

The Art of Sacred Reading: In Search of a Bahá'í Approach

Ismael Velasco

As the 19th century approached its term, Nietzsche's madman was pondering the death of God, and coming face to face with the awesome puzzle of its aftermath:

“Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Wither is it moving now? Wither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not perpetually falling? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left?”¹

His lone, demented voice had in fact visioned the shape of things to come:

“For some time now we have realized it.” Italo Calvino adverts, “the storeroom of humanity's accumulated materials – mechanisms, machines, merchandises, markets, institutions, documents, poems, emblems, photograms, *opera picta*, arts and trades, encyclopedias, cosmologies, grammars, places and figures of speech, ties of kinship, tribe and enterprise, myths and rituals, operational models – no way remains to keep them in order. ...All the parameters, the categories, the antitheses, that had served to imagine, classify and project the world, are up for discussion. And not only those closest to historic attributions of values: the rational and the mythic, to work and to exist, masculine and feminine, and even the poles of more elementary topologies, like affirmation and negation, the tall and the short, the living and the thing.”²

It should not surprise that such conditions should have had a profoundly destabilising effect not only on our societies but on our very notions of self, engendering what Appadurai describes as a “new order of instability in the production of modern subjectivities”.³ Bahá'u'lláh Himself had prefigured this development, declaring with the tongue of prophecy in richly symbolic language:

“The heaven of every religion hath been rent, and the earth of human understanding been cleft asunder... The mountains have passed away, and the heavens have been folded together... Every woman that hath had a burden in her womb hath cast her burden. We see men drunken in this Day, the Day in which men and angels have been gathered together.”⁴

On the one hand such processes, such collapses, such implosions of seemingly reified schemas, disclose possibilities for more inclusive and harmonious interpretations of the grand narratives that ordered for centuries our sense of ourselves and of others, enabling unprecedented degrees of cross-cultural insight and participation in shared meaning. On the other hand, the selfsame speed and nature of these changes furnishes fresh incentives for cultural conflict, for entrenchment in ever hardening identities to

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Walter Kaufmann (trans.), Random House, New York, 1974, section 125

² Italo Calvino, “La Mirada del arqueólogo”, in *Punto y Aparte: Ensayos sobre Literatura y Sociedad*, Gabriela Sánchez Ferlosio (translator), Tusquets Editores, Barcelona, 1995.

³ Appadurai

⁴ Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 45

serve as barricades to hold the tide of cultural relativism, “where meanings, in a chaotic pattern rather than neatly ordered, are of necessity relativised to one another”.⁵ This is perhaps nowhere more so than in the religious sphere, as the Universal House of Justice most recently highlighted:

“the greater part of organized religion stands paralyzed at the threshold of the future, gripped in those very dogmas and claims of privileged access to truth that have been responsible for creating some of the most bitter conflicts dividing the earth's inhabitants.

“The consequences, in terms of human well-being, have been ruinous. It is surely unnecessary to cite in detail the horrors being visited upon hapless populations today by outbursts of fanaticism that shame the name of religion.”⁶

“As it turns out,” reflects Donald Kalb, “globality can foster both, an ecumenical humanism or the fundamentalist rejection of just that”, and what we are left with is a fundamental uncertainty in our identities. Identity has become a fragmented, fissiparous space, and we are confronted with the spectacle of a world seeking for itself, its gender, its ethnicity, its religion or want of it, seeking everywhere, questioning everything, clinging to landmarks of once coherent, or more coherent selves, and we see the world like another madman, this time not Nietzsche's but Nizami's:

“It is related that one day they came upon Majnun sifting the dust, and his tears flowing down. They said, "What doest thou?" He said, "I seek for Layli." They cried, "Alas for thee! Layli is of pure spirit, and thou seekest her in the dust!" He said, "I seek her everywhere; haply somewhere I shall find her.”⁷

“Indeed,” Kalb remarks, “the cultural economy that marks the global age revives all sorts of identity-movements, in particular those associated with religion and ethnicity”.⁸ Sometimes the processes of this search are powerfully ennobling, whilst others, as in the case of ethnic cleansing or religious intolerance, the pursuit of identity degrades the human spirit.

Nor were observers, - even (or perhaps particularly) the most influential - expecting such a dénouement to the seemingly indisputable death of God. “This”, political scientists advert, “is a new phenomenon... Instead of the Weberian iron cage and the progressive disenchantment of the world that was supposed to be congruent with modernization within the nation-state framework, we now face the spread of religion, ethnicity, and identity politics [where] ...an as yet unknown and inflammatory cultural politics is produced, a politics of difference that cannot be contained within the “cordon sanitaire” of the inevitably homogenizing modern nation-state.”⁹

It may indeed be true, in a mythic way, that in the course of the 19th century, “we killed God” as Nietzsche so percipiently observed;¹⁰ as the process of expunging the

⁵ Cf. Robertson, pp.125-126; Kalb, p.3

⁶ The Universal House of Justice, *To the World's Religious Leaders*, April 2002, p. 2

⁷ Baha'u'llah, *The Seven Valleys*, p. 5

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⁹ Kalb, expounding Appadurai, p.8

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Walter Kaufmann (trans.), Random House, New York, 1974, section 125

sacred from the narrative of modernity, begun long before, was all but completed by the time “the age of extremes” opened in the twentieth century.¹¹

But in religious consciousness this was not the first time God had been killed, and those times too the deed proved to be very far from final. In the Christian story for example such a cosmic act had already been perpetrated once in Jesus’ crucifixion. This did not for Christians prove to be the *end* of God, but rather a temporary obscuration, which at the term of a mere “three days” led Jesus’ followers to declare His resurrection, and the society that had discounted Him to reappraise the situation – as it perplexingly discovered the resurgence of an apparently moribund Christianity on a scale and vitality hitherto undreamt and inconceivable. It likewise would seem that the much later murder of God whose perpetration Nietzsche recorded with a mixture of exhilaration and dismay, turns out to have been but a preliminary - and “after three days” God appears as strong as ever in the fractious and disturbing “return of the religious”¹² into the consciousness, if not yet the language of modernity.

This return has not, indeed, been uncomplicated or harmonious. On the contrary, “inflammatory cultural politics” increasingly characterise our discourses on religious identity, tragically illustrated in the iconic moment of September 11, 2001. Faced with such politics of difference, grounded and legitimated in the religious sphere on the basis of conflicting claims and narratives that the attentive reader soon discovers within and between the sacred texts of the world’s religions, it may be posited that the logic of “reconciliation” constitutes the heart and soul of a Baha’i hermeneutic, and the “reality of reconciliation” its a-priori assumption.

Embracing paradox: The experience of contradiction and the logic of reconciliation.

Shoghi Effendi is unequivocal on the reconciliatory logic of the Baha’i Faith, “a Faith which is ...the reconciler ...of all religions”,¹³ “its avowed, its unalterable purpose is to widen their basis, to restate their fundamentals, to reconcile their aims”.¹⁴ “The aim of Bahá'u'lláh... is ...to reconcile rather than accentuate the divergences of the conflicting creeds which disrupt present-day society”,¹⁵ inasmuch as “the Revelation identified with Bahá'u'lláh reconciles [previous Dispensations’] seemingly divergent claims and doctrines”¹⁶

Such passages induce, on a superficial reading, a feeling of well-being, a promise of coherence, a sense of arrival at some kind of solid ground at a time when “every solid thing hath been made to flow”¹⁷, when all round we hear the voices, in the words of Spanish writer Fernando Savater, of those “for whom clamouring equally against everything – against slavery and against those that abolished it, against the liberty that establishes laws in defence of values capable of being universal and against those that

¹¹ Cf. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*

¹² Cf. Alain Touraine

¹³ Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 112

¹⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'llah*, p. 114

¹⁵ Shoghi Effendi “Summary Statement - 1947, Special UN Committee on Palestine”

¹⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 100

¹⁷ Baha'u'llah, *Prayers and Meditations by Baha'u'llah*, p. 226

reduce it to the intransigent whim of a few, against force utilized against tyrants and against such as is exerted by demagogic autocrats,”¹⁸

In such a context, Bahá'u'lláh's declaration of “the reality of reconciliation” beckons with a promise of coherence which seems an oasis in a desert of fragmentation. But enticing though one finds Baha'u'llah's witness to “the reality of reconciliation”, and emboldened though one becomes by the directions and signals left in His writings to guide the way to its location, a closer look (“repeat the gaze”)¹⁹ perhaps portends that the instinctual feelings of relief are premature. For it must be recognised that the very word “reconciliation” implies and necessitates a starting-point of conflict, and that “the reality of reconciliation”, declared by Baha'u'llah, must be laboriously and imaginatively sought if it is to be found at all. Baha'u'llah's declaration of “the reality of reconciliation”, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's assertion of “the primal oneness deposited at the heart of all created things”,²⁰ and like texts, impart to Baha'i hermeneutics a sense of direction, a goal, and an interpretive starting point against which progress may be measured – but it is some way from obviating the necessity of the journey itself, or even warranting attainment.

This recognition, that we must still find the way to reconciliation along a trail of seemingly irreducible contradictions may well induce what Muslim mystics and Bahá'í texts alike designate *hayra*, the wonderment, amaze, bewilderment, astonishment, marvel and perplexity which makes up the sixth valley of both Baha'u'llah's *Seven Valleys* and Attar's *Conference of Birds*. Such astonishment may be an elevated, but it is also a troubling condition, which Webster's dictionary defines as “to strike with a sudden sense of surprise or wonder especially through something unexpected or difficult to accept as true or reasonable”. A state expounded by Burkardt as “a feeling of dismay or perplexity in front of a situation which appears as having no way out, or in front of incompatible truth on the rational level. It is the ultimate crisis of a mind which meets with its own limits” (T. Burckardt, *Letters of a Sufi Master*)

This is not an unusual experience, but on the contrary typical, though we may do all we can to push it to the margins of our consciousness. As Bahiyih Nakhjavani reminds us:

“Religion ...brings man to an encounter with the contradictions within himself again and again... Such confrontation not being the most comfortable experience in the world, what is more instinctive than that man will find every possible means to avoid it? ... One of the startling proofs of the validity of the Baha'i Faith is that it requires us to face these contradictions, that it explores them, glorifies them, sets them at its very centre. From the simplest detail of function on an administrative committee to abstract speculations on the Word of God, we are challenged to beware of slipping into one extreme or the other, of losing sight of one facet of truth in order to support another.”²¹

¹⁸ Fernando Savater

¹⁹ Cf. Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 258

²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha*, p. 263

²¹ Bahiyih Nakhjavani, *Four on an Island*, George Ronald, Oxford, 1983, p. 109

In relation to the sacred texts of the world, Baha'i exegetical reconciliation of initial contradiction has been frequently effected through a range of techniques including historical contextualisation, metaphorical interpretation, and an a-priori assumption of inward, inherent, kerygmatic consensus or convergence.²² It is perhaps more comfortable for Bahá'ís to engage in the kind of plural and destabilising exegesis Baha'i theology entails in relation to the texts of "previous" dispensations, than it is to apply such perspectives to one's own. Indeed, it may be entirely unexpected to find reconciliation needed in a Bahá'í canon one may be accustomed to regard as immediately and uncomplicatedly coherent. But as this paper illustrates, it is probable that no discourse having to communicate high spiritual truths through the crude instrument of human language will be free of the need of reconciliation, as the essential oneness of reality is refracted through the variegated multiplicity of words:

“If I speak forth, many a mind will shatter,

And if I write, many a pen will break”²³

We are reminded of Shoghi Effendi's dictum:

“One might liken Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to a sphere; there are points poles apart, and in between the thoughts and doctrines that unite them.”²⁴

We are thus confronted, within a Baha'i theological perspective, with the validity of paradox; where positions polarise and yet are held to be harmonious, though “the thoughts and doctrines that unite them” may not be immediately apparent. Such paradox goes to the heart of very many related issues in Baha'i hermeneutics. As Bahiyyih Nakhjavani insists:

“A close textual study of Baha'u'llah's language as well as an investigation of any one of His teachings, challenges us to bear various elements in mind simultaneously. Though we may crave for some hard and fast rule, though we may wish for a ready solution to the restless dilemma we have to face in daily decisions, yet we find ...that the secret of dealing with dilemmas is not elimination but reconciliation, not by exclusion but inclusion. The purpose of the Manifestation of God is not to give us a tidy set of rules that lead to the death of the spirit, but to toss us in the paradox of choice where we might live and burn. To be a Baha'í is to have the courage to do this.”²⁵

The philosophical value of paradox is an age old concept, Ernest Becker going so far as to hold that the capacity to contain the maximum paradox is the highest form of heroism. Its inability to close the circle, its irreparable uncertainty of meaning, does not necessarily equate to meaninglessness or to the impossibility of subjective certitude or inter-subjective insight. But it does inherently and irreparably clip our wings and sever all aspiration to what Kant described as apodictic certainty,²⁶ or indeed, if we be sincere, even to apodictic rhetoric.

²² For some approaches to Baha'i exegetical reconciliation see Khazeh + Seena, Seena; Chris Buck; Micael Sours; etc.

²³ Baha'u'llah, *The Seven Valleys*, p. 29

²⁴ Cited by the Universal House of Justice in “Issues Concerning Community Functioning”, Feb 7 1993

²⁵ pp.112-113

²⁶ Cf. Emmanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*

Not unusually, we find ourselves before what the Greek sceptics after Sextus Empiricus called equipollence,²⁷ meaning the equal strength of seeming contradictory arguments or postulates, an equipollence which they valued and we fear for its capacity to induce epochee, the suspension, not of belief as is generally held, but of assent; a rationality poised at the very threshold where doubt and conviction meet or separate. While for the Greek pyrrhonists this led to a carefully nurtured state of philosophical and religious doubt, for Montaigne it did the very opposite, as exemplified in his amusing yet profound *Apology for Raymond Sebond*.²⁸ For him equipollence did not consist of merely positing equally convincing arguments for irreconcilable conclusions, but rather in cultivating emotional empathy simultaneously for antithetical stances and points of view, giving his deep religious faith a breadth of humanity that made his embrace of paradox perhaps an act of compassion and intellectual, even epistemic magnanimity; an expression of respect for the relatively puny yet truly sacred efforts of frail humanity to make sense of an immense and bewilderingly various universe, in both its grandeur and its seemingly prosaic minutiae. This perspective has some relevance to the Baha'i logic of reconciliation, which likewise depends on creative empathy for seemingly exclusive claims and qualities, on the imaginative embrace of paradox. As William Collins propounds:

“The vision inspired by Bahá'u'lláh is a progression of images that is intended to heighten the experience of the paradoxical in a succession of contrasting yet related imageries, provoke a crisis of understanding, [and] inspire the leap to new knowledge”.²⁹

For paradox, it may be readily perceived, is not simply a literary device, but inherent in the art of living. “Once we have grasped that man is a bundle of contradictions” Nakhjavani concludes, “we see that his power to survive, to create and revive his civilizations depends upon his ability to find structures, capable of serving his individual and social needs, that contain the maximum paradox. A study of the Baha'i Faith shows us such a structure and confronts us with such paradoxes. It is a religion, uniquely flexible and disturbingly comprehensive, which requires us to sustain and support conflicts without abdication or compromise... This requires something akin to artistry. We need to exert our utmost creativity and become spiritual artists, so to speak”.³⁰

The Baha'i hermeneutic, then, is also an exercise in creativity, without which paradox is destined to remain mere contradiction, and equipollence the end rather than starting point of reconciliation. At the heart of this “logic of reconciliation” lies, it is suggested, a hermeneutic of “open-mindedness and loving sympathy” .

“Loving sympathy”: the example of Montaigne

²⁷ On equipollence and the Greek sceptics see...

²⁸ Michel de Montaigne, ...

²⁹ William Collins...

³⁰ p.116

In a tablet written sometime in Adrianople to Salman, that nomadic, illiterate, yet profoundly perceptive and inquisitive courier of Bahá'u'lláh,³¹ we read: “Warn, O Salman, the beloved of the one true God, not to view with too critical an eye the sayings and writings of men. Let them rather approach such sayings and writings in a spirit of open-mindedness and loving sympathy.”³²

Bahá'u'lláh's admonition stands out, it will be suggested, against the background of an important current in Western intellectual culture and history. For while the quality of open-mindedness resonates significantly with the contemporary Western intellectual ethos and its intellectual roots, a hermeneutic of loving sympathy as a counterbalance to an excessively critical reading may be said to challenge some of its discursive norms, nowhere more so than in an academic context.

In modern Western intellectual culture, open-mindedness is indeed generally held up as a virtue to be cultivated and preserved in genuine intellectual endeavour. The Shi'i Usuli doctrine of imitation (*taqlid*), whereby a duty is imposed on believers to imitate the doctrinal and legal stance of religious leaders (*mujtahids*) rather than arrive at their own conclusions, is as distant from Western intellectual values as it is from the Baha'i ideal of independent investigation of truth. On the contrary, modern intellectual endeavour in the West is founded upon the cornerstone of critical thinking, the ability to question current assumptions and previously held convictions on the basis of new evidence or interpretations.

Indeed, the virtue of open-mindedness is inseparable from the habit and pursuit of rigorous critical thinking, and one would be hard put to overstate or exaggerate the value attached to critical thinking in the ethos of contemporary academia. Rooted in the classical tradition (Socratic-Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Pyrrhonist), and in the Christian Fathers' own systematic critique of Pagan philosophy and values, Western critical thinking was honed in the logical controversies of the scholastics. It took a qualitative leap in the Reformation's theological critique and the Renaissance's incubation of scientific methodologies, and gave birth to the Enlightenment's rationalist revolution and Romanticism's own subsequent revisionism. It culminated in the 20th century with the birth of modern academia and the rise of a critical apparatus of unprecedented sophistication, built on foundations laid by Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, among others.

Critical thinking likewise forms an integral part of the cardinal Baha'i principle of independent investigation of truth. The uncritical assent to inherited opinions is regarded as pernicious to the point of being the “greatest cause of bereavement and disheartening in the world of humanity”, as elucidated in one of 'Abdu'l-Baha's most emphatic disquisitions on the subject during his stay at Walden, Massachusetts in August of 1912:

“God has not intended man to imitate blindly his fathers and ancestors. He has endowed him with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must

³¹ For a description of this tablet see Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Baha'u'llah*, vol. 2, pp. 283-90.

³² Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, CLIV

accept. He must not be an imitator or blind follower of any soul. He must not rely implicitly upon the opinion of any man without investigation; nay, each soul must seek intelligently and independently, arriving at a real conclusion and bound only by that reality. The greatest cause of bereavement and disheartening in the world of humanity is ignorance based upon blind imitation. It is due to this that wars and battles prevail; from this cause hatred and animosity arise continually among mankind... Therefore, depend upon your own reason and judgement and adhere to the outcome of your own investigation; otherwise, you will be utterly submerged in the sea of ignorance and deprived of all the bounties of God.”³³

Having emphasised the importance of critical thought to a Baha’i perspective however, in the shape of a willingness and even an injunction to question received wisdom, it may be remarked that critical thinking can also lead to a peculiar form of hermetism: an attitude of *a priori* resistance to truth claims. It could indeed be argued that from a Baha’i perspective the Western intellectual tradition’s emphasis on critical thinking has led to an imbalance that systematically privileges doubt over certitude and mistrust over sympathy as an intellectual and interpretive lens: a “hermeneutic of suspicion”³⁴ which in the course of the 20th century has come to dominate Western intellectual culture and which, it may be argued, represents a departure from Baha’u’llah’s warning to His followers “not to view with too critical an eye the sayings and writings of men.” At the very least, against the context of this distinctively modern or even post-modern hermeneutic of suspicion, Baha’u’llah’s call for loving sympathy as a hermeneutical stance stands out not merely as a moral exhortation but as a softly stated yet pointed challenge to prevailing paradigms of discourse.

At the heart of today’s hermeneutic of suspicion lies a recognition of the subtle interweaving of power and discourse. Discourse and ideology validate and often conceal power relations ranging from those between author and audience to those between oppressor and oppressed. In this perspective texts become battlefields for power – interpretive, cultural, political. A text is not an object but an arena and event in which the reader participates: a naive reading that ignores such relationships of power will only serve to validate the status quo, regardless of its moral and intellectual soundness. Meaning, thus, is not a single point, but a conflict ridden process. To ignore the conflicts inherent in a text may be said therefore to legitimate the suppression of difference. What, against this background, can be the basis for interpretive loving-sympathy? On what grounds can Baha’u’llah warn against engaging with others’ ideas with “too critical an eye”?

I would like to approach this question indirectly, by reflecting, in the light of Bahá’í scripture, on one of intellectual history’s most colourful characters, a self-described pyrrhonist, or radical skeptic, whose critical skepticism was built on a foundation of exaggerated hermeneutical sympathy. I speak of course of Montaigne, whose Apology of Raymond Sebond furnishes a rich tapestry on which to trace the threads

³³ ‘Abdu’l-Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp.291-294. Abdu’l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 354. 1800 students and 180 professors, not to speak of other civic leaders and prominent people constituted the audience of what ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s chronicler described as “one of the most significant days.” (Cf. *Mahmud’s Diary*)...

³⁴ The term was originally coined by Riqueur as a contribution to the Gadamer-Habermas debate on the value of tradition \$\$\$\$. He identifies Marx, Freud and Nietzsche as “Masters of Suspicion”, and argues for the value of this hermeneutical stance in exposing the “strategies of power” behind every text.

of both critical thought and sympathetic reading within the tensions and dilemmas of a faith perspective.

Like unicolored rays emerging rainbow-like refracted through a crystal, so did even the most seemingly uncomplicated thought attain rich variety of expression projected through Montaigne's prismatic mind. Montaigne's perception of his faith filtered through encyclopedic and often trivial recollections to open up a myriad avenues of approach. Each of these interpretive avenues he was irresistibly led, by temperament or by design, to take the time to explore - irrespective of personal predilection or conviction. So that whilst expounding, defending or inquiring into what he might regard as the one unassailable light of true belief, he could not but scan in the same instant the multiplying colours of travesties, alternatives, implications and approximations which were plausible, real, or merely conceivable.

If his religious allegiance rested firmly in one place - the Catholic church - his inquisitiveness hardly found enough variety in the world and in history to sate its untamed appetite for the curious, the unusual, the odd, the slightly different. "I have", he avowed, "drawn some profit from the confusion of forms in the customs of the world: manners and customs different from mine do not so much annoy me as instruct me; comparing them does not puff me up with pride but humbles me. There is for me no such thing as a privileged choice, except one coming expressly from God." (P.85) "Variety of treatment", he also asserted, "is as good as consistency. Better in fact: it means being more copious and more useful." (P.78)

Such fascination with diversity may perhaps partly be explained in terms of Montaigne's uncanny ability to empathise, as is evident in passages like the following:

"The writings of the Ancients - I mean the good, ample, solid ones - tempt me and stir me almost at will; the one I am reading always seems the most firm. All appear right at their turn, even though they contradict each other." (p.149)

This exhilaration at being able to identify with the infinite variety of human custom and opinion, from stoicism to skepticism to epicureanism, overrides, as our earlier quote hinted, the comfort and allure of consistency and explains his refusal to privilege any choice "except one coming from God." (p.85)

This inclination he appears even to have cultivated consciously and studiously, with further destabilising epistemological consequences:

"Many's the time I have taken an opinion contrary to my own and (as I am fond of doing) tried defending it for the fun of the exercise: then, once my mind has really applied itself to that other side, I get so firmly attached to it that I forget why I held the first opinion and give it up. Almost any inclination no matter which, takes me with it and carries me along by my own weight. Almost anybody could say much the same himself if he watched himself as I do." (p.145)

Implicit in these words is a challenge to his readers to attempt the same endeavour, anticipating that if the reader watches his own self as closely as Montaigne did his, he

will perceive therein the same instability of opinion observed in Montaigne.³⁵ The last sentence also discloses the purport behind the seemingly trivial exercise of defending theses to which one is initially opposed to the point of being oneself won over by one's arguments: behind "the fun of the exercise", is, as ever, the goal of self-understanding. "I spy closely on myself", he wrote, "and keep my eyes constantly directed on myself alone- I do not have much else to do" (p.144) "And what can anyone understand who cannot understand himself?" (p.136)

To a Baha'i, this interpretation of Montaigne's intellectual stance makes congenial reading. Bearing in mind Bahá'u'lláh's, we now discover, revolutionary admonition, "approach such sayings and writings in a spirit of open-mindedness and loving sympathy,"³⁶ we find that these two attitudes - open-mindedness and loving sympathy – permeate Montaigne's general approach to "the sayings and writings of men". The warmth and receptivity of his treatment characterises even his discussion of culturally alien customs and ideas, conveying a sense of fundamental oneness transcending, yet revelling in the rich diversity of human opinion and experience.

Behind his sympathy with the myriad, mutually conflicting "writings and sayings of men", however, lies his own characteristic hermeneutic of suspicion, which may be described as Christian Pyrrhonism. This perspective is built on the writings of Sextus Empiricus, the primary transmitter of the classical skeptic school known as Pyrrhonism, and on an irreducible personal faith filtered through the doctrines of Catholic tradition. Indeed, what makes Montaigne's hermeneutic of suspicion distinctive is its paradoxical relationship to his solid religious faith. On the one hand, Montaigne includes his own opinions within the purview of pyrrhonist skepticism, generating an intellectual humility that makes him open to other people's views. On the other hand he holds to faith as divinely infused knowledge transcending language and opinion and to a respect of the views of his religious community, which together act as a critical counterpoise to his intellectual skepticism.

The preponderance of scepticism in the Apology is in this light purely quantitative. Structurally, Montaigne's faith dominates and controls the work throughout. If, as Montaigne writes, only "Man naked, empty, aware of his natural weakness" is "fit to accept help from on high", "Man stripped of all human learning and so all the more able to lodge the divine instruction and belief within him", then it makes sense to see the Apology as a carefully executed attempt at "annihilating his intellect to make room for faith"(p.74.) "Do you want a man who is sane, moderate, firmly based and reliable? Then array him in darkness, sluggishness and heaviness. To teach us to be wise, make us stupid like beasts; to guide us you must blind us."(p.58)

It should be clear, not only from Montaigne's writing of a stripping away of "human learning", specifically, but from the richness of his own intellectual life, his passionate commitment to scholarship and study, and his encyclopaedic erudition, that his position does not involve a facile anti-intellectualism promoting obscurantism and

³⁵ In this we are reminded of Abelard's compilation of contradictory interpretations from the Fathers of the Church, designed to stimulate the mind of his students, as well as of Kant's antinomies, where he proved logically side by side a number of theses together with their opposite. More relevantly perhaps, we remember Sextus Empiricus' pursuit of equipollence, whereby epoché, or the suspension of belief, was attained by advancing equally compelling and mutually nullifying views.

³⁶ Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, CLIV

ignorance. Rather, his stance seems to echo, in perhaps exaggerated form, Bahá'u'lláh's own admonitions:

“Tear asunder the veils of human learning lest they hinder thee from Him Who is My name, the Self-Subsisting.”³⁷

“The understanding of His words and the comprehension of the utterances of the Birds of Heaven are in no wise dependent upon human learning. They depend solely upon purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit.”³⁸

“Beware lest human learning debar thee from Him Who is the Supreme Object of all knowledge, or lest the world deter thee from the One Who created it and set it upon its course.”³⁹

“inasmuch as man can never hope to attain unto the knowledge of the All-Glorious, can never quaff from the stream of divine knowledge and wisdom, can never enter the abode of immortality, nor partake of the cup of divine nearness and favour, unless and until he ceases to regard the words and deeds of mortal men as a standard for the true understanding and recognition of God and His Prophets.”⁴⁰

By making man aware of his utter incapacity to know anything with certainty by his own unaided powers, Montaigne arrays him thus in darkness and blinds with intent to guide. But it is not for Montaigne himself to claim to guide towards belief beyond making evident Man's utter helplessness: “belief” Montaigne explains, “is grasped only by... private inspiration from God's grace.”(p.3) “this is my verdict: in a matter so holy, so sublime, so far surpassing Man's intellect as is that Truth by which it has pleased God in his goodness to enlighten us, we can only grasp that Truth and lodge it in us if God favours us with the privilege of further help, beyond the natural order.”(*ibid.*) Man, he asserts with evident if uncharacteristic certitude, “will rise if God proffers him -extraordinarily - His hand; he will rise by abandoning and disavowing his own means, letting himself be raised and pulled up by purely heavenly ones.”(pp.189-90) This stance, on the need for grace to reinforce purely human striving, is once more validated in the Bahá'í Writings:

“These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within 66 him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp. The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror. Neither the candle nor the lamp can be lighted through their own unaided efforts, nor can it ever be possible for the mirror to free itself from its dross.”⁴¹

Man's task, then, according to Montaigne, is to disavow “his own means”, and God's task, and God's only, to “lodge the divine instruction and belief within him.”(p.74) This disavowal of our own unaided means for the apprehension, it must be

³⁷ *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, p. 57

³⁸ *Kitab-i-Iqan*, p. 210

³⁹ *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, p. 56

⁴⁰ *Kitab-i-Iqan*, p. 3 ff.

⁴¹ *Gleanings from the Writings of Baba'u'llah*, p. 65

remembered, not of material reality, but specifically “that Truth by which it has pleased God in his goodness to enlighten us”, is in fact held out by Bahá’u’lláh to constitute the acme of human understanding, which is to say the culmination of the proper exercise of our intellectual powers:

“Having recognized thy powerlessness to attain to an adequate understanding of that Reality which abideth within thee, thou wilt readily admit the futility of such efforts as may be attempted by thee, or by any of the created things, to fathom the mystery of the Living God, the Day Star of unfading glory, the Ancient of everlasting days. This confession of helplessness which mature contemplation must eventually impel every mind to make is in itself the acme of human understanding, and marketh the culmination of man's development.”⁴²

It comes, accordingly, as no surprise that Montaigne should devote the bulk of his words to enunciating the scepticism that allows Man to disavow his own means and should refrain from usurping the place of God by seeking to impart through merely human means a faith that ought to “come in and dwell within us as something infused, beyond the natural order;” for “if she comes in, not just by reasoning but by any human means, then she is not there in her dignity and splendour.”(p.4)

The aim of the Apology appears therefore to be purely negative: to deprive the reader of all human certainty in order to leave him “a blank writing-tablet, made ready for the finger of God to carve such letters on him as he pleases.”(p.74)

We recall Bahá’u’lláh’s supplication for His followers:

“Inspire them, O my Lord, with a sense of their own powerlessness before Him Who is the Manifestation of Thy Self, and teach them to recognize the poverty of their own nature in the face of the manifold tokens of Thy self-sufficiency and riches, that they may gather together round Thy Cause, and cling to the hem of Thy mercy, and cleave to the cord of the good-pleasure of Thy will.”⁴³

In this reading of Montaigne, and in contrast with Villey’s interpretation, Montaigne never loses sight of his original objective, which is explicitly “to trample down human pride and arrogance, crushing them under our feet; [to]make men feel ...the vanity, the nothingness of Man, wrenching from their grasp the sickly arms of human reason, making them bow their heads... before the authority and Majesty of God”(p.12).

As we pray in the Long Obligatory Prayer: “that I may demonstrate my poverty, and magnify Thy bounty and Thy riches, and may declare my powerlessness, and manifest Thy power and Thy might.”⁴⁴

Such a position takes as its point of departure the relative fragility of all human opinion, including one’s own, and thus undermines the legitimacy of intellectual conflict as opposed to mere disagreement. On the basis of the inherent fragility of human opinion and an epistemology that makes room for non-discursive spiritual knowledge, it privileges process over conclusion, seeing all conclusions as provisional

⁴² *Gleanings from the Writings of Baba'u'llah*, p. 165 ff.

⁴³ *Prayers and Meditations by Baba'u'llah*, p. 47

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 319

and focusing on the ethical dynamics of our relationship to God, to our fellows, and to our own selves. The text is seen not as a threat, but as an opportunity, both to question our own assumptions (undermining our sense of self-sufficiency and opening us to the grace of God), and to enrich the human and intellectual diversity of our experience.

The fundamental flaw in this fideism of Montaigne lies in that, as he warned his patroness, “you must surrender your own arms to force your opponent to lose his” and “undo another by undoing yourself”(p.136) The reason is that the charge levelled by Erasmus against Luther’s claim of divine inspiration as criterion for the recognition of the Truth applies to Montaigne as well. How do you know that what you believe to be divinely inspired is indeed so? On what objective grounds can you distinguish between your own claims to divinely inspired truth and those of your opponents?⁴⁵

Montaigne does not, at any point, tackle these questions, but observes a silence that proclaims more loudly than words that he has no repartee and no reply to these objections. Indeed, if he tried to answer them, he would himself become the victim of his own counter-attack and find himself consigned to the same corner to which he relegates his opponents. That it is not involuntary oversight that leads him to “undo” himself in undoing his enemies is shown by our last citation: he knows that he is surrendering his arms even as he victoriously forces his opponent to lose his. He calls his approach an “ultimate rapier-stroke”, “a desperate act of dexterity”; sheer “rashness”. And yet he carries on, proceeds to seeming self-destruction for the sake of reducing the opposition to doubt its own convictions along with all else. “Is it not better to remain in doubt, than to get entangled in the many errors produced by human fantasy? Is it not better to postpone one’s adherence indefinitely than to intervene in factions, both quarrelling and seditious?”(p.70)⁴⁶

The tensions between Montaigne’s faith and his scepticism in the Apology are thus left unresolved. To accept unreservedly his fideism would call into question his scepticism, while to accept unreservedly his scepticism is to undermine his fideism. Montaigne, however, refuses to settle for one or the other, but seems (illogically, or perhaps *alogically*) to accept equally unreservedly both positions. “Here”, as he explained to his Patroness, “we have ...reached the limits and the very boundaries of knowledge, where (as in the case of Virtue) extremes become vices.”(p.137) Lost for explanations, he proffers none. We return to our starting point, the condition of astonishment or *hayra*.

The lesson that he draws from this intentional impasse is light-hearted but telling: “Remember the tuscan proverb, [‘He who becomes too clever is lost’]. My advice to you is to cling to moderation and temperance, as much in your opinions and arguments as in your conduct, fleeing what is merely new or odd.”(*Ibid.*)

And so, again, we find that in Montaigne’s vision, the process outweighs the conclusion. Moderation and temperance in opinions, arguments and conduct are held

⁴⁵ On Luther’s debate with Erasmus, and the encounters between scepticism and Reformation in general which forms the backdrop to Montaigne’s enterprise see Popkin, ch.2.

⁴⁶ Elsewhere in the Apology Montaigne answers this question by stating that neutrality is not possible in matters of religion, especially, it seems against the context of the Wars of Religion: “It is like saying that we could do with a judge who is not bound to either party in our religious strife, who is dispassionate and without prejudice. Among Christians that cannot be.”(p.185). Thus, even if the answer to the question is positive, it is not, according to Montaigne, feasible.

to be more important than the ephemeral conclusions of human reason. Human opinions should not become the excuse for immoderate exchanges, as all points of view are inherently limited, and, while valuable as signposts towards greater self-awareness, they are destructive as flags or banners for conflict and division. Indeed, to achieve this moderation, Montaigne uses his skepticism and his fideism to temper, without neutralising, one another. From this perspective, Montaigne's vision is neither primarily skeptical nor essentially fideistic, nor yet simply contradictory. Rather, Montaigne's standpoint is, essentially, paradoxical, drawing a circle in our discussion, bringing us to the hermeneutic of reconciliation, and the ineffable, supra-linguist nature of reality..

Like Socrates, Montaigne engages with others' and his own thought in order to place question marks around it and stimulate inquiry.⁴⁷ He uses paradox to subvert affirmations, and turn them implicitly into questions only in order to lead or be led towards further questions, *ad infinitum*. Nor was Montaigne alone in turning to paradox to make tentative the categorical linguistic device of affirmations. McGowan cites a large number of precedents from the Middle Ages and earlier to Montaigne's own time: since the time of the Ancients paradox had been used as a didactic tool, and Montaigne, aware of this genre, was profoundly attracted to its congenial puzzles.⁴⁸

At the heart of this phenomenon lies a conviction Montaigne shares with our mystics, and with Bahá'u'lláh's own teachings reviewed in an earlier chapter: a keen awareness of the limitations of language. Reminiscent of the later Wittgenstein,⁴⁹ Montaigne equates in an allegorical manner differences of opinion with differences of language (language-games, would say that other sceptic some three and half centuries later): "That diversifying of tongues and language by which God threw confusion over the enterprise of Babel, what else does it signify if not the infinite, endless altercation over discordant opinions and arguments which accompanies the vain structures of human knowledge, emeshing them in confusion."(p.131)

The link is more than allegorical: "Our speech, like everything else, has defects and weaknesses. Most of the world's squabbles are occasioned by grammar! ...How many quarrels, momentous quarrels, have arisen in the world because of doubts about the meaning of that single syllable *Hoc* [this]."⁵⁰ (p.99)

The problem is still more fundamental than misinterpretation and semantic obscurity, however. "Pyrrhonist philosophers, I see, cannot express their general concepts in any known kind of speech; they would need a new language: ours is made of affirmative propositions totally inimical to them."(*ibid.*) This is the fundamental challenge that leads Montaigne towards paradox. Were he to attempt to close the paradox between his fideism and his scepticism he would be trapped in affirmative propositions which would fail to convey the fullness of his meaning which is at once fideistic and sceptical yet, in certain sense, transcends both, and needs "a new language", which "cannot express [his] general concepts in any known kind of

⁴⁷ On Montaigne's self-identification with Socrates and the implications for his didacticism and style see McGowan, ch. 8.

⁴⁸ See McGowan, ch.4.

⁴⁹ See especially his posthumously published thoughts on the subject, titled *On Certainty*.

⁵⁰ An allusion to debates with Protestantism over the nature of the Eucharist.

speech.” Paradox provides this new inexpressible language by taking his audience to the limits of language and then challenging them to go further.

His motivations in this regard, it seems to me, are radically different from those of the ancient Pyrrhonians.⁵¹ His flight from affirmation had, it is true, a lot to do with unadulterated doubt; but it had also, as has become evident - contrary to what might have been expected - a lot to do with faith. The tension between his doubt and his faith is in fact maintained and not resolved in language. Where the ancient Pyrrhonists sought to transcend belief, therefore, Montaigne sought to transcend language. For them the purpose of undermining affirmative propositions was attaining to a state of complete and imperturbable suspense; for him, the same practice was a way of going into deeper faith, beyond discursive rationality, beyond words. As he said: “I find it unacceptable that God should be limited thus by the rules of language”(p.99).⁵²

Scepticism and fideism are both, for Montaigne, tools to an end, and not ends in themselves, as they have often been regarded: the end which they jointly pursue is paradox, and the means whereby they attain it, is equipollence. Equipollence structures and underlies the argument and style of the Apology for Raymond Sebond. Faith is defended with equal vehemence and affirmed with equal power as is scepticism, neither position yielding ground to the other, and standing in relation to one another less in equilibrium than in dynamic and unresolvable tension.

Equipollence was similarly a central feature of classical sceptical arguments.⁵³ The goals which this common strategy is made to serve, however, and consequently the methods adopted for its execution are different in Montaigne and in classical scepticism as it survived in the texts of Sextus Empiricus, Cicero, Diogenes Laertes, and to a lesser extent St. Augustine. For sceptics, the goal of equipollence was what they termed *isosthenia*, meaning a mixture of irreconcilability and undecidability capable of inducing *epoche*, (suspension of belief or assent) in a quest for *ataraxia* (tranquility, imperturbability). Their approach to equipollence was thus strictly logical, the opposition of mutually exclusive views with equally strong arguments in support of each proposition, nullifying each other and consequently destroying belief in both.

Montaigne, on the other hand, uses equipollence to produce a sense of paradox, which unlike *isosthenia* or irreconcilability, juxtaposes mutually opposed conclusions to induce simultaneous belief in both positions, or rather, to induce belief in their supra-linguistic harmony. Montaigne’s method, of necessity, is rhetorical rather than logical, since it aims at an illogical, or more properly, *supralogical* effect.

⁵¹ On the ethical rationale of classical Pyrrhonism see Sedley, *passim*, and Burnyeat, “Can the Skeptic Live with his Skepticism?”, *passim*.

⁵² In this concept of a knowledge of God beyond language, an apprehension which is strictly supernatural, we may detect the influence of mysticism. Montaigne, not himself a mystic, shows considerable empathy - does this surprise? - with mystics, and some similarities have already been noted by Brush. We may add to Brush’s own comments that besides, of course, Augustine, who presents strong mystical motifs in his writing, Montaigne may have been influenced by his acquaintance with that father of much medieval mysticism, St. Bernard, who he in fact once explicitly cites by name in the Apology. As a further example of Montaigne’s mystical tendency, never central but still evident in Montaigne, one might adduce the following quote which could without difficulty have fallen from the lips of the most heaven-absorbed mystic: “Only such things as come from Heaven... bear the mark of Truth; but ...they cannot be seen with our human eyes, nor do we obtain them by our own means: so great and so holy an Image could never dwell in so wretched a dwelling, unless God first makes it ready for that purpose, unless he forms it anew and fortifies it by his special grace and supernatural favour.” (p.143)

⁵³ On equipollence and related concepts in Greek scepticism see Burnyeat, *op. cit.*

Montaigne's equipollence consists, in contrast to sceptical methods, of elaborating a single dominant argument for scepticism and then, without equivalent argument, indeed without equivalent argument possible, proceeding to assert a logically opposed conclusion which is nevertheless held to be not contradictory, but, beyond the limitations of language, harmonious. The *Apology*, therefore, as we read it, is a conscious exercise in paradox in the best tradition of paradoxical moralism. Faith and scepticism are not so much unreconciled as reconciled in what one might call an inconclusion: an imperative which compels, in the midst of certitude, to keep seeking; and which impels, in a sea of uncertainty, to swim with full conviction. However close Montaigne drew to Sextus Empiricus before him and to Pascal after him, he remained closest to Socrates.

Clearly, Montaigne was not a Bahá'í. He was a Catholic writing in a period of theological and social upheavals, as Christians fought with one another bloodily to establish the priority of their own understanding of scripture in the wars of Reformation and Counter Reformation. One senses, reading his *Apology*, that, in his hermeneutical loving sympathy, in his philosophical scepticism, in his fideism, and in his flight towards paradox, Montaigne frequently goes further in his emphasis than would the Bahá'í writings, less strident, less extreme in their affirmations on the subject. Nevertheless, by the very exaggerations of each of these tendencies, and, in the light of our earlier treatment of the subject, they serve to dramatise and highlight resonances in distinctive elements of the Bahá'í perspective on what emerges as a sacred art of reading.

Indeed, from our discussion so far, it becomes clear that, for a Bahá'í, the art of reading, not only Holy Writings, but all books, is a sacred endeavour, an encounter of subjectivities, that, when informed by faith, is informed by an ethical and hermeneutic imperative toward reconciliation, an imperative that is not blind to difference, but on the contrary makes it the springboard of creativity, and the very starting point of reconciliation. This implies a degree of comfort with ambiguity, a readiness to meet with paradox and a tolerance for equipollence, for unresolved polarities of equally compelling validity that may point to the supra-discursive nature of reality. Such an outlook need not imply an abdication of critical thinking, but it takes as its starting-point a stance of loving sympathy, with a genuine openness to alternative opinions and worldviews, springing from a humble recognition of the relative instability of personal opinion, and the irreducible fallibility of our limited, and limiting, linguistic rationality.

From such recognition of the sacredness of reading more generally, we begin to be prepared to approach the unique act of reading sacred texts. As we enter as readers the qualitatively different realm of sacred scripture, a hermeneutic of reconciliation, loving sympathy and open-mindedness, it becomes clear, is not sufficient to do justice to the encounter with the Holy which the Word of God implies. Rather, the reader must plumb deeper, into the ineffability of one's truly religious experience; that "mystic feeling" that unites him or her with the divine and makes of the process of reading a sacred act of adoration and yearning, a journey into one's own, often inarticulate depths, and a ladder of ascent toward a closer relationship with God.

This is, naturally, a matter intensely personal, taking place within the inviolable precincts of the reader's heart. As hinted earlier however, such an outlook and

motivation, when linked to the guiding counsels of Bahá'í scripture, may affect in substantial ways, not only individual readers' experiences and conclusions, but, in an important way, the nature and tone of scholarly expression in potentially far reaching ways.

Nothing, perhaps, illustrates better the formidable and profound journey implied in the encounter with Holy Scripture than the book which "alone," Shoghi Effendi states, "by sweeping away the age-long barriers that have so insurmountably separated the great religions of the world, has laid down a broad and unassailable foundation for the complete and permanent reconciliation of their followers."⁵⁴

Sacred text and sacred reading: a journey into the Book of Certitude

"In the name of God, the Exalted, the Most High. No man shall attain the shores of the ocean of true understanding except he be detached from all that is in heaven and on earth."

With these words opens Baha'u'llah's Book of Certitude. Without warning, without pause, perhaps even unawares we are transported to the edge of dilemma: do we identify ourselves with the type of reader which the book assumes is glancing at its pages - a reader devotedly seeking shores of oceanic understanding? Or do we resist the identification, proceeding as an audience other than the one presumed (intended) by Baha'u'llah? And if we do recognise in the quest for true understanding our own aspiration, do we accept the challenge of detachment as formulated in the text? More to the point, do we accept the book's authority to prescribe at all? Or do we here part company with Baha'u'llah, choosing to measure the book by standards other than those laid out in its pages?

On our conscious or unconscious answer to these questions rests our subsequent experience of the text. These choices and decisions, not explicit in the text, lie implicit in the prescriptive authority assumed by Baha'u'llah throughout the work. The extent to which we either acquiesce to Baha'u'llah's authorial voice, or distance ourselves therefrom, dictates a diversity of possible relationships between text and reader which in turn give rise to various ways of experiencing its meanings. It is this link between interpretation and experience, as conceived by Baha'u'llah, which we wish to explore in greater depth.

Let us return, then, to the beginning. "No man shall attain the shores of the ocean of true understanding except he be detached from all that is in heaven and on earth." Implicit in this passage is, as we have said, an audience desirous to attain the wondrous vista, the "shores of the ocean of true understanding".⁵⁵ The generic tone

⁵⁴ God Passes By, p. 139

⁵⁵ the word here translated as "true understanding" is *irfan*, a word rich in mystic resonances. The word is present in the short Baha'i obligatory prayer, as well as in the opening paragraph of Baha'u'llah's Most Holy Book, and in both texts it is held up as the purpose of existence. *Irfan* is further translated by Shoghi Effendi as "knowledge" and as "recognition" of God and His Manifestation. Islamicists usually translate the term as "gnosis". Its prominence in Islamic mysticism may be inferred from the fact

of the address, as of the work as a whole, further indicates that the book's intended audience is not only one particular person seeking to attain unto these shores,⁵⁶ but rather a type or even archetype of reader, seeker-aspirant of this glorious destination.⁵⁷ Implicit in this aspiration, furthermore, is the fact of separation, of distance from one's goal (true understanding), for one cannot aspire to attain a goal one has already reached. An unspoken recognition of the reader's remoteness from true understanding thus provides or rather signals the point of departure. It evokes receptivity - a willingness to listen openly and sincerely to an authorial voice that speaks as if from deep within or far above in the preamble of the book.

But such desire to attain, such awareness of the distance, are deemed insufficient: "except" we be "detached from all that is in heaven and on earth", we shall in no wise "attain the shores of the ocean of true understanding". The use of the conditional ("except he be detached...") implies that detachment is not inherent in the journeying. It *is* possible to travel towards true understanding without detachment, but though one may indeed thus travel, one will never thus attain.

Expatiating on the meaning of these initial words the next paragraph states:

"The essence of these words is this: they that tread the path of faith, they that thirst for the wine of certitude, must cleanse themselves of all that is earthly - their ears from idle talk, their minds from vain imaginings, their hearts from worldly affections, their eyes from that which perisheth."

In what could almost be considered a paraphrase of the earlier passage, the book's ideal reader is defined still more clearly. Not only must he desire to attain to the shores of the ocean of true understanding; he must also "tread the path of faith" and "thirst for the wine of certitude." Unlike detachment, which quality the conditional clause implies could be absent during the journey, the other three requisites are treated as a given, a *sine qua non* of the journey itself. An intention - to attain to the shores of the ocean of true understanding; a designated and ongoing action - treading the path of faith; and an inner state - thirst for certitude's mystic wine. Bereft of these three, not just the goal, the book advises, but the very journey, are beyond reach.

The Author thus seems to be emphatically inculcating certain attitudes in the audience. An ideal reader is being not merely hoped for or awaited - but rather

that the word *irfan*, according to Siyyid Hussein Nasr, was used in post-Safavid Iran, especially in the nineteenth century, as a euphemistic way of referring to sufism when the latter was repressed and socially unacceptable. *Irfan* is sometimes described as "relational knowledge" as opposed to purely rational or analytical knowledge, and is said to involve spiritual communion, mystic insight and love.

⁵⁶ Such as Haji Mirza Siyyid Muhammad, the maternal uncle of the Bab in answer to whose questions the Book of Certitude was written.

⁵⁷ Confirmation of the broad scope of the intended audience may be gathered from the following passage of the Book of Certitude concerning its own contents: "We have variously and repeatedly set forth the meaning of every theme, that perchance **every soul**, whether high or low, may obtain...his share and portion thereof..."That all sorts of men may know where to quench their thirst."KI187

actively cultivated. It becomes clear that there are preconditions imposed by the book upon its reader without which one may not fully participate in its paradigm. Unless these conditions apply to us as readers, while reading of the book will still be possible, our attempts at understanding it 'from within' will be in fact precluded. For unless we are in actual fact upon a quest for true understanding, treading the path of faith, and thirsting for the wine of certitude, we will fall outside the scope of the book's intended, or at least implicit, audience.

This of course does not mean that only those who fulfil or desire to fulfil these requisites will be able to derive meaning from the Book of Certitude. The literary, philosophical, even aesthetic contents of the Book of Certitude may be equally accessible to readers who recognise and readers who reject the Author's claim to prescriptive authority. Both audiences may well arrive at similar or identical conclusions as to the meaning of a text. But the psychological effect of arriving at those shared conclusions is likely to differ in relation to one's attitudes to the Author's claims to authority, implicit in his interpretive demands. Readings which do not accept the Book of Certitude's underlying premises; readings which do not, for instance, involve the intense spiritual seeking so emphatically inculcated in its opening pages, will result in an experience of the text other than that expected by its Author.

One of the most significant then, if least obvious themes of the Book of Certitude, is what may be termed the psychological, or more precisely the mystical, dimension of hermeneutics. In linking true understanding – the quintessential subject of hermeneutics – to spiritual states, Baha'u'llah aligns the hermeneutical process to what is best described as mystical experience. The exploration of a sacred text, when undertaken under the pale of Baha'u'llah's exhortations, becomes a journey of the soul into the realm of the spirit: the mystical City of Certitude and the Word of God become indistinguishable. True understanding becomes inseparable from specific personal qualities. Hermeneutical success is conditioned upon a re-orientation of the reader's aspirations, will and worldview. According to this rather demanding measure, a reading that fails to positively transform, is a reading that fails to truly understand.

From this perspective, Baha'u'llah's Book of Certitude appears intended primarily, not to impart certain information or expound a given set of opinions (which any intelligent reader is likely to be able to grasp), but to have a specific existential/mystical effect which only a spiritually engaged reading can induce. The hermeneutical process is thus harnessed to the goal of spiritual education. Rather than focusing on dispelling the obscurities of a specific set of eschatological traditions as voiced by Haji Mirza Siyyid Muhammad, for which a more traditional *tafsir* approach would have been perhaps more appropriate, Baha'u'llah uses the Haji's questions as a means of directing him, and by extension the full compass of the intended audience, to the qualities of mind and heart that according to the Book of Certitude can alone enable a reader to truly understand, that is to say, truly *experience*, the allusions at hand and others akin to them.

The underlying method involves linking the text's message to a series of interpretive obstacles which act as spiritual stimuli. These obstacles take the form of premises and attitudes which must be developed or overcome in order to attain the goal of

“true understanding”. They function simultaneously as gates mediating entry into a privileged experience of the text, and as barriers defending or concealing the full meaning of the book from audiences regarded as unworthy to receive it or unready to accept it. Hence, the Book of Certitude may perhaps be said to have a less obvious intended audience than might at first be imagined: a reader who, though not yet fulfilling its criteria for true understanding, is yet desirous of fulfilling them, and willing to spend the necessary effort.

In reality, our approach to Scripture, to the practice of “sacred reading” more generally, and to our investigation of life itself, proceeds, if we are to follow Bahá’u’lláh’s injunctions and the vistas they unfold, in the reverse direction to that followed in this essay. It begins, in fact, in the striving for a spiritual condition which is the fundamental prerequisite of true understanding, and which the Book of Certitude explicitly, and the whole Bahá’í canon implicitly, seek to stimulate. It is out of this inner yearning, and sincere labour, that wells out the true intellectual humility and compassion that make possible an open-minded and loving eye. The receptivity, self-awareness, and independence of thought that such a spiritual condition and hermeneutical attitude engenders, empowers us to engage with the ambiguities, perplexities, contradictions and paradoxes of real life, in all its overwhelming immensity and plenitude, without yielding to either despair or dogmatism, and impels us, and makes us ever more capable, to achieve reconciliation in an increasingly fissiparous world.