effendi that might help to think about the position of the House of Justice in the Covenant, especially as it relates to time and allusion and especially insofar as the House of Justice itself is that “system” that cannot be dissociated from Bahá’u’lláh and is ordained in the Will, the Charter of the New World Order that Shoghi Effendi so extols. In that Will, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá affirms unequivocally that the House of Justice is “under the care and protection of the Abhá Beauty [Bahá’u’lláh], under the shelter and unerring guidance of the Exalted One [the Báb],” and expatiates on the assurance that the will of the House and the will of the latter are entirely identical. “Whoso doth deviate therefrom,” he writes, referring to the decree of the House, “is verily of them that love discord, hath shown forth malice and turned away from the Lord of the Covenant.”⁷¹

The reference quoted above to the Will of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, which endowed the House of Justice with its authority, spurs contemplation on the implications of the metaphor of the “offspring,” and the extent to which it is a metaphor is itself open to consideration. Inasmuch as a child is constituted irrevocably by the genetic makeup of both its parents, and as it is impossible either to conceive, or to conceive of, the very existence of the child without the fusing of the generative forces of both parents, or there is no way that the child can exist without accepting the generative role of both of the parents, the Will constitutes the result of the interaction of the wills of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. That much is rather obvious.

But there might be much more to this metaphor of genetic offspring. It turns out that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s style in his Will was “allusive” in a literary sense, though the “mystic intercourse” above suggests that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was not alluding but rather expressing a will that was essentially identical; the notion of “allusion” works at, perhaps only at, a surface prose level reading. In his study of the Will and Testament, ‘Alí Nakhjavání indicates that the “method” underlying the text of that document was the same as that of Bahá’u’lláh in his Kitáb-i-‘Ahd, or “The Book of the Covenant,” in which Bahá’u’lláh designates ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as his successor. The very construction of the text ordaining the perpetuation of the Covenant beyond ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Nakhjavání explains, follows the construction of the endowing into ‘Abdu’l-Bahá of the Covenant itself. Nakhjavání cites Shoghi Effendi as the source of this analysis; it was he who indicated that the documents feature, in his own words, a “close relationship between them, as well as the identity of purpose and method which they inculcate.”⁷² Indeed, in multiple instances, Shoghi Effendi refers to “gaps” that Bahá’u’lláh “deliberately left” in

⁷¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, last modified June 5, 2025, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/will-testament-abdul-baha/will-testament-abdul-baha.pdf?8d65fa4c>, pdf p. 9.

⁷² ‘Alí Nakhjavání, *Answers to Eight Frequently Asked Questions* (Casa Editrice Bahá’í, 2015), ch. 1.

both his legal and administrative scheme for the Faith, “gaps” that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and, through him, the Universal House of Justice in its role within the “System” ordained in his Will, were meant from the outset to fill, in Shoghi Effendi’s interpretation.⁷³

In the very textuality of the documents from the centers of authority following Bahá’u’lláh, then, we see a notion of genetic offspring: the constitution of the texts by a genetic melding of two different bodies of generative material, a double-helix binding together of two strands of textual meaning, one existing within the immediate content in and text of the document, the other arising from the allusive conceptual history of the text. Such are the “creative energies”—creative meaning, of course, capable of creation, of procreation, of the generation of new things—operating within the text inasmuch as the text itself seems to be formed by the splicing together of strands of those generative texts. Any attempt to parse or dismember the text, seeking to divide meaning that has come from the past from meaning that comes from the present, is impossible because the text itself is constituted, irrevocably, of both of those strands of meaning inasmuch as the text is irrevocably allusive in its situation within systems of conceptual meaning and metaphor. So closely bound together into the genetic stuff of the text are the two strands. Just as it is impossible to separate the genetic material of an individual into those of each of its parents, or to dissociate the child’s own creativity from that of its parents, an attempt at dissociation within the text constitutes an act of “mutilation” of the text, leaving it meaningless. Shoghi Effendi stresses:

the system of Bahá’í administration is not an innovation imposed arbitrarily upon the Bahá’ís of the world since the Master’s passing, but derives its authority from the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, is specifically prescribed in unnumbered Tablets, and rests in some of its essential features upon the explicit provisions of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. It thus unifies and correlates the principles separately laid down by Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and is indissolubly bound with the essential verities of the Faith. To dissociate the administrative principles of the Cause from the purely spiritual and humanitarian teachings would be tantamount to a mutilation of the body of the Cause, a separation that can only result in the disintegration of its component parts, and the extinction of the Faith itself.⁷⁴

It would appear—and this is perhaps a runaway interpretation, but one that I venture might be viable on the basis of the foregoing examination—that the function of allusion in the correspondence of the House of Justice achieves this very intertwining at the level of text and at the level of time, the same intertwining that is suggested by Shoghi Effendi of the operation of the Covenant itself: that

⁷³ Shoghi Effendi, “The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh,” in *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh: Selected Letters*, pdf p. 3; and Shoghi Effendi, “The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh,” in *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh: Selected Letters*, pdf p. 68.

⁷⁴ Shoghi Effendi, “The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh,” in *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, pdf p. 3.

inasmuch as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is the Covenant, and inasmuch as he perpetuated that Covenant through the House of Justice by means of his very “offspring,” his Will and Testament, then it is not unreasonable to suggest that certain features that characterize the Covenantal functions of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and his Will also characterize the House of Justice. The texts of the House of Justice themselves are made up in a sort of double-helix of the present and the past: the present, the text referring to and deriving from the current moment, and the past, carried in through allusion. Such is the duality that allusion achieves: one level of the text is of the present, the contemporary deployment of the allusion, while the other level of the text is of the past, the source texts to which the allusion gestures, yet those two strands cannot be separated insofar as the meaning of the text necessarily and irrevocably contains both within the allusion. Like offspring, the words in themselves carry both strands within them: the meaning in the immediate context and the meaning in the allusive context. Thus the words, like offspring, carry multiple temporalities within them. And thus the past and the present, prior ages and former ages, are “intertwined,” and the text itself operates as the genetic offspring of the past and the present, which come together as a single, generative entity. Shoghi Effendi explains:

It should also be borne in mind that the machinery of the Cause has been so fashioned, that whatever is deemed necessary to incorporate into it in order to keep it in the forefront of all progressive movements, can, according to the provisions made by Bahá’u’lláh, be safely embodied therein. [...] Not only has the House of Justice been invested by Bahá’u’lláh with the authority to legislate whatsoever has not been explicitly and outwardly recorded in His holy Writ, upon it has also been conferred by the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the right and power to abrogate, according to the changes and requirements of the time, whatever has been already enacted and enforced by a preceding House of Justice. [...] Such is the immutability of His revealed Word. Such is the elasticity which characterizes the functions of His appointed ministers. The first preserves the identity of His Faith, and guards the integrity of His law. The second enables it, even as a living organism, to expand and adapt itself to the needs and requirements of an ever-changing society.⁷⁵

The splicing of the “immortal” texts of Bahá’u’lláh and also of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá into words of the House of Justice addressed to the present day through allusion maps on to what Shoghi Effendi refers to as the simultaneity of the “immutability of His revealed word” and the “elasticity which characterizes the functions of His appointed ministers.” This notion of the House of Justice operating with “elasticity” as a “living organism” seems to suggest precisely the preservation of the genetic, immortal generative material now being recombined into new but also not new forms with the passage

⁷⁵ Shoghi Effendi, “The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh: Further Considerations,” in *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, pdf p. 11.

of time. Indeed, Shoghi Effendi has written, in a passage cited by the Universal House of Justice, “When this most great Edifice shall be reared on such an immovable foundation, God’s purpose, wisdom, universal truths, mysteries and realities of the Kingdom, which the mystic Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh has deposited within The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, shall gradually be revealed and made manifest.”⁷⁶

This linking of the immutability of the revealed word as one strand and the elasticity of the appointed ministers as another generates the “living organism” of the Faith, in which the Covenant is the pulsating force, the life force itself. These two strands perhaps correlate with what the Universal House of Justice, in its centenary review of the Covenant, explains as the “two authoritative centers” of the Covenant: one, the “Book,” which includes the word of Bahá’u’lláh as well as that of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, since they are the appointed interpreters of his word, and the other, the Universal House of Justice.⁷⁷ Those two authoritative centers operate together in the very textuality of the correspondence of the House of Justice to generate meaning: meaning itself relies on those two centers, those two strands of genetic material. Everything besides these two vital strands, including this study, might contribute to their generative force, or it might detract from it, but whatever it does, it is distinct from it and bears no authority.

The reorganization of time and temporality through a continual textual recombining of past, present, and future and across space suggests the very purport of religion as an institution in Bahá’í thought. The “purpose” of “the religion of God,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá avers, is “to foster fellowship and love amongst the members of the human race.” “Religion is the foundation of spiritual unity, the unity of thought, the unity of perception, the unity of custom,” he states. It achieves this at least in part by establishing the “relationships” that must exist in the world of humanity, as in the world of the body: “by religion is meant the necessary relationships for the oneness of the world of humanity. This is the foundation of the religion of God!”⁷⁸ Without that “spirit” of religion and its establishment of these relationships, it is as if the body of humanity is dead. It must be that part of these relationships are temporal relationships, the development of a new temporality suited to a new age unlike the temporalities of prior times, a new conception of time itself, a conception that is literally vital.

Indeed, as we saw moments ago, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá himself draws from the exact same metaphor of the body deployed by Bahá’u’lláh in his evaluation of the “sickness” of the world, a metaphor that implies both the spatial dimensions of unity and the temporal dimensions of change and progress: spatially, different components of a body must work together to produce a greater sum, the phenomenon of consciousness, a quality no individual part carries; temporally, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states

⁷⁶ The Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, ed., “The Universal House of Justice,” <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/compilations/universal-house-of-justice-compilation/universal-house-of-justice-compilation.pdf?290ba51c>, 2021, no. 25, pdf p. 8.

⁷⁷ The Universal House of Justice, *Reflections on the First Century of the Formative Age*, pdf p. 6.

⁷⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’í Sacred Writings*, ch. 10, no. 9, pdf p. 126.

in that passage, “a human being does not remain always in the same condition” and requires different remedies for different ailments and different times. It is the role of religion to respond immutably yet elastically to those times. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states: “The change and transformation in the conditions and exigencies of the times is the cause of the abrogation of religious laws, for the time comes when those earlier commandments no longer suit the prevailing conditions.” He avers: “Consider how greatly the exigencies of the modern age differ from those of ancient and of medieval times! Is it possible that the commandments of former centuries could be enforced in these latter times?”⁷⁹ It is this elasticity required definitionally by the institution of religion that the House of Justice enacts with allusion, though again, not only with allusion, of course.

In reference specifically to overcoming “theories and policies, so unsound, so pernicious” that interrupt the oneness of humanity, and therefore necessarily contradict the conception of true religion expounded by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the “necessary relationships for the oneness of the world of humanity,” Shoghi Effendi describes Bahá’u’lláh as the “Divine Organizer,” whose “truths” about the oneness of humanity are “irreconcilably opposed to, these war-engendering, world-convulsing doctrines.” Among those “truths” of the Divine Organizer, Shoghi Effendi wrote, was the injunction that “all mankind may become the upholders of one order, and the inhabitants of one city” since “ye dwell in one world, and have been created through the operation of one Will.”⁸⁰ To generate a temporality for this oneness of humanity, it appears, requires the intertwining of the past, present, and future, a means to harmonize the various temporalities that exist across space and to join together and give coherency to progression through time, and a mechanism to associate the contingency of human time with the non-contingency of the temporality of the Sovereign Lord. How this is achieved by the temporality of the Covenant, at least as it is effected through allusion, remains our outstanding question.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá surely meant many things when he told his audience in Boston that his spirit would remain with them, but among those meanings must have been the spirit of the Covenant, and the spirit of oneness, which would persist after his departure, insofar as those three spirits are one and the same. And even if it is not at all clear, at the basic level of ontology, what that “spirit” might possibly be, through allusion, it appears to mean the spirit of that one Will that created all in the one world in which all dwell, the one “order” that all mankind must uphold. As suggested by the allusions to the Covenant in the correspondence of the Universal House of Justice, allusions that all lead to Bahá’u’lláh through the person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and thus act as both allusions to and allusions about the Covenant, the creation of that order appears to hinge, at least in part, on a reorganization of time itself.

Three days before ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who is the Covenant, told his audience in Boston that he

⁷⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’í Sacred Writings*, ch. 10, no. 10, pdf p. 127.

⁸⁰ Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come* [March 1941], last modified December 22, 2023, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/shoghi-effendi/promised-day-come/promised-day-come.pdf?72ab26bb>, pdf p. 58.

would be leaving them and leaving behind his spirit, he addressed another congregation with these words, words we encountered earlier, but which we can now complete:

From the seed of reality religion has grown into a tree which has put forth leaves and branches, blossoms and fruit. After a time this tree has fallen into a condition of decay. The leaves and blossoms have withered and perished; the tree has become stricken and fruitless. It is not reasonable that man should hold to the old tree, claiming that its life forces are undiminished, its fruit unequalled, its existence eternal. The seed of reality must be sown again in human hearts in order that a new tree may grow therefrom and new divine fruits refresh the world. By this means the nations and peoples now divergent in religion will be brought into unity, imitations will be forsaken, and a universal brotherhood in reality itself will be established. [...] Until all nations and peoples become united by the bonds of the Holy Spirit in this real fraternity, until national and international prejudices are effaced in the reality of this spiritual brotherhood, true progress, prosperity and lasting happiness will not be attained by man. This is the century of new and universal nationhood.⁸¹

The final consequence of this derangement and reordering of temporalities might be the obliteration of distance, temporal or ontological, between the individual self, rendered a reading locus of that reordering, and the agent of the reordering, Bahá'u'lláh, through his appointed successor, the center of his covenant, his inscrutable mechanism for a new and universal nationhood amid the withdrawal of his presence. The allusive, Covenantal collapse of contingent temporalities and their integration into one other and into the supratemporality residing in the stuff of existence bring the word of Bahá'u'lláh, what he calls the ocean of his revelation, near, astonishingly near, to the reader. To one believer whose "heart" was "consumed in its separation," Bahá'u'lláh gave assurance of this delectable propinquity in "this Day," a day, he explained, or he explains, that Muhammad and Abraham and Moses would have rejoiced to attain: "Nay, thou art even now standing before His face, and We are imparting unto thee, through the tongue of might and power, such words as even the ears of the sincere ones have been deprived of hearing. Say: Were He to utter but one word, that word alone would exceed in sweetness all the sayings of men."⁸²

⁸¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "Talk at the Tremont Temple at the Unitarian Conference, Boston, Massachusetts," no. 52, pdf p. 84

⁸² Bahá'u'lláh, "Súriy-i-Ra'ís," in *Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, pdf p. 50.

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