

'Abdu'l Bahá's Tablet of the Two Calls: Civilizing Barbarity

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1. Introduction

The earth seemed unearthly. We were accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there – there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were – No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you – you so remote from the night of first ages – could comprehend. And why not? The mind of man is capable of anything – because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future.¹

The immortal words of Marlow, the narrator in Joseph Conrad's enduring classic, *Heart of Darkness*, as he journeys deep into the unknown, the darkness, to retrieve Kurtz, at one time civilization personified, now the embodiment of crassness, avarice, barbarity.

Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness*, is a rumination on the thin line between civilization and barbarity. This relationship is also the central theme of Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet of the Two Calls. "Civilization is conjoined with barbarism," (SWAB 297) Abdu'l-Bahá states in the Tablet.

Arguably no subject is more apt to ponder in today's political (indeed politicized) and ideological climate than how thinly civilization, a "terrible beauty," to borrow from W.B. Yeats, cloaks the darkness that envelops humanity. Here, we use Abdu'l-Bahá's civilization and barbarity construct to understand the capabilities of humanity absent the "call of God," "the Most Great Guidance." We employ the construct to also situate the geo-political and historical events alluded to by Abdu'l-Bahá in His Tablet, events that

demonstrate how the boundaries between civilization and barbarity at times overlap uncomfortably and at other times simply coexist indistinguishably.

2. The Tablet's Structure and Themes

The Tablet, known as the "Tablet of the Two Calls," is found in *Selections From the Writings of Abdu'l Bahá*, No. 225. The Tablet is not dated. Certain references in the Tablet, though, suggest that it was revealed *circa* 1907-1908.²

A brief word about the structure and themes of the Tablet. It is divided into 32 paragraphs of varying length. A number of themes are explored. Among these are: The two calls, namely call of civilization and call of God; the intimate relationship between the two, namely, that civilization (progress) is conjoined with barbarism unless material civilization is confirmed by Divine Guidance; happiness of mankind (happiness of the world of humanity) "lieth in the unity of the human race, and that spiritual and material developments are conditioned upon love and unity among all men;" the dual nature of man; material progress being the result of association and cooperation, while ruin the outcome of animosity and hatred; unity in diversity; obedience, submission, and loyalty towards one's government.³

Here, we probe the theme of civilization and barbarity.⁴

3. Civilizing Barbarity

The Tablet begins with Abdu'l-Bahá describing, in His words, "two calls to success and prosperity being raised from the heights of happiness of mankind." (SWAB 296)

One is the Call of civilization, which pertains to the world of phenomena. It promotes the principles of material achievement; trains the physical accomplishments of mankind; comprises the laws, regulations, arts and sciences through which the world of humanity has developed. The propagator and executive power of this call is just government.⁵

The second call is the Call of God, whose spiritual teachings are safeguards of the Everlasting glory, eternal happiness and illumination of the world of humanity. It causes attributes of mercy to be revealed in the human world and the life beyond. This Call is founded upon the instructions and exhortations of the Lord and the admonitions and altruistic emotions belonging to the realm of morality which, like unto a brilliant light, brighten and illumine the

lamp of the realities of mankind. The penetrative power of the Call of God is the Word of God.⁶

Abdu'l-Bahá then describes the relationship between these two calls. He says that until material achievements, physical accomplishments and human virtues are reinforced by spiritual perfections, luminous qualities and characteristics of mercy, no fruit or result shall issue therefrom, nor will the happiness of the world of humanity, which is the ultimate aim, be attained.⁷ He cautions that while, on the one hand, material achievements and the development of the physical world produce prosperity, on the other hand dangers, severe calamities and violent afflictions are imminent.⁸

Abdu'l-Bahá invites the reader to look at the orderly pattern of kingdoms, cities and villages, with the attractiveness of their adornments, the freshness of their natural resources, the refinement of their appliances, the ease of their means of travel, the extent of knowledge available about the world of nature, the great inventions, the colossal enterprises, the noble discoveries and scientific researches. He says that this vantage point compels but one conclusion – namely, that civilization brings happiness and progress to the human world.⁹

But a different vantage point warrants a different conclusion. That vantage point is the discovery of destructive and infernal machines, to the development of forces of demolition and the invention of fiery implements, which uproot the tree of life. From this perspective, it is evident that civilization is conjoined with barbarism. Progress and barbarism go hand in hand, He says, unless material civilization be confirmed by Divine Guidance.¹⁰

Let's pause and reflect on this civilization-barbarity construct. They are "conjoined," Abdu'l-Bahá says. This means that civilization and barbarity are separated by a very thin line. Civilization is conceptualized in very precarious terms – a state of tension and unyielding struggle between constructive aspirations and destructive tendencies.

This is precisely the theme of *Heart of Darkness*. In this book, Conrad attempts to come to terms with the brutal and exploitative nature of the European colonization of Africa, using as a backdrop the bloody history of the Congo Free State. Conrad's narrator, Marlow, is the commander of a riverboat looking for ivory to trade in the Belgian Congo. Marlow travels into the heart of the Congo to retrieve the enigmatic Mr. Kurtz, a promising young agent who has disappeared into the bush. Along the way he learns that Kurtz has gained supreme power over the natives of the land through the use of extreme violence. Throughout Marlow's harrowing journey, Conrad maintains an unflinching focus on the crassness and avarice

of which human society is capable, ultimately revealing that the “the horror” Kurtz fears lies within us all. Marlow’s encounter with the mysterious and corrupted (and corrupting) Kurtz, who dies proclaiming the “horror” of what he found in the Congo, is the novel’s defining moment, when Marlow recognizes his kinship with Kurtz’s corruption.

Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is a rumination on the relationship between civilization and barbarity. The novel reminds us that civility is not innate; that the values and beliefs we possess as human beings, although passed down through countless generations born into civilization, are not intrinsic. Furthermore, the novel implies that, if submerged into a place of barbarity for a length of time, a civil man might succumb, as evidently Kurtz did, to the powers of darkness found in the human heart. Upon finding Kurtz, Marlow fully realizes the impact of utter, enduring barbarity on the heart of the urbane man. The values and beliefs civility had instilled are powerless against Kurtz’s own heart of darkness as he descends into his intrinsic, animalistic nature. Marlow recollects,

I tried to break the spell—the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness—that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations ... His was an impenetrable darkness.¹¹

Kurtz has capitulated to murder, theft, and the temptation to be god.

Heart of Darkness vividly offers insight into the capabilities of man without restraint. We have here a terrifying and thought-provoking look at how thinly civilization cloaks the darkness that lives within us all.

Kurtz personifies civilization, but, after succumbing to barbarity, is transmogrified into “a Flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly.” The original Kurtz had been educated partly in England.¹² His mother was half-English, his father half-French.¹³ All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz.¹⁴ We have an indictment of Europe here. Kurtz did poetry; spoke on love; justice.¹⁵ And yet, despite (or perhaps in spite of) these civilizational trappings, there was a hollowness about him. When he lived his entire life in every detail during that supreme moment of complete knowledge, Kurtz could only utter: “The horror!” “The horror!”¹⁶

Such was his pronouncement: a judgment upon the adventures of his soul on earth. That's his entire summation!

Conrad portrays the tense and uneasy relationship between civilization and barbarity — the same relationship Abdu'l-Bahá describes in the Tablet. Recall that Abdu'l-Bahá describes progress and barbarism as going hand in hand. The barbaric tendencies can be tempered, mitigated, if you like, only when “material civilization [is] confirmed by Divine Guidance, by the revelations of the All-Merciful and by godly virtues, and [is] reinforced by spiritual conduct, by the ideals of the Kingdom and by the outpourings of the Realm of Might.” (SWAB 297) Thus, absent spiritual rejuvenation, growth, civilization decays and deteriorates into barbarity. The divide between barbarity/civilization comes close to collapsing into an area of mutual cohabitation.

Abdu'l-Bahá then illustrates just how uncomfortably civilization and barbarity overlap:

Consider that the most advanced and civilized countries of the world have been turned into arsenals of explosives, that the continents of the globe have been transformed into huge camps and battlefields, that the peoples of the world have formed themselves into armed nations, and that the governments of the world are vying with each other as to who will first step into the field of carnage and bloodshed, thus subjecting mankind to the utmost degree of affliction. (SWAB 297-8)

To develop a deeper appreciation of Abdu'l-Bahá's comments, we must take the political temperature of late 19th century-early 20th century.¹⁷ Recall that the Tablet was revealed sometime around 1907-1908.

By the late 1880s, all the desirable territories of Africa (and many of the richest countries of the Middle East and Asia) had been brought under European flags or had become “spheres of influence” of the European powers. Western imperialism was continuing apace in the first decade of 1900.

In 1907 Britain, Russia, and France formed the Triple Entente, which now faced the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy, which had been formed in 1882. As can be expected, all the governments claimed their intentions in forming these alliances were purely defensive, but the sober truth was that the loose concert of power which had existed from 1815 to 1870 had gradually been replaced by two powerful, hostile alliances.

From 1890 to 1914, all diplomats and military officers (if not all politicians generally) knew that the major nations of Europe were

engaged in an arms race and in the formation of ever tighter military alliances. The network of painstakingly crafted and often overlapping alliances seemed to give assurance that a general conflagration would be avoided and regional disputes settled, as they had been during most of the previous century.

As it turned out, appearances were deceiving. The formation of these mighty alliances and the concomitant increases in armaments rendered inevitable the war that began in August 1914. The tightening bonds of the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente substantially increased the danger of general war in the decade before 1914. The alliances, which were intended to maintain a balance of power and to protect each member in case of aggression, also meant that any serious local conflict could become general, internationalized.

The opening years of the 20th century were marked by turbulence and instability. In the years 1904-1905, the violent war between Japan and Russia led to the humiliating destruction of almost the entire Russian naval forces and its surrender of territories it regarded as vital to its interests. This humiliation was to have long-term domestic and international repercussions. On two occasions during these opening years of the 20th century, war between France and Germany over imperialist designs in North Africa was narrowly averted. In 1911 Italian ambitions similarly provoked a dangerous threat to international peace by the seizure from the Ottoman empire of what is now Libya. International instability had been further deepened when Germany, feeling constrained by a growing web of hostile alliances, embarked on a massive naval building program designed to eliminate the British lead.

Percolating below these conflicts were tensions among the subject peoples of the Romanov, Hapsburg and Ottoman empires. Balts, Poles, Czechs, Serbs, Greeks, Albanians, Bulgars, Romanians, Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, and a host of other nationalities all were thirsting for their day of liberation.

Advances in science and technology were exploited for military advantage. Military hardware triggered a massive arms race: Machine guns, long-range cannon, "dreadnoughts", submarines, landmines, poison gas, and the possibility of equipping airplanes for bombing attacks. All this weaponry would be deployed and refined during the course of the coming war – thus cementing, as Abdu'l-Bahá had warned, civilization and barbarity.

Abdu'l-Bahá, of course, prescribes a different combination, fusion. "[T]his civilization and material progress," He says, "should

be combined with the Most Great Guidance so that this nether world may become the scene of the appearance of the bestowals of the Kingdom, and physical achievements may be conjoined with the effulgences of the Merciful.” (SWAB 298)

Now, Abdu'l-Bahá's prescription may, at first blush, appear commonsensical. A closer inspection, though, shows otherwise. Indeed, Abdu'l-Bahá's civilization and barbarity construct may be employed to illuminate the latest, and widely acclaimed, political study of the relationship between civilization and barbarity in the context of 20th century Europe.¹⁸

As the title suggests, the author, an eminent historian, deals with the political and cultural history of Europe during the past hundred years. The author observes, as Abdu'l-Bahá did nearly a century ago, the apparent contradiction between forces of civilization and those of barbarity and proceeds to catalogue Europe's achievements. She observes that

The 'civilization' of 20th century Europe has included many of the most revolutionary scientific advances in human history, the information explosion, some of the most original movements in art and music, and the creation of a "welfare state" offering greater and more varied opportunities to the ordinary citizen than any previous civilization. It has democratized both traditional intellectual and artistic culture, and the popular culture of mass media entertainment, travel, and athletics. It has witnessed the gradual extension of the concept of human rights and religious and racial toleration.¹⁹

The author then juxtaposes these achievements with Europe's gross and glaring failures. She says that

But the same century has also seen the two most destructive wars in human history; a large number of authoritarian, arbitrary, and incompetent dictatorships; and, in the form of Nazism and Stalinism, the most vile and sadistic regimes of which we have any documented record. How can we understand the combination of such prodigious accomplishments and such devastating violence?²⁰

The author strives to answer two basic questions: What are the factors that produced European economic and scientific leadership? And what are the factors that produced such horrific wars and cultural conflict within the context of a single civilization?

She notes that understanding of any society requires a basic comprehension of its economic foundations, its political systems,

and its shifting power relationships. She then explains 20th century European barbarism in terms of deceit, military prowess, military alliances, threats, promises, military and naval feints, financial policies, personal traits of reigning rulers, poor decisions by players, misperceived ambitions of the enemy, virulent nationalism.²¹

Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet suggests that these material explanations are necessary, but not sufficient. Material explanations capture only part of the narrative; the analysis must go deeper – and consider civilization's disconnect with, in Abdu'l-Bahá's words, "the Most Great Guidance."

Abdu'l-Bahá explains the various dimensions of this Guidance. He tells us that happiness of mankind lies in the unity and the harmony of the human race, and that spiritual and material developments are conditioned upon love and amity among all men. He describes man as being endowed with two natures: one bent towards moral sublimity and intellectual perfection, the other towards imperfections: "If ye travel the countries of the globe ye shall observe on one side the remains of ruin and destruction, while on the other ye shall see the signs of civilization and development. Such desolation and ruin are the result of war, strife and quarrelling, while all development and progress are fruits of the lights of virtue, co-operation and concord."²²

Abdu'l-Bahá offers an implicit, but no less trenchant, critique of the perennial "survival of the fittest" mentality. He tells us that "which is conducive to association and attraction and unity among the sons of men is the means of the life of the world of humanity, and whatever causeth division, repulsion and remoteness leadeth to the death of humankind."²³ Here, Abdu'l-Bahá is making a simple, though often overlooked, distinction between human survival and animal survival.

As S.I. Hayakawa observed long ago, it is often taken for granted that human nature is "selfish" and that life is a struggle in which only the fittest may survive.²⁴ According to this thesis, the basic law by which man must live, in spite of his surface veneer of civilization, is the law of the jungle. The "fittest" are those who can bring to the struggle superior force, superior cunning, and superior ruthlessness. Hayakawa explained the implications of this philosophy: The wide currency of this philosophy of the "survival of the fittest" enables those who act ruthlessly and selfishly to ease their consciences by deluding themselves that they are merely following a "law of nature." Hayakawa then, inviting a hypothetically disinterested, and arguably more honest, observer, asked whether the ruthlessness of the tiger, the cunning of the ape, and obedience to the "law of the

jungle” are actually evidences of *human* fitness to survive.²⁵ He insightfully asked whether, if human beings are to pick up pointers on behavior from the lower animals, there were not animals other than beasts of prey from which one might learn lessons in survival.²⁶

Pointing to the rabbit or the deer, Hayakawa asked whether fitness may be defined as superior rapidity in running away from one's enemies. Similarly, pointing to the earthworm or the mole, might we not define fitness as the ability to keep out of sight and out of the way? Or, pointing to the oyster or the housefly, could fitness not be defined as the ability to propagate one's kind faster than one's enemies can eat them up? Thus, according to Hayakawa, if we are looking to animals for models of behavior, if we simply look to animals in order to define what we mean by “fitness to survive,” there is no limit to the subhuman systems of behavior that can be devised: we may emulate lobsters, dogs, sparrows, parakeets, giraffes, skunks, or the parasitical worms, because they all obviously survived in one way or another. We are still entitled to ask, however, if *human* survival does not revolve around a different kind of fitness from that exhibited by the lower animals.

Hayakawa then explained this fitness as the ability to cooperate, to unify. Hayakawa found that cooperation within a species (and sometimes with other species) is essential to the survival of most living creatures, including man.

Juxtaposing Hayakawa's insights with Abdu'l-Bahá's utterances, we learn that the unity called for by Hayakawa is attainable only in the context of diversity. Abdu'l-Bahá explains that differences are of two kinds:

One is the cause of annihilation and is like the antipathy existing among warring nations and conflicting tribes who seek each other's destruction, uprooting one another's families, depriving one another of rest and comfort and unleashing carnage. The other kind which is a token of diversity is the essence of perfection and the cause of the appearance of the bestowals of the Most Glorious Lord.
(SWAB 304)

Abdu'l-Bahá illustrates this point using the example of the flowers of a garden. He says:

Consider the flowers of a garden: though differing in kind, colour, form and shape, yet, inasmuch as they are refreshed by the waters of one spring, revived by the breath of one wind, invigorated by the rays of one sun, this diversity increaseth their charm, and addeth unto their beauty. Thus when that unifying force, the penetrating influence of the

Word of God, taketh effect, the difference of customs, manners, habits, ideas, opinions and dispositions embellisheth the world of humanity. This diversity, this difference is like the naturally created dissimilarity and variety of the limbs and organs of the human body, for each one contributeth to the beauty, efficiency and perfection of the whole. When these different limbs and organs come under the influence of man's sovereign soul, and the soul's power pervadeth the limbs and members, veins and arteries of the body, then difference reinforceth harmony, diversity strengtheneth love, and multiplicity is the greatest factor for co-ordination.

How unpleasing to the eye if all the flowers and plants, the leaves and blossoms, the fruits, the branches and the trees of that garden were all of the same shape and colour! Diversity of hues, form and shape, enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof. In like manner, when divers shades of thought, temperament and character, are brought together under the power and influence of one central agency, the beauty and glory of human perfection will be revealed and made manifest. Naught but the celestial potency of the Word of God, which ruleth and transcendeth the realities of all things, is capable of harmonizing the divergent thoughts, sentiments, ideas, and convictions of the children of men. Verily, it is the penetrating power in all things, the mover of souls and the binder and regulator in the world of humanity. (SWAB 304-5)

4. Conclusion

Abdu'l-Bahá's "Tablet of the Two Calls" is at once a plea and a promise. The plea is for unity, which, according to Abdu'l-Bahá, trumps discord and isolation. The promise is two-pronged: unity will result in welfare and happiness of humankind, while dissension and discord are sure to cause hardship — human, political, economic, intellectual.

This plea and promise, as Abdu'l-Bahá demonstrates, are amply borne out by history. Man continues to insist on harming man. The political and social climate that Abdu'l-Bahá alludes to in the Tablet prevail today. Difference, disunity, and destruction continue to marginalize unity and construction. Abdu'l-Bahá's unity in diversity paradigm enables us to mine the diversity inherent in humanity without alienating the other: unity without uniformity, diversity without fragmentation.

NOTES

¹ Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness and The Secret Agent*. New York: Doubleday, 1997, 47-48.

² This determination is confirmed by the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre.

³ SWAB 296-309.

⁴ "Depth or breadth?" A question that invariably leaps to mind in exploring this or any other Tablet under page and space limitations such as those imposed here. In other words, should the writer probe two or three salient themes? Or, abandoning depth, should the writer try to capture and convey the general thrust? I hope to steer a middle ground; that is to say, I will give a flavor of the overall thrust of the Tablet and then explore one or two themes in more depth. Along the way, I will embark on various excursions into politics, history, poetry, and literature. These detours, especially that involving Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, are meant to illuminate and dramatize the topic at hand.

⁵ SWAB 296.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 297.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 86, 90

¹² Ibid., 65.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 90.

¹⁷ This discussion borrows heavily from *Century of Light*, a 2001 publication of the Universal House of Justice.

¹⁸ Gabriel Jackson, *Civilization and Barbarity in 20th-Century Europe*, Amherst: Humanity Books, 1999.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 301.

²³ Ibid., 303.

²⁴ S.I. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, New York: Harcourt, 1949.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

