

Text, author, reader and the relationship with the Sacred¹

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All of us has have surely experienced being in a place and consulting a map without realizing our precise location. From our point of observation, we can see many churches and monuments that are not on the map and the answers that we receive to our inquiries to passers-by are unsatisfactory. Such an experience has also occurred at school, at university and, later on, at work. Indeed, in all these situations, we have been given maps that do not show what we are mainly concerned about. As years go by, we finally realize that maps are rather insignificant tools if they are not joined with our perceptions and feelings and, above all, we basically trust much more in our own ability to read and understand events.

If we take everything that which we deem reality as being the absolute truth, we may be mistaken.

In this essay, we examine how the relationship between the text, the reader and the author originates and develops. In this particular context, the author is conceived as the Manifestation of God or the Prophet. The reader is an individual reading a holy book - a book that may belong to the Christian, Islamic, Jewish or Bahá'í tradition. We will especially examine the relation between the reader, the text and the author as it may develop in the Bahá'í scriptures.

This essay is a preliminary survey of how the relationship between the text, the reader and the author originates and develops. It does not aim to come to any conclusion since this topic needs a lot of study both of the theories of literary criticism on one side and the Bahá'ís writings on the other.

In this particular context the author is conceived as the Manifestation of God or the Prophet. In the Bahá'í scriptures, we read that:

“The beginning of all things is the knowledge of God²...and this cannot be attained save through the knowledge of His Divine Manifestation.”³

The bahá'í scholar Hasan Balyuzi defines the station of the Manifestation of God as follows:

“The Manifestation of God is the Archetype, and His life is the supreme pattern⁴. His vision, not arrested by time and space, encompasses the future as well as the past. He is the only and the necessary link between one cycle of social evolution and another.

¹ While preparing this text, I have consulted many articles dealing with this topic; from various perspectives. In particular, I have consulted Brown, V., Textual Resurrection: Book, Imam and Cosmos in the Qur'an Commentaries of the Báb, The Bahá'í Studies Review, A Publication of the Association for Bahá'í Studies UK, Volume 13, 2005. Furthermore I have consulted: Lewis, F., Poetry as revelation, The Bahá'í Studies Review, A Publication of the Association for Bahá'í Studies UK, Volume 9, 1999-2000, Lewis, F., Scripture as literature: sifting through the layers of the text, The Bahá'í Studies Review, A Publication of the Association for Bahá'í Studies UK, Volume 7, 1997, McGlenn, S., Book review: The Ocean of His Words: A readers Guide to the art of Baha'u'llah, The Bahá'í Studies Review, A Publication of the Association for Bahá'í Studies UK, Volume 9, 1999-2000, Perrakis, P. S., Spiritual Oppression in Frankenstein, The Journal of Bahá'í Studies, Association for Bahá'í Studies, North America, Volume 9, Number 4, McLean, J., Literary criticism, Theology and Deconstructionism found at <http://mclean.titles.googlepages.com/LiteraryCriticismTheologyandDeconstr.htm>, 11/06/2008.

² Baha'u'llah, Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, 1983, p. 5

³ Baha'u'llah, Tablets of Baha'u'llah, Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa Israel, 1978, p. 156

⁴ Cfr. The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an, Tr. Yusuf Ali, Amana Corporation, Maryland, 1991, 33:21; 60:4,6

Without Him history is meaningless and co-ordination is impossible. Furthermore, the Manifestation of God releases deep reservoirs of spiritual power and quickens the forces latent in Man. By Him, and by Him alone, can Man attain 'second birth'. Through Him, and Him alone, can Man know God.”⁵

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In Abdu'l-Bahá's⁶ writings, we read: "...the function of language is to portray the mysteries and secrets of human hearts. The heart is like a box, and language is the key. Only by using the key can we open the box and observe the gems it contains.”⁷

Therefore, the purpose of language is to reveal the secrets hidden in the heart of the reader and enable the author to write and the reader to read statements that are true.

Bahá'u'llah writes: "That which is desired of a language is that it convey the intent of the speaker..."⁸

Language mediates inasmuch as it is the instrument that enables the "world of the text"⁹ to get in touch with the "world of the reader" and generate the meanings resulting from this contact. Language mediates between humanity and the world, in the meeting among human beings and between the individual and his own intimate thoughts.

The reality of the text is between the reader and the text itself: it is the result of a mutual relationship between the text and the reader.

Our purpose is to focus on how a theoretical concept tallies with our practical daily actions and experiences, as discussed, for example, by the sociologist Peter Berger.

"Everyday life presents itself as a reality interpreted by men and subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world."¹⁰ The daily routine can be understood as the reality made of gestures, habits and all those acts that make our living into a certain context familiar to us.

In this text we read that: "...reality is socially constructed..."¹¹ and furthermore he defines reality "...as a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition..."¹² and he defines knowledge "...as the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics."¹³

There can be found other definitions of this concept developed by other authors, but for reasons of brevity we will only take this definition in our work.

Daily life shows itself to the eyes of each individual as a meaningful, consistent reality, in which many things are taken for granted because, if they were questioned, they would challenge the existence of a considerable number of gestures which have always characterized and are still marking our own lives.

"This suspension of doubt is so firm that to abandon it, as I might want to do, say, in theoretical or religious contemplation, I have to make an extreme transition. The world

5 Balyuzi, H., Bahá'u'lláh The King of Glory, (George Ronald, Oxford, 1980), p. 7

6 Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921) son of Bahá'u'llah, Founder of the Bahá'í faith, and authorized interpreter of his writings. For more information on his life, see Balyuzi, H. M., Abdu'l-Bahá, George Ronald, Oxford, 1972

7 Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, Baha'i Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, 1982, p. 60.

8 Bahá'u'llah, The Tabernacle of Unity, Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, Israel, 2006, 1.7, p. 6

9 Ricoeur, P., Figuring the Sacred, Religion, Narrative and Imagination, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1995, pp. 240-43

10 Berger, P., Luckmann, T., The social construction of reality, Penguin Books, London, 1991, p. 33

11 Berger, P., Luckmann, T., The social construction of reality, p. 13

12 Berger, P., Luckmann, T., The social construction of reality, p. 13

13 Berger, P., Luckmann, T., The social construction of reality, p. 13

of everyday life proclaims itself and, when I want to challenge the proclamation, I must engage in a deliberate, by no means easy effort.”¹⁴

An introduction needs to be made in order to better understand the topic that we are dealing with. A literary text already contains its own meaning. The best way to approach it is to study it directly by examining each word with the aim to gather the meaning that its author is willing to convey, without superimposing our personal interpretation.

The text is continuously showing us the universal truth on human nature. Over the centuries, it has been revealing man's nature through the contribution of poetry, literature and art.

The text will talk to our individuality because it is unique, something essential that overcomes all social forces, bindings and limits around us. In other words, it is possible to interpret a text without necessarily showing what the right interpretation is or without imposing the idea that only *one* reading is correct. We will come back on this concept during our analysis.

The reader

A text becomes “reality” in the very moment when it gets in touch with the reader. The person who reads a text needs to use his or her creative resources to understand the concepts and then, by investing some more energy in identifying actions, to possibly put the approached ideas into practice; of course not all ideas can be put into practice for several reasons.

Indeed, the meaning resulting from this approach is an event which does not occur within the page of the text, where one can observe the flowing of the letters, but derives from the interaction of two elements: the text with its letters or context and the elaboration of the same text by the reader.

The context is the environment in which a certain expression occurs together with other expressions belonging to the same system of signs.

This means that, however subjective the relation between the reader and the text is, the reader can understand the text through the progressive shaping of the events in his or her mind. At a certain moment, the events and the reader will merge into a single body, where understanding and action cannot be set aside. By action can be meant the understanding of the words read or the process of acting this very concepts that the reader contacted.

In this case, the reader is asked to empty his or her mind of all preconceived ideas in order to let the new ones settle in, get in contact with the gist of the message that the author wishes to share.

A possible starting point is the one suggested by the scholar of literature René Wellek. This author suggests that a natural, reasonable starting point could be the reading, interpretation and the analysis of the works themselves, which after all are the only ones justifying our interest in the life of an author, in his social conditions and in the whole historical process.

An other approach suggests that a good starting point could be to read and study the life of the author in order to capture more possible information to understand his work.

14 Berger, P., Luckmann, T., The social construction of reality, p. 37

A question spontaneously arises: why do we decide to study a text or an author? We are not clearly interested in reading it because it has something in common with all men. Indeed, in this case, we would not choose that author, nor we would be interested in any feature that he may have in common with other contemporary authors. We would rather look for the peculiarity of a given character, and this is obviously a problem of individuality and value. Even by studying a historical period, a movement or a certain literature, the scholar will have before him/her an individuality with characteristics, features and qualities that differentiate him/her from other similar ones.

What has been emphasized above may lead us to dwell on a passage from Bahá'u'lláh's writings, that states the following:

“Say: The first and foremost testimony establishing His truth is His own Self. Next to this testimony is His Revelation. For whoso faileth to recognize either the one or the other He hath established the words He hath revealed as proof of His reality and truth...”¹⁵

In this quotation, which is so charged with meaning, we can find three elements beckoning us to approach the study of bahá'í writings: His Being, His Revelation and, finally, the words that He revealed. These three elements show an extremely special value, that can hardly be traced back to all men, or to a group of men such as philosophers or seers, but it seems to lead to a precise category of individuals, the prophets or manifestations of God, those people who are “...endowed with constancy...”¹⁶ which is a qur'anic category, because they have revealed a Holy Book.

The well-known scholar of Islam Alessandro Bausani says:

“As it is the case for all religions, the language with which the bahá'í texts are written, although their content and their shaping force are universal, is obviously the physical language belonging to the place where it was born. In this case the place is Persia....”¹⁷

Bahá'u'lláh similarly points out “These statements are made in the sphere of that which is relative because of the limitations of men.”¹⁸

This suggests us that there is not an absolute way of reading a religious text, rather as pointed out by Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í and authorized interpreter of the Writings of both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Bahá “...religious truth is not absolute but relative...”¹⁹.

This concept is very important because it shows how the relation between the text and the reader is a reality depending on the relation resulting from the interaction of these two elements. Reading a text aloud does not mean that this is the text itself, but it is the intonation that the reader is able to give and, during our listening, we may even correct the meaning that the speaker wishes to convey. An analogy could be found with music playing. Indeed, the playing of a piece of music, although it is performed by the best musician, is the result of his personal interpretation of the composition, which is coloured by the shades that he manages to express, and that may change in a later

15 Baha'u'llah, Gleanings from the Writings, p. 105

16 The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an, 46:35

17 Bausani, Alessandro, Saggi sulla Fede Bahá'í, Casa Editrice Bahá'í, Roma, 1991, p. 174

18 Baha'u'llah, The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys, Baha'i Publishing Trust, Wilmette Illinois, 1986, p. 27

19 Shoghi Effendi, The Promised Day is Come, Baha'i Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, 1980, p. 2

playing. In this sense, the reading of a text, its interpretation and over-interpretation allow us to add new, wider meanings and deeper understandings.

Professor of Semiotics Umberto Eco writes:

“A text is an open-ended universe where the interpreter can discover infinite interconnections.”²⁰

He then adds: “Language mirrors the inadequacy of thought: our being-in-the world is nothing else than being incapable of finding any transcendental meaning.”²¹

So when we read a text, a religious text, we are incapable of fully discovering a meaning transcendental in its characteristic that alone can provide us with an absolute understanding.

There is a quote by Baha'u'llah that suggests this very idea:

“Intone, O My servant, the verses of God that have been received by thee, as intoned by them who have drawn nigh unto Him, that the sweetness of thy melody may kindle thine own soul, and attract the hearts of all men. Whoso reciteth, in the privacy of his chamber, the verses revealed by God, the scattering angels of the Almighty shall scatter abroad the fragrance of the words uttered by his mouth, and shall cause the heart of every righteous man to throb. Though he may, at first, remain unaware of its effect, yet the virtue of the grace vouchsafed unto him must needs sooner or later exercise its influence upon his soul.”²²

In this perspective, the effect of the reading, which involves the intonation, in the reader's heart is extremely important. Although the reader might not feel any effect at first, later on the “text” will surely affect him, provided that through the limited tools, with which he is endowed, will allow him to truly listen to the reading without adding any subsequent rationalization, which results from concepts or ideas that were previously learnt and superimposed to the new ones still to be arranged.

Once a reader faces a text a feeling should arise, a feeling described in this dialogue by the philosopher Socrates and Theaetetus referred to philosophy and that could be a universal feeling that could belong to a potential reader.

These are their words: “«...I am amazed when I think of them;...and I want to know what on earth they mean; and there are times when my head quite swims with the contemplation of them...»...«I see, [replies Socrates], my dear Theaetetus, that Theodorus had a true insight into your nature when he said that you were a philosopher, for wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder.»...”²³

Similar words are suggested by Baha'u'llah in the Seven Valleys: “O Lord, increase my astonishment at Thee!”²⁴, showing a possible attitude to acquire while walking in the path of search.

Who is the reader and what are his characteristics? The first consideration leads us to the fact that the reader possesses his own culture and has developed a certain understanding of the reality of things through his efforts, his experiences, his wishes and emotions. In short, he is a complete, healthy, dynamic, creative individual. This aspect tends to include man's faculties as a whole.

20 Eco, U., *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, edited by Setfan Collini, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p. 39

21 Eco, U., *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, p. 39

22 Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings*, p. 295

23 Platone, *Teeteto o Sulla Scienza*, Universale Economica Feltrinelli, Milano, 2005, 155b, p.69, author's translation

24 Baha'u'llah, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, Baha'i Publishing Trust, Wilmette Illinois, 1986, pp. 34

Every person can be a reader, obviously he has to comply with the rules connected to the text, the intention of the author, which is often unknown to us, and the meaning of what is written.

Each reader belongs to a distinct category, from which he develops his own perspective of the text that he is reading. This perspective depends on his grounding as well as on his spiritual condition, this latter corresponding to specific comprehension levels.

We may think that each reader matches the various levels, in accordance with his spiritual comprehension, thus entering what the Islamic cosmology defines as the Worlds of God, which indicate the greater or lesser closeness to God.²⁵

Umberto Eco quoting the Russian scholar Tzvetan Todorov gives an interesting image of the relationship that should arise between the reader and the author:

“...a text is only a picnic where the author brings the words and the readers bring the sense.”²⁶

However true this statement may be, we should not overlook that the author brings in meanings that the reader cannot leave aside.

Again, Eco points out:

“To interpret a text means to explain why these words can do various things (and not others) through the way they are interpreted. But if Jack the Ripper told us that he did what he did on the grounds of his interpretation of the Gospel according to Saint Luke, I suspect that many reader-oriented critics would be inclined to think that he read Saint Luke in a pretty preposterous way.”²⁷

This statement by Eco suggests that there are cases in which it is possible to say that a certain interpretation is a bad one, because it goes against what is generally defined as ethical, religious or social.

The text

The most common answer to the question “what is and where is the literary work” conveys the idea that a literary work is a hand made work, an object compared to a painting or a sculpture, thus identifying the literary text with the black strokes of ink on the white sheet of paper or with the stone-engravings on ancient times.

This answer is unsatisfactory because we cannot disregard an extensive, orally handed-down literature, which was never put down in writing. Therefore, comparing a literary text to the ink strokes appears to be reductive because the printed page contains many elements that are unrelated to poetry, such as the fonts, the type of letters – block letters or italics – the size of the page and many others aspects.

As explained above, the literary work cannot consist in its being read aloud because it depends on the intonation and the interpretations *in itinere* of the person who reads, nor can it be the education and the personality of the reader, which, as we noticed, depends on his subjectivity and, which is, therefore, a relative concept.

25 We can find an interesting explanation to this concept in the text by Nader Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Canada, 2008, pp. 115-116, where the author most clearly defines this concept.

26 Eco, U., *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, p. 24

27 Eco, U., *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, p. 24

If we analyse a work of art more rigorously, we can stray from the idea that it is made up of a system of rules and rather conceive it as a system of different, interconnected levels.

The text is also a moment of revelation, which, in the Jewish doctrine is an acoustic, non-visual event. The scholar of Jewish mysticism Gershom Scholem explains that the starting point of all mystical theories of language, including the cabbalistic ones, is the belief that language, namely the medium through which the spiritual life of man finds its fulfillment, possesses an inner side, an aspect that cannot be reduced to mere communication between human beings. He adds that the mystical reader, as he calls him discovers in language a dignity, an immanent dimension, a structural aspect aiming at communicating something unspoken and that, if it could ever be expressed, it would not have a communicable sense.

Bahá'u'lláh explains that the power of the sacred word is higher and far superior to that which the senses of man can perceive. He then goes on to say that "... it is sanctified from any property or substance. It transcendeth the limitations of known elements and is exalted above all the essential and recognized substances. It became manifest without any syllable or sound and is none but the Command of God which pervadeth all created things."²⁸

Similarly, Scholem explains that in its becoming a word, the noun becomes a constituent part of what can be called the language of God, in which God introduces himself, shows himself and is communicated to his own creation as well, which comes to life just through the *medium* of this language. Everything according to him is created by combining the letters of the divine language.

Thus, the word is the instrument that allows man to accomplish two very important things: through his search, he can approach the knowledge of God which, as we have pointed out, can only happen through the words of the Manifestations of God. In order to do so man needs to purify his heart from all the things derived from the past so as to approach the text with a new, restored spirit, free from any previous knowledge, which Bahá'u'lláh urges us not to use as the balance to weigh His words.

In this case, the text is not a common text written by an especially talented person, but it is the result and the aim through which man can reach a special kind of knowledge already laying in his heart, the place, besides intellect, where the divine mysteries are revealed. It is the place where will and action join in a harmonious comprehension of the beginning of life.

We can therefore define some basic features which can be applied universally to any religious text we may be taking into consideration. A sacred text can be conceived of as a preexistent entity, which not only precedes the creation of the world but also becomes a paradigm of its creation. It encompasses the whole range of supernal and worldly knowledge, serving thereby as the depositary of the perfect gnosis and as an indispensable bridge between man and the divine. To study a sacred text is a religious duty, as it embodies the will of God which has to be further explicated by the intense devotion to the perusal and its practical application of what has been studied.

The reading of a text is the highest job of comprehension because we are able to retransform the text into a living organism. The comprehension process entirely moves

28 Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Baha'u'llah, Bahá'I World, Centre, Haifa, Israel, 1978, p. 140

inside the sphere of sense, which is transmitted by the mediation of language, and which it acquires its true spirituality in writing, because the process of comprehension attains its position of full sovereignty in front of the written text and it does not depend on anything external any more.

The author

In this article, we have examined the characteristics of the reader and the text. We now need to inquire into the elements which mark the author, the last though not the least important element to be considered in this analysis.

“What is an Author?” is the title of a very interesting essay by Michel Foucault²⁹. In this essay, Foucault defines the features of the author, which will support us in going into this problem.

When we make reference to the author, we immediately perceive that we are talking about a well-defined individual because of his characteristics, his historical position and his specific function.

The name of the author is not only an element that may become something different inside the speech, such as a noun or an adjective, that might be replaced by another element of the same category. Its presence is extremely important and allows us to determine about whom we are talking. The name of the author differentiates the relation between the author and other possible texts. The identification of the author will attribute a meaning to the text and will place it in the suitable context.

The function of the author is not always universal and constant in each text taken into account. This function has taken different meanings over the centuries, depending on the subject of the text and the historical context in which it was developed.

“The function of the author”³⁰ does not grow spontaneously by attributing a speech to a person: “It results from a complex operation whose purpose is to construct the rational entity we call an author.”³¹

We assign to this construction a “realistic” dimension because we are treating the depth of the author, his creativity, his intentions and his authentic ability to express a given concept.

How can we attribute a considerable number of texts to the same author and what are the rules which distinguish one author from the other?

We have considered the concepts that define the features of the author in accordance with the rules of literary theory and through the indications that can be drawn from some of its leading figures.

In this presentation, we are dealing with a particular author who, in the history of humanity, occupies a particular, unique position and whose special characteristic differentiates him from any other author because, as some people maintain, his word has creative power and contributes to build up a civilization and the improvement of humanity.

The Manifestation of God, the author being referred to here, we read in the Baha’i scriptures, shows his power of renewal by transforming society and launching a new

²⁹ Foucault, M., in Adams, H., Searle, L., *Critical Theory since 1965*, University Presses of Florida, 1986, pp. 136-48

³⁰ Foucault, M., *Critical Theory*, p. 143

³¹ Foucault, M., *Critical Theory*, p. 143

culture. The lessons of these individuals, unlike the philosophers', capture humanity by means of the revealed words and the practice of their lessons help man to reach salvation and it contributes in creating civilizations.³²

To summarize the points developed in this essay we can suggest that there is a possible approach to the interpretation of a text, which involves three interconnected notions: the author, the reader and the text. These three basic components, form a threefold aspect in which their relation of mutual communication is essential.

The "*intentio operis*"³³ as "the intention of the work"³⁴, plays an important role, as a source of meaning which is not always reducible to the pre-textual, "*intentio auctoris*"³⁵, none the less operates as a constraint upon the free play of the "*intentio lectoris*"³⁶

These three concepts characterize the interpretation as a research of meanings in which what one needs to look for in the text is what the author wanted to say, what the text is, what it states regarding its contextual coherence and the situation of the signification systems on which it draws, what it says apart from its author's intentions, and what the receiver can find in it referring to his own signification systems and/or his own wishes, thrusts, wills.

Therefore the "*intentio operis*" can be defined to attract the hearts of humanity, the cultivation of heavenly attributes, and to quicken the soul of men, "to explain to him the mystery of the power of the Holy Spirit; to enable him to reflect the light, and so, in his turn, to be the source of guidance to others."³⁷

Bahá'u'lláh Himself defines the goal of His mission:

"...is...the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall effect both its inner life and external conditions...For if the character of mankind be not changed, the futility of God's Universal Manifestation would be apparent."³⁸

The aim of educating the human heart also depends on the reader and his interaction with the author and the text. As we have seen above, in the act of reading, the reader shall meet the requirements of withdrawing from the knowledge learnt in the past, purifying his soul, ears, mind, heart and eyes from all the things which are doomed to die.

32 See for example Baha'u'llah, Gleanings from the Writings, XXXIV, LXXXI, see also Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá, Baha'i World Centre, Haifa, Israel, 1978, # 225.

33 Eco, U., Interpretation and overinterpretation, p. 9

34 Eco, U., Interpretation and overinterpretation, p. 9

35 Eco, U., Interpretation and overinterpretation, p. 9

36 Eco, U., Interpretation and overinterpretation, p. 9

37 Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, 1982, p. 310

38 Bahá'u'lláh, Kitab-i-Iqan, the Book of Certitude, Baha'i Publishing Trust, Wilmette Illinois, 1985, pp. 240-41