The Purpose of Poetry

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The Purpose of Poetry
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Abstract
This paper seeks out justifications for the work of Bahá’í artists of our time. It argues that now is the time for Bahá’í artists to begin working towards the flowering of our civilization. It argues for art as a unifying force which can create links of understanding between the believers. It suggests that art, and poetry in particular, provides a means of approaching the spiritual or intellectual reality which underlies material existence. It is intended as an appeal to Bahá’í poets and to artists of all disciplines.

Résumé
Cet article cherche á justifier le travail des artistes bahá’ís de notre temps en affirmant que le moment est maintenant venu pour les artistes bahá’ís de commencer á travailler pour l’ épanouissement de notre civilisation. Dans une telle perspective, l’art est envisagé comme une force unificatrice qui a le pouvoir de créer des liens de compréhension mutuelle entre les croyants. L’art, et en particulier la poésie, constituerait en effet une médiation entre la réalité spirituelle ou intellectuelle et l’existence matérielle. Il s’agit en fait d’une exhortation qui s’adresse á tous les poètes bahá’ís et aux artistes, quel que soit leur mode d’expression.

Resúmen
Este artículo se esfuerza por justificar el trabajo de los artistas Bahá’ís contemporáneos. Argumenta que ahoara es el tiempo para que los artistas Bahá’ís empiecen a trabajar hacia el florecimiento de nuestra civilización. Argumenta por el arte como una fuerza unificante que puede crear enlaces de entendimiento entre los creyentes. Sugiere que el arte, y la poesía en particular, provee unaforma de acercarse a la realidad espiritual

o intelectual que es fundamental a la
existencia materialística. Su intento es de apelar a los poetas Bahá'ís y
a los artistas de todas las disciplinas.

The individual should, prior to engaging in the study of any subject, ask himself what its uses are and what
fruit and result will derive from it. If it is a useful branch of knowledge, that is, if society will gain important
benefits from it, then he should certainly pursue it with all his heart.
'Abdu'l-Bahá, Secret of Divine Civilization

We are all familiar with Shoghi Effendi's statement:
... your understanding that there is no cultural expression which could be called Bahá'í at this time (distinctive
music, literature, art, architecture, etc. being the flower of the civilization and not coming at the beginning of a
new Revelation), is correct. (Qtd. in Extracts from Bahá'í Writings on Music 7)

This understanding has been the cause of some unease to Bahá'í artists in this time, leading them to a
suspicion that their own work may be, at best, crude and unworthy, at worst, inappropriate and without purpose in this
age. This unease, however, stems from an unfortunate interpretation of the Guardian's words, unfortunate in that it is
not useful to the Bahá'í artist. The intent of this essay is to put forward a justification for the efforts of Bahá'í artists
of this time, in the midst of the Formative Age, who are endeavoring to use their artistic talents as Bahá'ís in a Bahá'í
context. It is also an effort to discover, by studying the Writings, a place or position for an artist in this Revelation.
That is, what, as artists and Bahá'ís living in this time, may we regard as our proper function?
As a beginning, it is worthwhile to remember that the above quotation from a letter written on behalf of Shoghi
Effendi by his secretary does not end on an unhappy note, but goes on to point out:

...that does not mean that we haven't Bahá'í songs, in other words, songs written by Bahá'ís on Bahá'í
subjects. (Extracts 7)

From these closing words, it does not seem that the implications of this statement by the Guardian need be
seen as being negative for the artist of this time. In fact, it is made clear to us that, though we may not yet have an
encompassing Bahá'í civilization, this is no reason for Bahá'ís not to produce artistic work on Bahá'í subjects in the
early stages of the Dispensation. The Guardian does not state that the works of

this age must of necessity be of a
lower standard, of a cruder nature, or less worthy of attention.
Bahá'í poets in this age have a unique chance to perform solo, before their civilization's cast of thousands has
appeared. If the poet's voice is small, he will not be noticed, it is true.
But if his voice is loud enough to be heard,
compelling enough to command attention, then he stands on a bare stage and speaks to his people. This requires the
Bahá'í poet to make a great effort, to throw off the assumptions and expectations of the old world order, and to
stretch to meet the standard of the new.

The stage is set, the hour is propitious. The signal is sounded.
Bahá'u'lláh's spiritual battalions are moving
into position. The initial clash between the forces of darkness and the army of light is being registered by the
denizens of the Abhá kingdom. (Shoghi Effendi, Citadel of Faith 26)

As artists, we should not imagine that we are in any way isolated from, or unconcerned by, the battle of dark
and light that rages about us. We cannot place ourselves at a distance, belong to both worlds, or think that we may
serve two masters.
As poets, as artists of all types, Bahá'ís are breaking open new
territories, are taking part in the struggle
against the pull of the old world order, are trying to create a new standard in the world. In the future, perhaps our time
will be seen as the most inspiring and wonderful time for a Bahá'í artist to live, this time when we are so few in
number and are presented with so great a task. For in this time, it will take all our courage and effort to express
something of the spirit of Bahá in our artistic work, to demonstrate to the outside world that the Faith has a spirit
which permeates every part of life, a spirit capable of initiating art of the same, and of a higher standard as was born
of the religions of the past.
There may be a distinct danger to the Bahá'í poet outside of the Bahá'í con text. One of the difficulties in the
old world order is the fragmentation of belief that has taken place. For:

As the Protestant movement splintered into hundreds of denominations, as the credibility of Christian
cosmology diminished with every bout it had with science, as its values were swept aside by a burgeoning
industrial age in pursuit of higher standards of living, the nineteenth-century individual was left with no
direction in which to turn for the source of his cosmology and values-no direction, that is, except inward.

(Tuman, World Order 12)

That is, instead of there being one coherent world structure, which people were able to understand and
essentially agree upon (at least in the Western world), there came to be, in a short space of time, more and more
numerous separate and distinct “worlds.” This process has been further accelerated by the breakdown of physical
barriers between the peoples of different cultures. The Western world has not been able to maintain its insularity and
cultural chauvinism with any degree of success.
An attitude has developed, perhaps born more of insecurity than tolerance, that any system must have its
merits, and any interpretation of any system may be right for any individual. This to the extent that, within our own
culture, there is very nearly a one-to-one relationship between individuals and cosmologies. These are not merely
different permutations of a basically similar understanding of reality, but actually worldviews so different that many
people outside of the Bahá’í context find that they have no common ground whatsoever. For example, people from
work environments as different as a computer programmer and a laborer may be simply unable to make contact on
any level. People who have adopted very different value systems may be less able to communicate, and that split can
develop even between the two generations of one family.
As Bahá’ís, this is very familiar to us. We are aware that the major problem of this age is disunity and that our task is
to create one world. As poets, the problem of disunity in the conceptual reality of our audience can attack the very
centre of our ability to function as poets. If we cannot call on a common understanding of reality, we can scarcely use
our poetic devices with any degree of success, for the tools and methods of the poet rely on the poet and the audience
having an agreement about reality. Metaphor, for example, by its nature requires that poet and audience connect the
same tenor and vehicle, or hopeless obscurity will be the result. For irony to function, audience and poet must agree
on fundamental issues of right and wrong. Otherwise, how can the audience recognize those occasions when the poet
is deliberately skewing his picture of moral reality to make a point?
We can easily find examples in contemporary sources of profound differences in values that make the use of
irony something of a problem. A case in point is found in an editorial titled, “The Case for Torture: A Rebuttal,” in
which the author makes this interesting remark:

As I began to read Levin’s case for torture, I was first convinced that his

“modest proposal” was a satire,
written in deadpan Swiftian style. Signed by a respectable man, published by a reputable magazine, it could
surely not mean what it was saying. I was expecting the punch line that would, for sure, explode with one deft
blow this monument of twisted reasoning.... The punch line never came. Professor Levin meant it all....
(Newsweek)

Plainly, Professor Levin and the author of the editorial quoted above have wholly different moral views of torture—
views that are in total opposition. Yet, each author has been able to publish his view, in the same magazine, with the
public left to choose with which man it will agree. It is clear that such divergence in socially acceptable value systems
renders irony powerless. For satire, perhaps more than any other tool of art, depends upon a moral consensus in its
audience; and moral consensus is one thing that our society, at this time, is without.
The Bahá’í poet possesses great strength in his belief in one world, and his Bahá’í vision of history and
mankind. For the Faith is in itself a cosmology that supersedes, encompasses, and reconciles the multiplying
worldviews extant today. The Bahá’í poet, therefore, is not voicing only another view from amid the morass of
differing opinions. We can imagine the growth of Bahá’í art as being similar to the development of a embryonic chick
within an egg. The fluids of the egg have begun the process of breaking down, disintegrating in order to provide food
for the chick. At first the embryo may appear to be only another particle in the egg, but it is undergoing a wholly
different process. While the fluids around it break down and are absorbed by it, the embryo is growing and
developing into a vital organism. In the same way, we can see Bahá’í art begin ning to grow out of the old world
order.
It is only by realizing this that we, as Bahá’ís and artists, will find the con fidence to avoid the extraordinary
difficulties that arise from the present society’s pluralization of systems of meaning. As has been stated above, the
poet relies on common understanding. Symbols are no longer useful if everyone is in doubt as to what they
symbolize. It is religion, which in the past and for Bahá’ís in, the present, can provide this unified understanding so
essential to the work of the poet. Religion may be defined as the

cognitive and normative structure that makes it possible for man to feel “at home” in the universe. (Berger,

Berger, and Kellner, Homeless Mind 75)

Religion provides the “overarching canopy of symbols” (Homeless 75) which are the shelter of mankind and
without which the poet finds himself in the midst of a storm, trying to construct a highly individual umbrella. Since
this shelter is created essentially for his own use, put together from whatever pieces of cloth that were available, a
bedraggled humanity will probably not be able to interpret the poet’s work with any ease. The most successful will
achieve an inspired misinterpretation, constructing a small, equally individual shelter of their own. However, we, as
Bahá’í poets, must be confident enough of the reality of the Bahá’í canopy to enter wholeheartedly. That is, confident
that this structure will never collapse around us, and, armed with that knowledge, confident enough to throwaway
whichever style of umbrella we have been carrying.
There is a certain element of romance in the isolation enjoyed by the poet of the old world order. These poets
need not be concerned with the exigencies of pleasing their audience, nor are they encouraged to exercise restraint.
They may be seen as free spirits, concerned only with self-expression. This connection with society need be no closer
than the relationship of a barometer with the outside weather, the observer and mirror of the state of their fellow-man.
Apart from the unpleasantly cold relationship between a poet and society which this description implies, such a role is
simply not appropriate to the Bahá’í poet working within a Bahá’í context. Not only does the Faith provide a unifying
worldview and a structure of symbols for the poet to work with, it also provides the surrounding community, a
community in which the artist may find a role. For Bahá’ís, both poet and audience, are reading from the same
scriptures daily, have begun to learn a new language, and share a common understanding of the world. A Bahá’í
writing on Bahá’í themes for a Bahá’í audience has no proper reason to feel isolated or removed from his community.
He is an integrated part of the community, one of those who may claim to be “at home” in the universe. For the
Bahá’í poet to take on an attitude of introversion is perhaps imitative of the dominant old world order attitude or is in
some sense an item of cultural baggage. If we, as poets, though under the shelter of religion, still cling to our personal
umbrellas, we have not made a necessary act of faith. We must be prepared to admit that the shelter provided by this
religion is sufficient, and then beneath its canopy we shall be able to speak freely to our people.

Without this acceptance of ourselves as Bahá'ís and artists, it is hard to see how we shall produce work of excellence. A poet must write from the heart, that is, from the ideals most central to his being and so most profoundly felt. Poems that do not spring from this source, but from the shallower soil of imitation or habitual attitude, cannot have the same impact, nor the same strength, nor will they have the driving force that makes for excellence. This is not to say that a poem should be judged on the sincerity of its writer, but merely that this sincerity is a necessary fuel for the poem's creation. A poet, as a Bahá'í endeavoring to perfect his art, must be able to call on the core of his belief and write, as a Bahá'í, from that source. For

> although ye are speaking, yet in this age the speech of the believers of God must be the soul-entrancing melody of the Kingdom of Abhá and the harmony of the Supreme Concourse! Therefore 'Abdu'l-Bahá is not satisfied with a meek voice and depressing lamentation! ('Abdu'l-Bahá qtd. in Bahá'í News)

Fragmentation is not, however, the only danger inherent in accepting the old world order's assumptions of what a poet is and does. The Guardian has told us that this age witnesses "the degeneracy of art and music, the infection of literature" (Shoghi Effendi, Call to the Nations 10). It is clear that the very basis of the current artistic environment must be wildly incorrect to have produced such a result. For the poet, one result of increasing isolation from society is that "the indi vidual's experience of himself becomes more real to him than his experience of the objective social world. Therefore, the individual seeks to find his 'foothold' in reality in himself rather than outside himself" (Berger, Berger, and Kellner, Homeless Mind 74). The cardinal value, the one certainty in the world becomes the self. Deprived of the protection of religion, the poet retreats back into self and begins to draw on highly personalized symbols, for example, Robert Bly's matriarchal reinterpretation of history and tooth mother mythology. Such symbols have meaning only for the initiated or perhaps only for the poet himself. This is the doctrine of self-expression taken to its farthest extreme. The poet is forced to cannibalize himself for the materials of his art.

We see some of the results of this with the Romantic artist, who "felt himself to be an isolated entity, ... even the most popular and successful among them seemed possessed by 'boundless longing', and 'unrequited desire'" (World Order 14). We see the results of it in the disillusioned words of Oscar

Wilde, who said that “the only excuse
for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely. All art is quite
useless” (Stories). Art has reached a low
point indeed when even the artist considers it useless. In more recent times,
we have seen Dylan Thomas destroy
himself with alcohol, Ezra Pound embrace Nazism, Ann Sexton and Stevie Smith
commit suicide, Sylvia Plath die of
a fascination with death, and homosexuality become commonplace among twentieth
century male poets. The response
of the poet to the artistic environment of the twentieth century has not been a
happy one. The most admirable work of
this age seems to have achieved a kind of discipline out of the containment of
despair.

Because these wings are no longer wings to fly
But merely vans to beat the air
The air which is now thoroughly small and dry
Smaller and dryer than the will....
(Eliot, The Waste Land & Other Short Poems 56)

Indeed, it is the air itself that has grown small and dry, the surrounding
conceptual structure which has grown too
thin, which has not enough substance to support the poet’s efforts toward
flight. If poets lose their place in their
society, lose religion, and turn in on themselves, they are destroyed. Their
“learning is barren—indeed, it bringeth on
madness” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Selections 181).
Not only the artist but also the work itself must suffer from being cut off
from the source of the love of God.
As J. S. Bach advised one of his students:

Like all music, its finis and final cause should never be anything else but the
glory of God and the recreation
of the mind. When this is not heeded, there really is no music, but a hellish
howl and clatter. (Qtd. in
Schweitzer, J. S. Bach 53)

With the self as the cardinal value, the work of art loses its importance in
the objective sense. It has become
subjective, a vehicle for the artist’s self. Art without the devotional
aspect becomes merely a servant of the lower or
animal side of man, a debased and corrupt condition. It is only by turning
toward God that man can rise above his
animal nature, and this is likewise true of man’s art.
It is interesting to note that strong criticism of the idea of self-expression
as a suitable motive force for art
should appear in the writings of such thinkers of our century as Sir Karl
Popper. Within the old world order itself,
figures such as Popper are looking critically at currently accepted ideas on

art and finding them lacking.

Perhaps it will be worthwhile at this point to digress somewhat by outlining certain of Popper's ideas to provide a background to his criticism of self-expression in art. In Popper's philosophy, we find the concept of three "worlds." In this structure, World 1 is the world of our physical surroundings; World 2 is the world of the self and its responses; but World 3 is itself produced by the rational soul. That is, our day-to-day experience takes place in World 1; the experience itself is in World 2; and the account of this experience written in our diary exists in World 3. To quote Popper's own words, reality is divided into World 1, "the world of 'things' —of physical objects" (The Unended Quest 181), World 2, "the world of subjective experiences (such as thought processes)" (181), and World 3, "the world of statements in themselves" (181). Of the three worlds, only World 3 is the true concern of the rational soul. Popper goes as far as to propose that "we regard the human mind first of all as an organ that produces objects of the human World 3...and interacts with them" (189). In World 3, then, we find a collection of "theories, of critical arguments, and many other things such as mistakes, myths, stories, witticisms, tools, and works of art" (189).

In other words, those things a Bahá'í would understand to be matters of the spirit. This explanation of human existence assumes that the overriding concern of humanity must lie in World 3. It even seems to imply that our very humanness is due to our having the dimension of World 3 available to us. Given this aspect of Popper's philosophy, it is not surprising to find that he attacks the doctrine of self-expression in art, since this doctrine, in fact, attempts to limit art to Worlds 1 and 2, a wholly unnatural state of affairs.

According to Popper, World 2 (the world of the self or human consciousness) is the intermediary between Worlds 1 and 3. The world of our surroundings, as for example the physical paper and ink of a book, cannot be translated into the World 3 of critical appreciation, except by going through the World 2 of a conscious human mind (185). However, the self is performing this function most adequately when we have detached ourselves from self. For, in a state of intense concentration, "we may forget where we are—always an indication that we have forgotten ourselves. What our mind is engaged in, with utmost concentration, is the attempt to grasp a World 3 object, or to produce it" (191).

Popper's criticism of the expressionist theory of art is deceptively simple. He states that it is "empty." He

goes on to point out that

everything a man or an animal can do is (among other things) an expression of an internal state, of emotions,
and of a personality. This is trivially true for all kinds of human and animal languages. It holds for the way a
man coughs or blows his nose, the way a man or a lion may look at you, or ignore you.... In other words it is
not a characteristic of art. (62)

It is only by being aware of the deeper reasons behind Popper's summary dismissal of expressionism that we
begin to see an alternative theory emerging. For, if the human self exists primarily as a medium for gaining entrance
to World 3, and if it is performing that function most effectively when attention is not focussed on it, it follows that
we must ignore our selves in order to function as artists. We must turn away from our own selves, and turn towards
God—close one eye and open th e other. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us:

With reference to what is meant by an individual becoming entirely forgetful of self: the intent is that he
should rise up and sacrifice himself in the true sense, that is, he should obliterate the promptings of the human
condition,.... (Selections 180)

Thus far, this essay has focussed on criticizing both the apparent lack of a sense of purpose in the
contemporary artistic environment and on arguing the inadequacy of self-expression as a proper use for art. The
intention of beginning in this way was to establish a basis from which to present an alternative view of the purpose
and aim of writing poetry. As a Bahá'í, the only place to start in an effort to discover the use of poetry is the Bahá'í
writings themselves. These scriptures are our unfailing guide in any matter of perplexity. As John Hatcher points out:
" ... within the Bahá'í Writings are found the solutions to the major questions about existence in the temporal world"
(Bahá'í Studies 2).
In the Writings, we find a strong emphasis on deeds over words. We are taught to avoid those studies that
begin with words and end with words. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá put it, those branches of knowledge that consist in "empty,
profitless debates and in a vain concatenation of imaginings that lead to no result except acrimony…" (Divine
Civilization 106). If writing poetry does not fall into that category, we must be able to find in the Writings some clue
as to what its use may be and what results it may be expected to show.
We are told that, "Arts, crafts and sciences uplift the world of being and

are conducive to its exaltation”
(Bahá’u’lláh, Epistle 26). It is possible to accept such a teaching at
face value, uncritically considering it to be
correct. Here, apparently, is the solution: art is meant to uplift and exalt
us, therefore it isn’t vain and worthless, and
that is that. Unfortunately, it is left to the artist to discover the mechanism
that will transport us from here to there, or,
how to uplift and exalt the world of being through our art. It is one thing to
read such a statement on the printed page,
and quite another to begin to consider ways and means of putting it into
practice.
Previous to this Revelation, it is easier to see how artists could be the cause
of exaltation, for they were,
consciously or not, foreshadowing the glory of this Day. Nabíl reports the
Báb as saying, after quoting a verse from
Háfiz which foretold the Báb’s coming:

It is the immediate influence of the Holy Spirit that causes words such as
these to stream from the tongues of
poets, the significance of which they themselves are oftentimes unable to
apprehend. (Dawn-Breakers 258)

In the West, we have Blake’s “All Religions Are One,” and such works as
Handel’s “Messiah,” as well as the
less literal hints and glimpses which art has afforded to mankind of the future
golden age. For, as the Báb said on the
same occasion, quoting a well-known tradition:

Treasures lie hidden beneath the throne of God; the key to those treasures is
the tongue of poets. (258–59)

In this Day of God, it is more difficult to see the purpose of art. It would be
tempting to think that perhaps in
this Day we must work towards the realization of the Kingdom of God on earth
and leave behind us those hints and
allusions art has given us. “What would it profit any man to strive after
learning when he hath already found and
recognized Him Who is the Object of all knowledge?” (Gleanings 177).
It is plain from the extraordinary encouragement given to the development of
arts and sciences in the writings
of the Bahá’í Faith that such a conclusion must be wholly incorrect. The
arts, crafts, and sciences of humanity are
even raised to the level of worship, and we are told that “knowledge is as
wings to man’s life,.... Its acquisition is
incumbent upon everyone” (Bahá’u’lláh, Tablets 51-52). Yet, in
“former times it was believed that such skills were
tantamount to ignorance, if not a misfortune, hindering man from drawing nigh
unto God” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Selections
145). It is worth considering this remarkable change in the fortunes of

artists. Why should so great a change in the
station of arts, crafts, and sciences have taken place? How can it be imagined
that art could be arbitrarily elevated to
the station of worship in the scheme of things if it were a thing without any
use? Surely, it is more likely that in this
day knowledge has become useful to man's spiritual development; perhaps we
are only now at a level of maturity that
enables us to discover a purpose for acquiring knowledge.
In beginning to answer this question (that is, what is the purpose, or motive
force for art within the structure of
the Bahá'í Revelation), it is necessary to return to the ideas explained by
Popper. For, implied in the philosophy that
rejects self-expression out of hand, is, I believe, a solution to this problem.
As stated earlier, Popper chooses to divide reality into three worlds: World 1,
the world of physical existence;
World 2, the world of human consciousness; and World 3, the world of
intellectual reality. This last, the world of the
mind, being the real or most important existence of man. In Book VII, Socrates
uses the image of a cave, where
people are shackled so that they can only see shadows cast by flickering
firelight. Even those shadows are the
shadows cast by a puppet show performed for the prisoners' benefit, so that
they are twice distanced from reality.
Then Socrates pictures the philosopher as being one who has escaped from this
world of shadows, into the upper
world. This is the world of the mind, the "real" world, where Beauty
itself, as an ideal, exists, as opposed to things
which reflect the quality of beauty. For

> the world of our sight is like the habitation in prison, the firelight there to
> the sunlight here, the ascent and the
> view of the upper world is the rising of the soul into the world of mind.
> (Plato, Dialogues 315)

Later in Book VII, Socrates observes to Glaucon:

> I cannot but believe that no study makes the soul look on high except that
> which is concerned with real being
> and the unseen. (Dialogues 328)

So, we find in Plato, as well as in Popper, the conviction that the world of
the senses is not the chief concern
of man and the suggestion that man's most important reality is the reality
which contains ideal concepts. This world
of the mind is very similar to the intellectual reality explained by
'Abdu'l-Bahá when he spoke of the different types
of human knowledge, saying that

> human knowledge is of two kinds. One is the knowledge of things perceptible to
> the senses.... The other kind

of human knowledge is intellectual-that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses. (Some Answered Questions 83)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá went on to observe that “ether” existed as an intellectual reality, that is, as a theory, a reality in World 3. “Even ethereal matter, the forces of which are said in physics to be heat, light, electricity and magnetism, is an intellectual reality, and is not sensible” (83-84).

Plainly, works of art must exist as intellectual realities, as do theories like ether. Certainly, works of art may exist in the physical world as well, but this is a temporary and less important side of their existence. What of a poem, never written down, which exists for generations in the memories of a nonliterate people? It is a work of art, and yet, except in the moments of its recital, has no physical reality. What of the recording of a violinist performing, when both the violin and its player have left this physical existence? The performance still exists as a work of art, but where is the violin we hear? The violin itself, the performance, has become an intellectual reality.

These two examples are extreme, as they show that a work of art may exist independently, accessible to human knowledge, without the benefit of physical existence. However, all art has its essential existence as an intellectual reality. Indeed, if a work of art was not an intellectual reality, a concept created by a human mind, it would not be art at all but merely a natural phenomenon. Having established that art is an intellectual reality, created, interpreted, and given existence by human minds, we can proceed a step further with the argument.

According to Popper, World 3 is the most important thing in human life, even postulating that “we regard the human mind first of all as an organ that produces objects of the human World 3... and interacts with them.” That is, he regards World 3, the world of intellectual reality, as the reason for man’s existence. This may sound odd to us, until we consider that it is within World 3 that man’s understanding of God exists. This is not to say that God Himself exists as an intellectual reality or as a theory, but only that the closest man may approach to God is into the world of concepts, where man’s concepts of God exist. This, we may put forward as the first justification for art. If art can propel us into the world of intellectual reality (the abode of the rational soul, which is the reality nearest to God) and make us forgetful of our own selves, then it has served as worship in some sense and been the cause of exaltation.

This, however, is only the first level of justification, dealing with individuals. For the artist creating and the audience interpreting, it is an individual and wholly private matter as to whether art has or has not affected them one way or the other. But the world of intellectual reality has another, perhaps even more interesting side to its nature. It is the one reality that all humanity, regardless of physical surroundings, may properly be said to share.

We see this most plainly in the spread of the Bahá'í scriptures. For, if a child in England has learned a prayer in English, and a child in India has learned the same prayer in Hindi, these two children, regardless of their own nature, their surroundings, and even their languages, are sharing an intellectual reality. The scripture itself is the backbone of unity. The knowledge of the Bahá'í writings must be laid down first, the skeletal strength around which the flesh of human invention may grow and be supported. For our human unity is a concept; that is, it exists as an intellectual reality. So, it seems reasonable to turn to the reality of the intellect to find a means to nurture our growing unity. As the knowledge of Bahá'í scripture becomes more widespread, we shall see this unity of hearts and minds, born of a shared mindset, also become stronger and more widespread.

Art also has a part to play. For, if our shared knowledge of scripture is the bone and support of our unity, then our shared art is the flesh on those bones. We see this even now, on a simple level, when Bahá'ís all over the world sing and know by heart the Swahili song, "Toko Zani," in both its original language and the second verse of translation. This sharing of a song has a more profound effect than we might realize from so simple a cause. For in human history, only people who shared a house, a tribe, a village, or a country would know the same songs or the same stories. In our time, art is enabled to go where it pleases, and, among Bahá'ís, it does. In our age of communication, arts and sciences, shared crafts and ideas have become perhaps the most important assistance to human unity that we have. When we consider that, in this age, art has the purpose of unifying mankind, we may better understand why it has been so much encouraged in our Faith.

Given that art has this practical purpose, it may be of interest to return to an exploration of its spiritual purpose as regards the individual. For, if a shared intellectual reality is a cause of unity for humanity, art is still only a portion of the entire intellectual reality of humanity. Therefore, there must be some more particular function that art performs, peculiar only to itself, which could not be performed by science or any more

down-to-earth craft.
To discuss this, it is first necessary to return to our point that, as our nearest approach to God is our own concept of God, we most nearly approach God in this mortal world when we are most involved in the reality of the intellect, detached from the world of the senses and from our own selves. For then we are dealing with concepts, and our most important concepts, such as truth, love, or beauty, are simply, at their deepest level, attributes of God. In other words, a poet, or any artist, struggling to come to terms with beauty or truth, or who considers the meaning of love is endeavoring only to know God and to worship Him. That, as the Short Obligatory Prayer tells us, is the reason for man's existence. If a work of art, created by such an artist, succeeds in inspiring a similar movement towards knowing and worshipping God in the hearts of its audience, then surely art may be said to have a particular use, which cannot be usurped by any other invention of man. In terms of the individual then, art has the purpose of inspiring and assisting our mortal and endless search for God.
But how may art be able to do this? What quality of art enables it to perform so difficult a task? For, in fact, to a careless observer, much of art might well seem needlessly obscure. Poetry, for instance, does not speak in a direct way. It wraps everything it has to say in metaphor and imagery; it indulges in wordplay and is highly referential, even when the poet is intending to be understood. It would seem that most poets would feel a pang of fellow-feeling with Emily Dickinson, who said, "... my ideal cat has always a huge rat in its mouth, just going out of sight—though going out of sight in itself has a peculiar charm. It is true that the unknown is the largest need of the intellect, though for it, no one thinks to thank God..." (Selected Poems 307). Poems, like cats, are best when just going out of sight. It is the poet's task to tempt men toward the unattainable and to approach, with both audacity and tact, the unapproachable, since the reality of the intellect is, by its nature, not directly approachable. If we talk directly of beauty, beauty has eluded us; if we try to measure love, love has fled away; and if we wish to hold the absolute truth, truth itself is already dancing out of reach. For each of these is "an intellectual or spiritual state, to explain which you are obliged to have recourse to sensible figures" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions 84). Which is to say, the realities of the intellect must be approached via imagery and metaphor, or not approached at all. Any art or craft or science, is, in a sense, a metaphor that allows humanity to deal with intellectual realities.

But it is the poet who must deal with the
actual process of making up sensible figures for the particular purpose of
speaking about those things too serious to
be spoken of in plain speech. These are the things so deeply rooted in our
hearts that, without the indirectness of
poetry, they would be beyond articulation.
But the poem has another purpose, more important than this. The poem is made to lead us toward God. Since
we may not see God, the poem is nearest to guiding us to his presence when it is just vanishing, and that is the
attraction of things just going out of sight-they teach us how to yearn. As Bahá'u'lláh explains in the Kitáb-i-Íqán, in
a passage about symbolic language:

Divers and manifold are the interpretations of the words "behind the
Throne." In one sense, they indicate that
no true Shí'ihs exist. Even as he hath said in another passage: "A true
believer is likened unto the
philosopher's stone." Addressing subsequently his listener, he saith:
"Hast thou ever seen the philosopher's
stone?" Reflect, how this symbolic language, more eloquent than any speech,
however direct, testifieth to the
non-existence of a true believer. (79)

The poet, also, may achieve much through indirectness and the use of symbolic language like that of the example
above. But art, in order to be entertaining, needs more than this. If a poet becomes only an imitation of scripture, he
becomes boring, and, in comparison to the scripture itself, very second-rate.
The element which can make art
interesting to its audience is conflict. We should not imagine that conflict is inappropriate to the art of Bahá'ís, for the
conflict within man, between beast and spirit, is the essence of the human condition. Being Bahá'ís does not separate
us from that conflict, that continuing struggle within man, as we can see from the poetry of Roger White. According
to Geoffrey Nash, this conflict between the two sides of man is a seminal theme in White's work. Nash even takes the
title of his review from this theme, "The Heroic Soul and the Ordinary
Self." Nash says:

It is clear how important an element the dualism of the heroic soul and
ordinary self, and the resultant distance
between them, is for the vision of White's poetry....Internalized within the
individual believer—for whom the
poet himself stands—it is seen to be the cause of the tension behind
spiritual growth. (Bahá'í Studies 30–31)

Indeed, in this age, when the standard for the heroic soul has been so

dramatically raised, and the resulting
battle between soul and self rages with more ferocity and bitterness than ever before, the conflict within humanity is
nearer to us than it ever was. Such a battle can never be entirely won, and the devil in this millennium is only chained
up, not destroyed. In our time, as we see in a poem by Bruce Dawe, "Affinity," the self has the upper hand. Dawe
uses the image of Cain and Abel in this poem. He speaks in the voice of Abel, who lives within his brother, using his
shadow, "riding in the flesh. Under the vaulted breast... " and can only

play strange jokes
On that old blubber mask
With tangled crown,
Twiddle the gristly yo-yos of your eyes,
Well might the soul complain:
You only touch the rim of friends,
Rattle on strangers,
While I have loved them all
In hopelessness,
Yet, even if the self does heed the cry of Abel,
O remember who your brother is,
Pale crumbling Cain,
And turn to me
And find yourself again.
(Condolences)

They shall still be brothers. The affinity between soul and self cannot be broken, even if the soul is allowed to play its
proper and dominant part in the life of man, it will have the continuing problem of governing the rebellious self.
From this, the lifegiving struggle within man, we can begin to see a possible relationship that could exist
between our poetry and the Writings. The poet's role may be that of questioner, lover, repentant child, but always
mortal, addressing the divine Voice of scripture. Perhaps the poem would be an argument with the scripture about the
ways of God, perhaps an intimate colloquy, a plea for forgiveness, or a song of pure praise, but whichever of these it
is, it has a conversational relationship with the Word of God. As in our own lives, where our actions could be seen as
questions directed at our God, and his replies, by implication, in the doors that either open or shut before our faces, so
in this conversation within a poem. The answer of the scriptures appears by implication, is called out of the minds of
the audience by the poet. We can see this in the work of the Christian poet, George Herbert. An example of his
technique is the poem, "The Collar." The poem appears to be nothing but a

cry of rebel lion throughout. From the
defiant opening:

I struck the board, and cry'd, No more.
I will abroad.
Through the poet's fierce complaints:
Have I no harvest but a thorn
To let me bloud,
To his resolve for overt rebellion:
Away; take heed:
I will abroad.
Call in thy death's head there: tie up thy fears.
He that forbears
To suit and serve his need,
Deserves his load.

The self is allowed to make its vehement case. And yet, it is answered wholly
without vehemence, as we discover,
for:

As I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde
At every word,
Me thought I heard one calling, Childe!
And I reply'd, My Lord.

Perhaps this would seem an inadequate answer to an entire poem of complaint,
unless we reread those complaints
with an eye to Herbert's word-play. It is well to take note when the poet
tells us that, during his ravings, "At every
word," he heard the Voice of God. The first line contains a serious pun of
this nature, for we are told that the poet, a
priest, "struck the board." The board in question, it would seem, is the
altar, where the ceremony representing that
other board, of Christ's last supper, takes place. So, in his opening line,
the poet has reminded his Christian audience
of Christ's meekness, of his last supper, during which He, the One most
wronged, made no complains. Again, such a
reminder is given to the reader when the poet asks if he must be content with
the harvest of a thorn—for so was Christ
crowned with thorns. And later in the poem, this suggestion is emphasized when
the poet asks:

Is the year onley lost to me?
Have I no bayes to crown it?

The poet has, in effect, led us into comparing a crown with the Crown, even
though he appears to be only continuing
his angry tirade. Another serious pun is used to similar effect in the lines:

He that forbears

To suit and serve his need,
Deserves his load.

This hinges on the use of the word suit. Earlier in the poem it has been used in the sense of being in suit to one's master for favor. Though it is now used, apparently, in the sense of suiting oneself, the first usage could also work. That is, the line could be read to mean that he who does not wait in suit upon his Lord, deserves his load—when the word load itself has immediately recalled the Christian image of sin as a burden. So, we discover, the Voice of God calling through every word has a very concrete existence within the structure of the poem itself. This indirectness on the part of the poet is not without purpose. It serves to imitate a very human response to tests: the rebellion and rage of the self, undercut by the faithful soul, which must recall the Voice of God.

We have seen how a poet's craft permits him to approach spiritual matters, but this does not tell us what the place of a poet may be in the community; the part the poet may play in our time, previous to the Lesser Peace; and the poet's developing role in the future, within the Bahá'í community. Obviously, there are many possibilities open to Bahá'í poets, and the following suggestions will be only speculation. But it may be of interest to explore some of the implications in the Writings about the role of the artist. From a statement made by the Guardian, it seems that the indirect methods employed by art can be useful in the teaching work:

That day will the Cause spread like wildfire when its spirit and teachings are presented on the stage or in art and literature as a whole. Art can better awaken such noble sentiments than cold rationalizing, especially among the mass of the people. (Bahá'í News 7)

In this letter, the Guardian went on to say that we would "have to wait only a few years to see how the spirit breathed by Bahá'u'lláh will find expression in the work of artists." Now, almost fifty years after this observation was made, is surely not too early for us to start producing such works of art. But in what particular way can Bahá'í writers use their work to teach? On looking further into the writings of the Guardian on this subject, we find some more specific advice:

For in the world today much can be achieved through the power of [the] pen. All you need is to try to deepen your knowledge of the history and the teachings of the Faith, and thus well-equipped you will assuredly win a glorious success....

It would seem from this that we need not seek more detailed instructions. We need only the broad base of knowledge of our teachings and history, and then, no doubt, if we compose as our talents guide us, we will find that our work cannot help but act as a teacher of nonbelievers. However, in art:

> The direct presentation of the Teachings is surely highly important and even indispensable nowadays…it should be done with utmost care and tact, and in a manner that would appeal to the non-believers. (On Writers and Writing)

It would seem that poetry is ideally suited to such a task. Its methods are indirect, certainly, but through these indirect methods, poetry approaches the deepest matters of the spirit more directly than any other form. Poetry, by its nature, is able to talk about religion, about terror and despair, and the state of men's hearts more openly, and yet with more "care and tact" than the other arts. Poetry's method is metaphor, the using of sensible figures to express intellectual realities. But if, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá pointed out, metaphor is the only way of approaching the spiritual realm, then poetry is actually the most direct route to the world of the spirit, since it openly declares itself to be the craft of making metaphors, which are intended to express intellectual realities. Teaching nonbelievers is not the only function available to the poet of our time. In the Writings, the devotional aspect of the poet's work is also pointed out. In The Chosen Highway, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is reported to have said that

> all Art is the gift of the Holy Spirit. When this light shines through the mind of a musician, it manifests itself in beautiful harmonies. Again, shining through the mind of a poet, it is seen in fine poetry and poetic prose....
> These gifts are fulfilling their highest purpose, when showing forth the praise of God. (167)

We have already explored the abstract interpretation of the poet or artist praising God through his art, that is, by considering, in art, the attributes of God. There is, however, a more literal way of interpreting the artist's function of praising God, as we find in a letter of the Guardian:

> ...with regard to your question concerning the use of music in the Nineteen Day Feasts, he wishes to assure all the friends that not only he approves of such a practice, but thinks it even advisable that the believers should make use, in their meetings, of hymns composed by Bahá'ís themselves and also of such hymns, poems and chants as are based on the Holy Words. (Extracts 10)

That is to say, the poet is allowed to present, at the Nineteen Day Feast, those of his poems which are
appropriate to the solemnity of the occasion. The implications in this for the role of the poet in the community are far
reaching. Certainly it does not suggest that the poet need be isolated in any way. In fact, it almost seems to suggest a
central role for the poet in the Bahá'í community. It is possible to imagine a future when each local community would
have its own poets, able to vie with one another to produce works of fitting excellence to be presented at the Feast;
when each poet would have a role to play, a community, and a comprehending audience.

In our own time, we must sow the seeds of this future and lift our hearts "above the present," and look into the
future. Today the seed is sown ... but behold the day will come when it shall rise a glorious tree ('Abdu'l-Bahá qtd. in
Australian Bulletin 5).

We are aware that the flower of world civilization will appear, but in our own time we must set about putting
out roots, seeking nourishment, providing the necessary basis of individual effort that will let the flower of the future
grow and flourish. Our art will inevitably be different from the art of the Golden Age, as the root of the plant is
different from the bloom. Our art must grow in the rotting material of the old world order, whereas the art of the
future will grow in clean air. But we are no less important, no less necessary! Our art is at the core of the future, it
will grow beyond our imagining, from this beginning.

As individual artists we may well feel dispirited at our lack of a supporting civilization. It is true that in the
"twentieth century, it is, sometimes, difficult to find true religious verse because this age is not an age of faith;.... The
voices of religious poets are therefore, voices of people 'crying in the wilderness'" (Jennings, ed., Religious Verse 9).

In spite of this loneliness, it is the task of Bahá'í poets to do exactly that, to write the true religious poetry which is so
thin on the ground in our age.

As to the standard we can reach in our time, we can find some encouragement in looking at our own nascent
administrative system. For "the world of politics is like the world of man" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Divine Civilization 107)
and by comparing one to the other, we may be able to find our perspective. The administration of the Faith is now,
like our world civilization, at its very beginning. This is the Formative Age, and our administration is only just
starting to take shape. But this does not mean that within this newly born divine administration there are no

outstanding individuals. Far from it, in this time, on some occasions, the work of the administration depends largely on the work of some outstanding and self-effacing believer. It may be the same with the art of Bahá'ís . The Golden Age we long for is only just forming, and the art of Bahá'ís depends on the emergence of outstanding Bahá'í artists to lay the foundations needed for the future development of art.

Developing this theme, when the Guardian tells us that we do not yet have a cultural expression which could be called Bahá'í, it is helpful to interpret this in the light of his own achievements. It is clear and evident that we do not have anything which could be called a Bahá'í architecture as yet, that is, we do not design and live in a particular type (or types) of house, in a Bahá'í village circled round its House of Worship; we do not have the Bahá'í schools and hospitals, their design extrapolated from Bahá'í teachings on education and healing. These things belong to the future. We do, however, have some of the most beautiful buildings in the world, as for instance those in the Holy Land; the shrine of the Báb, the

...Queen of Carmel enthroned
on God's Mountain, crowned
in glowing gold, robed
in shimmering white, girdled in
emerald green, enchanting every
eye from air, sea, plain and hill.
(Shoghi Effendi qtd. in Giachery, Shoghi Effendi 107)

whose design the Guardian approved and whose construction he worked with consuming energy to complete. We have the Archives Building, whose situation and decoration deeply involved Shoghi Effendi. We have the Mansion of Bahji, which he restored, and the gardens of the holy shrines, which he designed. When we look at the writing of the Guardian, we might well concur with the Hand of the Cause of God, Ugo Giachery, when he says that

had we a thousand lives to live, we could never fully repay Shoghi Effendi with enough love and gratitude for the beauty, inspiration and perfection of his literary work. (Shoghi Effendi 42)

If 'Abdu'l-Bahá is the perfect exemplar for humanity, Shoghi Effendi sets a standard for the Bahá'í artist to emulate. No matter what the obstacle in his path, no matter what difficulties had to be overcome, he put his whole being into creating, in his translations, his writing, his beautification of the Bahá'í holy places, a treasury of beauty that Bahá'ís will still be drawing on in a thousand years to come. Aware as

we may be that we have no surrounding
culture in this time, we can also remember that the Guardian had far less
cultural support than we do now and yet was
not prevented from creating beauty.
In our Guardian, we see the self in its proper place, utilized and not
utilizing, the self, the servant to the high
aims of the Guardian. Yet, in spite of his self-abnegation, when we look at his
writing, we cannot say that it lacks
originality, that it fails to carry the stamp of an individual style. The
difference, perhaps, could lie in the fact that
Shoghi Effendi does not seek originality for its own sake, nor to express
himself as an individual in his work. His
distinctive writing style simply occurs as a side-effect of his efforts to
perfect his work.
As Popper has pointed out in his discussion of art:

Trying seriously to be original or different, and also trying to express
one's own personality, must interfere
with what has been called the "integrity" of the work of art. In a great
work of art the artist does not try to
impose his little personal ambitions on the work but uses them to serve his
work. (Unended Quest)

The result of such self-discipline on the part of the artist is not and cannot
be the crushing of the self out of existence;
or to make the individual a bland and inoffensive simulacrum of his neighbor.
In fact, by resigning originality and
self-expression as a goal, the artist gains back, measure for measure, pressed
down and running over, precisely that
which he gave away freely. In the work that is completely dedicated to the
praise of God, the purest and finest aspect
of the individual's nature shines forth, unobscured by the mortal dust of
personality. "The Kingdom is attained by the
one who forgets self. Everything becomes yours by Renunciation of everything"
('Abdu'l-Bahá qtd. in Grundy, Ten
Days 13).
As Bahá'ís we look forward to a time when "A world script, a world liter
ature...will simplify and facilitate
intercourse and understanding among the nations and races of mankind" (Shoghi
Effendi, Directives 67–68). To form
a school of art or a style of writing now would obviously be premature, as the
Guardian has pointed out. It would
cramp and inhibit the very "Bahá'í" art it was trying to foster.
Bahá'í art will grow, as Bahá'í civilization will grow,
from individual efforts united by their source and their goal, into a widely
diverse and unified culture.
In the present, the Bahá'í Faith is an infant, and so is the art of the
Bahá'ís a babe in arms compared to the

venerable art of the period just before the manifestation of the Báb. But we can bear in mind the words of the Báb and take courage for, “the newly born babe of that Day excels the wisest and most venerable men of this time...” (qtd. in Nabíl, Dawn-Breakers 94). We have the benefit of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh in his Day; we have been given a new understanding of history, and of our own time. The work of the artist has been explicitly justified and praised by Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi, and, for the writer, the entire language has been recreated by the influx of scripture. There are new depths, new meanings, new resonances in a language that attempts to contain the words of Bahá’u’lláh. The language is obliged to stretch and expand to accommodate Him; it is transmuted into a higher and richer thing by its contact with Him. There are new metaphors to be explored, new ideas to be worked with, a purpose to be fulfilled. As artists, our work is as different from our artistic environment in the old world order as a healthy infant is different from a senile adult. The little resemblance is fleeting and of no import. As Bahá’ís, we are secure in the knowledge of the source of art and of its proper use. As poets, we may remember ‘Abdu’l-Bahá words:

I hope thou wilt acquire great proficiency in writing literature, composition, eloquence of tongue and f1uency of speech.... (Tablets 501)

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