

Literary Criticism, Theology and Deconstructionism¹

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Introduction

Bahá'í scholars have recently begun to direct their attention to the complex but fruitful relationships between theology and literary criticism, as distinct from exegesis.² While the properly literary critical focus of these studies can thus far be characterised as a "first look" approach, this area of research has the potential for considerably enriching the literary-theological dimensions of Bahá'í Studies for at least two reasons that have much to do with "cross-fertilization.": (i) In terms of methodology, this perspective will require that scholars "correlate," a method recommended by Shoghi Effendi in at least four of his letters that advocates relating the Bahá'í teachings to "...all the progressive movements and thoughts being put forth today...."³ (ii) This effort will in turn shed new light on text-rooted studies of the Bahá'í sacred writings which must also include any considerations of Bahá'í theology.

While I will not attempt an exhaustive survey of this field here, since 1997 four publications come to mind: John S. Hatcher's book *the Ocean of His Words. A Readers Guide to the Art of Bahá'u'lláh* (1997), Phyllis Perrakis' article "Spiritual Oppression in Frankenstein" (*The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 1999), Franklin Lewis' article "Scripture as Literature:Sifting Through the Layers of the Text" (*The Bahá'í Studies Review*, 1997) and Sen McGlinn's polemical in-depth review⁴ of Hatcher's *the Ocean of His Words* in *The Bahá'í Studies Review*, (1999/2000). I should not neglect to mention Christopher Buck's *Symbol and Secret.Qur'an*

¹. I refer to deconstructionism rather than simply to deconstruction because this philosophical current has also become a pervasive mind-set in postmodernity.

².Scholars should exercise care in not erasing the line between scriptural exegesis and literary criticism. While there are, of course, points of convergence, exegesis, as currently practiced by such textual-translation scholars as Todd Lawson, Christopher Buck and Stephen Lambden, relies upon data drawn mainly from the field of Islamic and Bábí-Bahá'í studies, while literary criticism draws upon data from that field while relating any findings to the study of Bahá'í texts and/or theology. Franklin Lewis' approach, while it remains largely focused on Bahá'u'lláh's Persian language writings, strikes me as being more in line with properly literary critical thinking.

³.The complete quotation reads: "Shoghi Effendi has for years urged the Bahá'ís (who asked his advice and in general also) to study history, economics, sociology, etc., in order to be *au courant* with all the progressive movements and thoughts being put forth today and so that they could correlate these to the Bahá'í teachings." From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, July 5, 1947 in *The Importance of Deepening our Knowledge and Understanding of the Faith*, p. 47. Other references to correlation are found in letters of August 6, 1933, October 21, 1943 and July 5, 1949.

⁴. While I do not care for either the tone of McGlinn's *ad hominem* review, and his accusation of "a political agenda" involving the "forces of conservative religion in the United States" (p. 199), I agree, in the main, with McGlinn's arguments. What struck me, as McGlinn also points out (p. 203), was Dr. Hatcher's scarce consideration of non-Bahá'í literary critics. There is only one bibliographic mention in his book. While this omission may have methodological implications, it is puzzling for one who is a professor of English literature writing about the "literary art" of Bahá'u'lláh. Hatcher's approach, in this book at least, has taken no notice of Shoghi Effendi's recommendation of the method of correlation to non-Bahá'í thought. As McGlinn also points out (p. 203), Dr. Hatcher, for whatever reason, has omitted any mention of Christopher Buck's *Symbol and Secret* (1995), an omission that does not seem justified in such a study.

Commentary in Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Íqân (1995) which has earned some justified praise from Franklin Lewis.⁵ But I do so to make a distinction. It forces the terminology, as Sen McGlinn does in his review of Hatcher, to call Buck's study "genre criticism" (p. 203). However, it does clearly qualify as academic Bahá'í exegesis, heavily Quranic in content and only incidentally literary critical since *Symbol and Secret* does not reflect in content any serious utilisation of "blurred genres"⁶ which was not Buck's focus in any case.

This paper examines the interface of the dynamic tension that exists between literary criticism and theology as two distinct but nonetheless mutually interacting and beneficial forms of discourse. My thesis is that theology and scriptural study stand to greatly benefit from an adoption of the humanising, existential⁷/experiential "real life" dimensions of literature and certain currents of critical theory⁸ that offer insights into the nature of the modes of expression found in literature *inter alia* in the act of reading (reader-response theory), rhetoric (rhetorical criticism), objective and historical criticism, the nature of signs (semiology) and the deeper structures or patterns that lie embedded within all types of literature (structuralism)

However, a certain selectivity is required when sifting through the literature of this highly diverse field which has become, according to Hazard Adams, professor of English and comparative literature at the University of Washington, "...a plethora of competing jargons and systems, to say nothing of antisystems."⁹ One of these antisystems, is the ultra-solipsistic, postmodern literary critical perspective of deconstructionism, some of whose advocates declare themselves to be hostile to religion and theology and which envisages, without stint, the death of God. While theology can be viewed, following Anders Nygren in *Meaning and Method* (1972), his *magnum opus*, as a kind of "conceptual poetry,"¹⁰ it must continue to stand for logocentrism and the expounding of an objective, propositional belief system.

The Humanising Face of Literary Criticism

T.R. Wright of the University of Newcastle documents in an instructive survey called

⁵.See Lewis' review "Symbol and Secret. Qur'an Commentary in Baha'u'llah's Kitáb-i-Íqân," *The Bahá'í Studies Review*, no. 6, 1996, pp. 76-92.

⁶.The phrase is from Clifford Geertz's brilliant essay "Blurred Genres:The Refiguration of Social Thought". See *Critical Theory Since 1965*, pp. 514-523. Geertz is an anthropologist and professor of social sciences at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton who uses "interpretive text-analogical methods" and applies them in interdisciplinary fashion to the social sciences.

⁷.See further in this essay for brief considerations of my view of the theistic existential view.

⁸.I am using critical theory as it is used in North America as an abbreviation of literary critical theory. In Europe, critical theory refers to the sociological analysis of the so-called Frankfurt School as well as a critique of ideology..Introduction, *Critical Theory Since 1965*, p. 1.

⁹.Introduction, *Critical Theory Since 1965*, p. 1.

¹⁰.This reference to Nygren is from David Tracy's discussion of "Religious Language and the Impossibility of Metaphysical Language:Anders Nygren" in *Blessed Rage for Order. The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York:The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 157.

Theology and Literature (1988)¹¹ how during the twentieth century, theology and particularly biblical exegesis were informed by the application of literary critical techniques to sacred study. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the literary implications of the Bible are as old as the Bible itself. Stephen Prickett points out in his chapter “Biblical and Literary Criticism: A History of Interaction” in *The Bible and Literature. A Reader* (1999) that the selection and arrangement of the books of the canon in the third century CE, in more or less its final form, was in itself “...a critical and polemical act.”, and that the Bible is “...a monument to intertextuality.”, with, for example, its constant referrals to the life and actions of Jesus as a fulfilment of specific Hebrew texts.¹² In the twentieth century, literary techniques were employed to more closely analyse biblical literature beginning about 1900. Source criticism¹³ and form¹⁴ and redaction¹⁵ criticism, while they resulted in a scepticism that questioned the *vox dei, ipsissima verba* of the Bible, employed basic literary critical techniques to create a more scientific approach to the understanding of biblical texts.

More recently, the pre-deconstructionist methods of structuralism have greatly influenced Biblical studies. While structuralism traces its history back to the nature of the sign in the work of Swiss structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, it gained impetus in the 1960's from the work of Roland Barthes¹⁶ and his 1966 publication *Critique et vérité* in which Barthes proclaims the importance of the ‘science of literature’¹⁷ which focused attention away from the interpretation of particular works to larger philosophic considerations of the meaning of texts. R.C. Culley summarised well, overstatement notwithstanding, the scientific bent in the structuralist approach when he wrote that structuralists “are seeking a method which is scientific in the sense that they are striving for a rigorous statement and an exacting analytical model.”¹⁸ This method seeks to

¹¹.(data) Wright’s book, while a little dated, gives a streamlined overview, based on a complete bibliography (to 1988), of the various questions relating to the interface of theology and literature.

¹².*The Bible and Literature: A Reader*, eds. David Jasper and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1999), pp. 12-13.

¹³.Basically source criticism consisted of identifying the relations and influences among the synoptic gospels.

¹⁴.Form criticism examines the changes in form of the smaller literary units that make up the gospel stories in terms of their purpose and *Sitz im Leben* or setting before these stories reached their written stage. Thus, one story might be framed, for example, with an anti-Jewish polemic in mind. The effect of form criticism produced a certain scepticism since it argued that these stories were created for particular theological purposes and their contents shaped to that end rather than issuing directly from the mouth of Jesus. Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932) a Hebrew Bible scholar who used a history of religions approach (*Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) for the Gospel were two key figures in the form criticism movement. Dibelius who had studied with Gunkel and Schmidt were other figures in the field. Form criticism was a kind of genre criticism since it was preoccupied with oral traditions and their historical contexts.

¹⁵.Redaction criticism (*Tendenzkritik*) examines the manner in which the final editors of biblical texts molded the earlier sources into their final form.

¹⁶.Barthes later became disenchanted with the pseudo-scientific certainties of structuralism and helped to formulate deconstructionist theories of language.

¹⁷. Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), p. 30.

¹⁸.R.C. Culley, “Exploring New Directions,” in *The Hebrew Bible and its Modern Interpreters*, ed. D.A. Knight and

uncover deeper, underlying patterns and structures common to literature itself or to modes of expression such as myth, metaphor, symbol or rhetoric which purport to give definitive interpretations of literature. Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* in Geneva (1916) also became the model for Russian formalism and semiotics (semiology) and influenced deconstructionism. Other structuralists, including Barthes himself, have softened the harder approach which was the legacy of de Saussure's linguistics. Concurrent with the development of today's deconstructionism, present preoccupations have included studies based on the centrality of story in theology (narrative theology)¹⁹ and the modes of expression mentioned above as found in sacred texts.

Apart from the recommendation of general hermeneutical principles which have largely a pre-Bahá'í history,²⁰ and while they may be implicit to Bahá'í scripture itself, there is no mention in the Bahá'í sacred writings (understandably), or the commentaries of Shoghi Effendi, of any specific literary critical techniques and schools, at least as employed by western scholars. However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá specifically mentioned the acquisition of "...science, arts and *belles lettres*..." to a student who had queried him about the pursuit of his education as "... a matter which is acceptable before God and a duty which is incumbent upon us to accomplish."²¹ Comparing the "Cause of God" to a college, 'Abdu'l-Bahá reportedly said in another circumstance: "The college is founded for the sake of the acquirements of science, arts and literature."²² a closely worded parallel of his advice to the student cited above. By extension, it is not a far step to conclude that this endorsement of the study of literature would also have to include any of those more progressive critical techniques that scholars estimate would contribute to a deeper understanding of sacred literature.

G.M.

Tucker (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 174.

¹⁹ John C. Hoffman in "Metaphorical or Narrative Theology" challenges the assumption of theologian of metaphor, Sallie McFague (*Speaking and Parables, Metaphorical Theology*) that: (1) metaphor is the definitive element in human understanding (2) metaphor best guards against "absolutizing our theological concepts" (pp. 173-74). *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, vol. 16, no. 2, Spring, 1987, pp. 173-85. While Hoffman argues that "we look to narrative as our key interpretive category" (p. 174), in so doing he presents a balanced view of McFague's arguments, with which he in part agrees.

²⁰ I am thinking here of such things as the employment of "plain sense" and figurative interpretations of scripture or that microcosmic and macrocosmic interpretation (the part interprets the whole and the whole interprets the part) which is a variation of the principles that scripture interprets itself. References in Bahá'í scripture to "inner"(esoteric) (*bátin*) and "outer" (*záhír*) meaning" basically have to do with literal and figurative interpretation. Shoghi Effendi's endorsement of holistic interpretation (letter of July 5, 1947), which is quite modern in approach, has its counterpart in other interpretive techniques. Bahá'u'lláh's prohibition of the figurative interpretation of ritual or legal texts in the *Aqdas* may be a specifically Bahá'í interpretive rule.

²¹ "Now as to what thou askest concerning giving up the scientific attainment in Paris for the sake of confining thy days to the delivery of this Truth, it is indeed acceptable and beloved, but if thou acquire both it would be better and more perfect, because in this new century the attainment of science, arts and *belles lettres*, whether divine or worldly, material or spiritual, is a matter which is acceptable before God and a duty which is incumbent upon us to accomplish. Therefore, never deny the spiritual things to the material, rather both are incumbent upon thee" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Baha'i World Faith*, pp. 376-377).

²² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in *The Importance of Deepening*, p. 203.

While Bahá'u'lláh's writings contain pervasive allusions to the religio-cultural antecedents which he inherited (Persian, Sh'ih Islamic and partly Sufistic), while creatively structured, these writings are composed, in the main, from ordinary, everyday speech. This is also true of Shoghi Effendi's English language writings which have been largely shorn of Islamic allusions,²³ except when they treat of the "falling fortunes of sh'ih Islám" or "the collapse and fall of the Muslim Caliphate."²⁴ While the impact of prophetic revelation language is extraordinary, the building blocks of speech, which precedes writing in all cultures and which de Saussure privileged over writing,²⁵ are prosaic but transformed by the power of Spirit into enduring monuments or verbal icons. Thus revelation language, while at the scholarly level, will be susceptible to specialised study, at the first level of faith-engendering, it requires no technical expertise for understanding and is entirely democratic and liberal in its offerings. (But literacy must be assumed if we speak of the act of reading rather than the act of listening).

In this prosaic language, however, we encounter the paradox of simplicity. The "ordinary" language of divine revelation can conceal the most abstruse of philosophical theological problems. Indeed Bahá'u'lláh alludes to the complete verbal insufficiency of language to convey truth. What type of "truth" the Persian Prophet alludes to here few of us can know: "How great the multitude of truths which the garment of words can never contain! How vast the number of such verities as no expression can adequately describe, whose significance can never be unfolded, and to which not even the remotest allusions can be made!"²⁶ Sometimes, Bahá'u'lláh declares, the logical codes of language are completely broken as for the lovers who find themselves in the third of Bahá'u'lláh's Four Valleys (*Chahár Vádí*): "To them all words of sense are meaningless, and senseless words are full of meaning."²⁷ The simplicity of words betrays, then, any simplicity of meaning.

While much ink has flowed to explain the nature of specifically religious language, compared to its more literal,²⁸ scientific formulations, Joseph Keller comments on the ability of

²³The foregoing should not be taken as a blanket statement. There are, of course, several references to Islam within the letters and commentaries of the Guardian. But, unlike the writings of the Three Central Figures, Shoghi Effendi's English-language writings are not grounded in an Islamic religio-cultural context. However, Shoghi Effendi in his treatments of Islam makes a clear distinction between Islam, as it exists ideally, and Islam as it is practiced, particularly in the hostile reception that Islam accorded to the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.

²⁴*The Promised Day is Come*, pp. 90-99 (check). Shoghi Effendi quotes Bahá'u'lláh on the fall of Islam: "By your deeds," He, in another Tablet, anticipating the fall of the Sultanate and the Caliphate, thus reproves the combined forces of Sunni and Shi'ih Islam, "the exalted station of the people hath been abased, the standard of Islam hath been reversed, and its mighty throne hath fallen" (*The Promised Day is Come*, p. 61).

²⁵In *Of Grammatology* (trans. 1976) Derrida sought to reverse this priority arguing that Platonism and Christianity assumed, incorrectly, a Divine Mind or Logos as being "present" in speech. Speech, he argued, was endlessly self-reflexive and also deferred thought from any final "closure."

²⁶*Gleanings*, p. 176.

²⁷*The Four Valleys*, p. 55.

²⁸Scriptural literalists are, in a sense, very bad scientists for scientific language is entirely literal in that, while symbolic (particularly in the case of mathematics), it says what it means.

ordinary language, of which revelation language is a special creation, to engender what is at the heart of all religious experience--a sense of communion (and community). While Keller's context is interpersonal communication, this sense of communion is achieved no less in the Speaker-listener relationship, while reading or listening to sacred utterance, as the soul responds in kind to be of one accord with the grammar of revelation:

Ordinary language, even in its trivial aspect, potentially can lead to communion; communion is implicit as the goal of which even a casual encounter is promise (but never anticipation, since communion may not be programmed). One result of this process is the creation of meaning out of the linguistic picture of reality. When ordinary language leads to communion, it alters itself as the speakers achieve semantic and grammatical accord.²⁹

The study of literature, moreover, fleshes out existential moments which have the effect of grounding propositional or belief system *theoria* in concrete "historical"³⁰ events, even those of a quotidian nature. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's reinterpretation of the resurrection story, not only makes an anti-literalist argument, but also, while including it, transcends metaphor to recognize the existential quality of human existence as a moment of test and transformation, an interpretation, moreover, whose perspectival focus has been validated by Rudolf Bultmann who presumably know nothing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanation. Bultmann's existential reinterpretation would have it that the resurrection myth "...expresses the disciples' experience of reorientation as a result of communion with Christ."³¹ But such an interpretation obviously does not take place from within the context of the culturally conditioned and relative terms of modern existentialism. As I have written elsewhere, the "existential moment" of "test and transformation" is a perennial condition of the human soul, and not culturally conditioned, one in which "The image of the hidden higher self is seeking definition and desires to come clear."³² It is a condition in which all believers find themselves everywhere and always. Here is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's exist-ential interpretation of the resurrection story:

²⁹. Joseph Keller, "Ordinary Language: The Everyday Icon" in *Sciences Religieuses/Studies in Religion*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1983, p. 295.

³⁰. By a historical event I refer either to a "world-shaping" (Shoghi Effendi) event of magnitude, either in the life of the Divine Manifestation, his followers, or on the stage of world history or a less determinative quotidian event in the life of the ordinary believer. A historical event is any meaningful happening. In my essay "The Possibilities of Existential Theism for Bahá'í Theology" I have argued that the theistic existential perspective deserves a place in Bahá'í theology because: (i) it is implicit to Bahá'í scripture. (ii) it relates "real life" situations to a process of spiritual transformation (iii) it is reflected in Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í history in "the acts and events in the lives of the prophets and spiritual teachers...." (p. 201). *Revisoning the Sacred. New Perspectives on a Bahá'í Theology*, ed. J.A. McLean (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1997), pp. 189-215..

³¹. In Wright, p. 27. See *The Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel, 2 vols (New York), vol. 2, p. 240.

³². For some brief views on the existential implications of the faith state see my essay "The Existential Moment" in *Under the Divine Lote Tree. Essays and Reflections* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1999), pp. 115-16. See also in the same book "Christ in Gethsemane: The Existential Moment and the Irony of Knowledge" (pp.24-29). For the the reverse side of the existential moment see "The Epiphanic Moment" (p.116) as a celebratory moment of "...exaltation, of illumination or triumph when we are in Wordsworth's phrase 'surprised by joy'." The phrase "test and transformation" is not found in these essays but expresses the essence of "the existential moment."

Therefore, we say that the meaning of Christ's resurrection is as follows: the disciples were troubled and agitated after the martyrdom of Christ. The Reality of Christ, which signifies His teachings, His bounties, His perfections and His spiritual power, was hidden and concealed for two or three days after His martyrdom, and was not resplendent and manifest. No, rather it was lost, for the believers were few in number and were troubled and agitated. The Cause of Christ was like a lifeless body; and when after three days the disciples became assured and steadfast, and began to serve the Cause of Christ, and resolved to spread the divine teachings, putting His counsels into practice, and arising to serve Him, the Reality of Christ became resplendent and His bounty appeared; His religion found life; His teachings and His admonitions became evident and visible. In other words, the Cause of Christ was like a lifeless body until the life and the bounty of the Holy Spirit surrounded it.³³

While 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretation removes the resurrection from the category of literal fact, it becomes nonetheless a historical event since it *really happened*. While it is not given to every generation to live during the lifetime of the Prophet, "when God walked among men," the sense of being lost and then found, of losing and rediscovering one's identity, which Northrop Frye³⁴ says is "...the framework of all literature."³⁵ is a universal element for both theistic and non-theistic persuasions and is common to all 'times and climes.' 'Abdu'l-Bahá's commentary, not only underscores the triumphal power of apostolic Christianity, but also makes an allusion to this loss and recovery of self and identity among the disciples.

While literature has close associations with what philosopher Arthur O. Lovejoy called "the history of ideas" in *The Great Chain of Being* (1936) and in *Essays in the History of Ideas* (1948),³⁶ it does not, unlike theology, repose on a series of propositions. Literature will admit only language, imagination and human experience as the three basic elements in its catechism of letters. Literature takes no *a priori* account of the faith state which is the distinguishing feature of religion and is presumed in the study of theology. Religiosity will serve only as *one of* the elements in the literary world. The literary critical view provides, consequently, a countervailing and balancing focus, one that sets literary scholarship, not over and against faith, but sensitizes the fixed belief system to "...the range of human experience in the human condition", the "...massive intertextual allusion..." of scripture and its "lyrical beauty."³⁷ "Revelation" in literature

³³ *Some Answered Questions*, p. 104.

³⁴ Frye, whom I was fortunate to have had as my teacher in Biblical literature at the University of Toronto (1970), was a structuralist critic, one of a few giants in the field, who overhauled and systematised the entire field of literary criticism. Among his publications are *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (date), *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (date), *The Stubborn Structure* (date), *The Critical Path* (date) *The Great Code. The Bible and Literature* (1982) and *Words With Power* (1990).

³⁵ *The Educated Imagination*, p. 21.

³⁶ The reference to Lovejoy is from René Welleck's and Austin Warren's instructive account of the place of ideas in literature. See "Literature and Ideas" in *Theory of Literature*, pp. 110-24

³⁷ Stephen Prickett, "Biblical and Literary Criticism: A History of Interaction," p. 45.

must occur along a human horizon, within those lateral connections of what human beings reveal to themselves within the dimensions of a human apocalypse. Frye writes: "Literature is a human apocalypse, man's revelation to man, and criticism is not a body of adjudications, but the awareness of that revelation, the last judgement of mankind."³⁸ This last sentence hints at Frye's preference for literature over religion as a body of non-dogmatic, non-judgemental insights into the human condition.

While Prickett's phrase "...the range of human experience in the human condition." is only a general indicator, it does for all its generality validate what is both natural and supernatural in our own existence --for human experience includes a strong sense of the supernatural--; i.e. that we live in a horizontal world which interacts with a continually imploding vertical transcendental Reality. The literary critical approach can bring into focus the unaltered, "real" human dimensions of spirituality and makes us more deeply aware of the continuous interaction of the divine *and* the human realms. Such an experiential approach tends to soften, harmonize and relativise the propositional, narrowly dialectic and didactic, more or less fixed interpretations that one finds both in scripture and theology with *the what is happening now* or in light of *the ever-recurring human experience*. Thus, the literary critical path puts a human face on the unconditional, absolute requirements of the dictates of faith expressed in scripture or theology and helps to create understanding through the locus of human consciousness and experience which are also gifts from God.

Polemical Reflections on Deconstructionism

At the outset, it bears noting that deconstructionism is not just a literary critical school. It is also an ideology,³⁹ used here in its coercive or negative sense, the reason why I name it deconstructionism, rather than calling it by its more familiar name of deconstruction. The phrase "deconstructing an argument" has passed into the language and has received, *inter alia*, journalistic recognition. This main thrust of this ideology is perhaps the following: its absolute relativisation of the truth. There are no absolute truths for deconstructionists; neither would there be any universal truths since languages, they argue, are culturally bound and are necessarily structurally relative in that they organise thought and provide a world view. One can understand how these arguments would be inimical to the claims of revelation and the positing of the belief systems of religion which are intended to transcend cultural barriers. For the deconstructionist, language has a greater power than truth and, in a sense, is always struggling with truth. For a Bahá'í, language functions in the service of truth and would be the vehicle to unlock its secrets. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: "... the function of language is to portray the mysteries and secrets of human hearts. The heart is like a box, and language is the key. Only by using the key can we open the box and observe the gems it contains."⁴⁰ Thus, the function of language is to unveil these

³⁸. *The Educated Imagination*, p. 44.

³⁹. The word ideology can have both positive and negative connotations. T.R. Wright defines ideology in *Theology and Literature* (1988) simply as "a set of concepts and practices which form our understanding of ourselves and the world" (p. 16). But in its agenda-driven, hard-line politicised form, it represents a coercive idea. As history informs us, totalitarian regimes always rely on ideologies. These forms of ideology are destructive of freedom of expression. While deconstructionists would be the first to deny that they are opposed to freedom of expression, deconstructionism is a negative philosophy since it negates the very idea that one can find truth. Its goal becomes the destruction of the common consensus.

mysteries; i.e. to make truth statements.

Consequently, despite the humanising influence of literature and the literary critical “color filter,”⁴¹ theologians and religionists have good reasons to resist importing *holus bolus* deconstructionist or pervasively relativist currents of critical theory which would have deleterious consequences for the sacred study. But deconstructionism, *vis-à-vis* religion has gone a step farther. It is self-professedly allied with the death of God and atheism. Deconstructionist philosophers of language are fond of quoting Nietzsche’s mottoes such as ‘truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions’ and ‘there are no facts, only interpretations.’⁴² Much of this anti-theological writing comes from France. Aside from the philosopher of language, Jacques Derrida, the current guru of deconstructionism, who is opposed to fixed meanings of any kind, Julia Kristeva, feminist, philosopher of language and practicing psychoanalyst, “...claims that ‘poetic language’ is ‘the enemy of religion’, disrupting the constraints of ‘transcendental rationality’, reactivating libidinal drives suppressed by the reason.”⁴³

However, Kristeva’s assertion is not obvious. Purely poetical and theological language can work well in bifocal concert. I take here only one example, the Sufi expression “the Sun of Truth”(Per.=*shams-i-haqiqat*) which is used pervasively in Bahá’í scripture as a central metaphor. This poetical expression refers to the station of prophethood and as such it has a proper theological meaning. Yet, both as metaphor or symbol and theological truth, the expression contains a latent proliferation of meanings. A cluster of images and relationships are illustrated in the following heuristic⁴⁴ examples:⁴⁵ It is to be noted that these examples are both pictorial-poetical and conceptual-theological. Although it occurs that the poetical uses of this language may have been forced into the service of theology, little reflection is needed to realise that both modes--imagination and concept--are fully interactive and cooperate in symbiotic fashion in the examples provided.

The use of metaphysical language in theology is in any case probably closer to poetry than to science. In *Meaning and Method*, referred to above, Anders Nygren argues persuasively

⁴⁰. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 60

⁴¹.The expression is Northrop Frye’s in his *Polemical Introduction to Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, p. 7.

⁴².Quoted by Wright, p. 38. Source in Nietzsche not indicated.

⁴³.From T.R. Wright, *Theology and Literature* (1988). The quotation from Julia Kristeva is taken from *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gova and others, New York, 1980, pp. 125 and 140. 140. (Publisher not indicated by Wright).

⁴⁴.As opposed to ostensive or clearly demonstrable. Here I am using the word to indicate that the examples provided are only an aid to understanding since they require further discussion.

⁴⁵.The absolute indispensability of the Divine Manifestations since life itself on earth depends upon the heat and light of the sun; the mirrors of the human heart in which the Sun of Truth shines and which may be obscured by the dust of earthly concerns; the eternity of truth which like the sun is ever-rising; the clouds of superstition and error which hide the sun of truth away; as an image of the unity of the Prophets since, in our planetary system, there is only one sun; the supreme station of the Divine Manifestation since the sun rises high above the horizon of the world; as a representation of progressive revelation when referring to the signs of the zodiac as the successive prophetic dispensations, with Bahá’u’lláh taking the position at the zenith. These statements are closely based on those Bahá’í writings that contain references to the “Sun of Truth.”

that metaphysical language is disqualified from making any “scientific” claim to meaning since it does not employ self-evident and universal mathematical axioms or empirical modes of scientific verification. However, metaphysical and *ergo* theological language⁴⁶ is not meaningless if understood as “conceptual poetry.”⁴⁷ In my essay “The Convergence of Theology and Poetry,” I have argued that these two forms of discourse converge within a poeticized theological interpretation, whose common elements I have reformulated as “the mystical vision,” “grace” and the “metaphysical world view.” Here I refer to a shared “mystical vision” of both poet and theologian:

Here, then, is the first meeting-place of the two domains. Both poet and theologian dwell in the land of the mystical vision. By “mystical,” however, I do not mean any rarefied state such as being absorbed into the Godhead, nor do I intend the classical types or forms of religious consciousness that phenomenologists such as Rudolf Otto⁴⁸ and others have defined. By “mystical” I intend for the theologian a quest for a vision of God in the objective structures of human thought. For the poet, it means a highly sharpened and sensitised focus, an intense awareness, a keen joy, a transformation of the quotidian. Both poet and theologian may experience cosmic consciousness, illumination, intimations of divine love and the like.⁴⁹

For deconstructionists “...there is no ultimate meaning to the text or to the world. Literature functions rather like striptease, to quote the fictional Morris Zapp, holding out the ‘promise of an ultimate revelation which is infinitely postponed.’ The text never allows itself to be possessed; the role of the reader is merely to take pleasure in teasing.”⁵⁰ The fluidity of poetic language, according to Roland Barthes, one of the founding theorists of deconstruction, defines it as an “anti-theological activity” and leads ultimately to the death of God. Barthes writes: “...by refusing to assign a ‘secret’, an ultimate meaning, to the text (and the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meanings is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases --reason, science, law.”⁵¹

Such a refusal, were it to be fully applied, would not only mock, but destroy the foundations of western civilisation-- such as they are. One has to wonder what kind of liberation would intervene with the cancellation of the logocentric basis of religion and theology, philosophy, science and law and how they would continue to function. Such a prospect does not

⁴⁶.Not all theologians agree that theology should use metaphysical language.

⁴⁷.Nygren’s position summarised by David Tracey, *Blessed Rage for Order*, p. 159.

⁴⁸.See Otto’s classic study of the phenomenon of religious consciousness in *Das Heilige* (1917). English translation, *The Idea of the Holy* (1924).

⁴⁹.J.A. McLean, *Under the Divine Lote Tree. Essays and Reflections*, p. 132.

⁵⁰.Quoted by Wright. From David Lodge, *Small World* (London, 1984), pp. 26-7. Publisher not indicated.

⁵¹. Quoted by Wright. From Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath, London, 1977, p. 147. Publisher not indicated.

seem to concern the deconstructionists who have made a god of the “play” of language. These theorists have, at least, been partly logical with their anti-logical logic by carrying the implications of their revolutionary theories through to their ultimate conclusions. Although they have imputed to logocentrism, with what they view as its monolithic, authoritarian systems, a veritable Pandora’s box of evils that have been visited upon the world--death, alienation, intellectual tyranny, suppression of minorities and the underprivileged-- the very demons they have sought to destroy have proven to be very elusive and resistant. Hydra-like, the god *logos* has reappeared, imposing semantical “order” on the very theories from which they sought to banish him. Despite Derrida’s disclaimer that “I don’t destroy the subject: I situate it.”,⁵² just where the subject fits into semantic space is anybody’s guess.

Scholar of romantic literature and objectivist critic M.H.Abrams (1912-), an upholder of the humanistic tradition which operates according to the acceptance of the rationality inherent in linguistic conventions, in a polemical essay which deplores what has become of “The Age of Criticism” in the newer “Age of Reading,” points to Derrida’s “science of nescience.”⁵³ Abrams writes: “I shall try to break through with a crashing generalization:As a philosopher of language, Derrida is an absolutist without absolutes.”⁵⁴ Derrida’s subtle deconstruction of the logocentric notion of language must lead to the conclusion that any traditional understanding of meaning has become meaningless.: “...since there is no such ground, there is no stop to the play of undecidable meanings.”⁵⁵ Abrams quotes Derrida: “The absence of a transcendental signified extends the realm and play of signification to infinity.”⁵⁶ However, Derrida is perceptive enough not to commit a *reductio ad absurdum*. Language, if we need to be told, still works. “...it gets its job done.”⁵⁷

Disclaimers notwithstanding, the understanding of deconstructionist theories depends upon a common understanding of their contents. To argue that the element of logocentrism does not apply to a deconstructionist reading of texts, is to argue against any common understanding of deconstruction itself, the “at least this much” scenario. While deconstructionist interpreters may have shifted the meaning of logocentrism away from the “center’ of the authority of texts by an admixture of semantic solipsism and “free play,” to lighten the onerous and joyless work of the exegete, the fact remains that any advocacy of a deconstructionist current argues in favour of the perception of a common core of intellectual factors. Stephen Bonnycastle in his epilogue “Postmodernism, the Eclipse of Grand Narratives, and the Weakening of Shared Public Meaning” gives seven common elements of postmoderism which are based largely on deconstructionist

⁵².Derrida cited by Frank Lentricchia in *After the New Criticism* (Chicago:Chicago University Press, 1980), p. 271.

⁵³.*Critical Theory Since 1965*, p. 437.

⁵⁴.*Critical Theory Since 1965*, pp. 437-38.

⁵⁵. *Critical Theory Since 1965*, p. 438.

⁵⁶. *Critical Theory Since 1965*, p. 438.

⁵⁷.Abrams on Derrida, *Critical Theory Since 1965*, p. 438.

readings of texts.⁵⁸ One can defer meaning only so long (*différance*).⁵⁹

Derrida's critique of logocentrism applies, of course, to any understanding of God and to all the attendant theologies that attempt to explain God. The world religions, despite their internal differences, are all systems that are also based on logocentrism as it exists within divine revelation. Yet for all the anti-religious flavour of deconstructionism, biblical hermeneutics had already centuries ago anticipated certain of the deconstructionist concerns. One of Derrida's teachers was the French Jewish phenomenologist philosopher and Talmudic commentator Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995), whose ethical writings focused on the neighbourliness of the presence of "the other."⁶⁰ Susan A. Handelman and Daniel Boyarin argue that "Derrida's brilliant and tireless exercises in literary readings emerge...out of his background in Rabbinic thought with its midrashic intertextuality and its sense of struggle with and for the text."⁶¹ Another Jewish scholar, Geoffrey H. Hartman, argues that a text such as the story of Jacob's wrestling with the angel at Peniel in Genesis 32:1-22 'keeps alive the irreducible asymmetries and superfluidities which constitute the mystery....'⁶² of such a text. The rabbis, it would seem, moreover, were good deconstructionists and their endless conversations with God through the Hebrew Bible were (are) a perpetual safeguard against closures of meaning: "With the rabbis we are reminded that the Bible resists closure and conclusion, its endless writing demanding an endless exercise of reading and re-reading, writing and re-writing within the whole enterprise of literature in all ages."⁶³

In a passage which refers to the "twofold language" ("outward" and "veiled and concealed") employed by the Prophets, Bahá'u'lláh indicts the pervasive use of the literal interpretation of scripture when he reveals:

In such utterances, the literal meaning, as generally understood by the people, is not what hath been intended. Thus it is recorded: "Every knowledge hath seventy meanings, of which one only is known amongst the people. And when the Qa'im shall arise, He shall reveal unto men all that which remaineth." He also saith: "We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings; each one of these meanings we can explain."⁶⁴

⁵⁸. *In Search of Authority. An Introductory Guide to Literary Theory*, pp. 237-238.

⁵⁹. Derrida has created his own literary critical vocabulary. One of his key terms is the complex *différance* which is coined out of *différer* (to defer) and *différence* (difference). Basically, it signifies a differing with which is based on both a deferring (of meaning) and a difference. Derrida has been accused of sophistry on this one since he claims that *différance* is "neither a word nor a concept."! It is null, linguistically speaking. See his essay "Différance" in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, pp. 120-136.

⁶⁰. Thanks to Dr. Phyllis Perrakis for drawing this point to my attention. Lévinas was in fact born in Lithuania.

⁶¹. *The Bible and Literature. A Reader*, p. 60. Jasper and Prickett refer to Handelman's *The Slayers of Moses. The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982) and Boyarin's *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

⁶². *The Bible and Literature. A Reader*, p. 60.

⁶³. *The Bible and Literature. A Reader*, p. 60.

⁶⁴. *Iqán*, p. 254-55.

This passage also implies a rejection of any finality in interpretation and hints at what 'Abdu'l-Bahá called "... an esoteric meaning"⁶⁵ to scripture. For Bahá'u'lláh not only is telling us that the Promised One is the Supreme Exegete and that when he arises his dispensation will witness an explosion of knowledge, but also that there are other meanings to the sacred text that we have not yet imagined. This last point is crucial. The coming of the Promised One, notwithstanding his definitive interpretations, does not close the door to interpretation but rather opens it. Since each letter in "the Mother Book" "...is indeed a mother letter..."⁶⁶, a *variorum* of interpretations will arise, both divine and secular. This last point relates directly to the author-reader relationship. And it is worth noting in this context that Shoghi Effendi often refers to Bahá'u'lláh as "the Author of the Bahá'í Revelation" and 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the "Author of the Plan" (the Divine Plan) which would seem to be an endorsement of the Divine Revelator as being included within the category of author, perhaps as the Author of authors.

In the number symbolism of the Bible, the number seventy, which reappears in the *Hadith* cited above, is simply a comprehensive number that refers to a large, significant number. The seventy meanings of scripture derive from the "polysemous" (polysemic) nature of the divine word. A word employed by modern literary critics, polysemous was used by Dante (1265-1321) during the Middle Ages in his *Epistola X* to Can Grande which established a four-fold method for traditional Christian exegesis as the literal, allegorical (mystical), moral and anagogical⁶⁷ senses. Dante's notion of scripture as having "more senses than one",⁶⁸ as explicated by Northrop Frye,⁶⁹ has a direct bearing on reading either the Bahá'í sacred writings or those of Shoghi Effendi or, of course, any scripture *tout court*. Frye cautions against interpreting Dante's "polysemous" as simply relative "different meanings." Frye's reading relates the exegetical act to the root image of Dante's word, the seed, which Frye interprets as "...different intensities or wider contexts of a continuous sense, like a plant unfolding out of a seed."⁷⁰ This suggests that there must be an internal consistency in any systematic interpretation, rather than just a series of random, disconnected readings.

There are other considerations in the tensions created by the theological-literary critical interface. Barthes writes of the "death of the author."⁷¹ But where we do go after the author has

⁶⁵. *Some Answered Questions*, p. 120. The context is the response to the question of the sacrificial death of Christ as the "Word of God." 'Abdu'l-Bahá gives both an "apparent" and "esoteric" meaning in his answer.

⁶⁶. "Every single letter proceeding out of the mouth of God is indeed a mother letter, and every word uttered by Him Who is the Well Spring of Divine Revelation is a mother word, and His Tablet a Mother Tablet. Well is it with them that apprehend this truth" (*Gleanings*, p. 142).

⁶⁷. Anagogical refers to the final end of the soul, "where we end our strife."

⁶⁸. The expression is Dante's quoted by Frye in *The Great Code*, p. 220.

⁶⁹. *The Great Code*, pp. 220-221.

⁷⁰. *The Great Code*, p. 221.

⁷¹. in T.R. Wright, *Theology and Literature*, p. 4.

died? We have to go, of course, to the text, or, as the modern literary critic might have it, to the theorist himself, who has become a kind of substitute author. Literary critical theory has become increasingly detached from the understanding of literature as an aid to comprehension with the result that a highly diverse and subjective mass of material, much of it vacuous, has become an end in itself. Critical theory is now about understanding critical theory, not about understanding literature. It is as if musical theory were to replace musical composition. But if we go back to the text, Derrida tells us that the text has no fixed meaning. There is just the light-hearted play (*jeu*) of endless meanings that takes place in the “space” that has been created by the displacement of the presence of the logos, the “transcendent signified.”

In a Bahá'í perspective, to speak of the death of the author would be a tremendous stretch, unless we imagine that in some sacrificial sense the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have died to their own sacred writings and live through them, as a reflection of a total consecration to the Will of God. But it would be more true to say that the Divine Revelators, far from having died to their writings, live again and again in and through their divine utterances, one of the Prophet's greatest proofs,⁷² each time a seeker takes up the sacred word either for instructional or devotional purposes.

If some postmoderns are really on a quest “in search of authority,”⁷³ as the title of Stephen Bonnycastle's book would indicate, then Bahá'u'lláh's authoritative word, despite the anti-hierarchical bent of postmodernism, bears consideration:

O friend of mine! The Word of God is the king of words and its pervasive influence is incalculable. It hath ever dominated and will continue to dominate the realm of being. The Great Being saith: The Word is the master key for the whole world, inasmuch as through its potency the doors of the hearts of men, which in reality are the doors of heaven, are unlocked. No sooner had but a glimmer of its effulgent splendour shone forth upon the mirror of love than the blessed word 'I am the Best-Beloved' was reflected therein. It is an ocean inexhaustible in riches, comprehending all things. Every thing which can be perceived is but an emanation therefrom. High, immeasurably high is this sublime station, in whose shadow moveth the essence of loftiness and splendour, wrapt in praise and adoration.⁷⁴

A Word not like other words. To return to Joseph Keller's point, if we apply deconstructionist views of language to sacred scripture, we find indeed, not just a deconstructive

⁷².“Say: The first and foremost testimony establishing His truth is His own Self. Next to this testimony is His Revelation. For whoso faileth to recognize either the one or the other He hath established the words He hath revealed as proof of His reality and truth. This is, verily, an evidence of His tender mercy unto men.” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 105). It is noteworthy that in this passage Bahá'u'lláh places His “Self” and His “Revelation” as ranking ahead of “the words He hath revealed...” This implies that the “Revelation” is a broader dimension than the “words”. Perhaps this Revelation is the revelation of the entire cosmos. We have here a reversal of traditional theological understanding since the Word is usually viewed as having engendered (and is engendering) the cosmos.

⁷³.*In Search of Authority. An Introductory Guide to Literary Theory* (Peterborough Ontario:Broadview Press, 1996).

⁷⁴. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 173.

process taking place, but a veritable de-struction of any sense of communion or community, which lies at the heart of religion; whether it be communion with God, with like-minded individuals, or even with oneself. Ultra-solipsistic theories are just as people-alienating as the monolithic systems that they condemn. If logocentric religious systems are monolithic and totalitarian, deconstructionist anti-systems suffer from the defect of anarchy, which for deconstructionists seems to be a cause for celebration since everyone can legitimately stake out his territory. The deconstructionist anti-monument is literally built on air, is "...just an interplay of phonemes, morphemes...",⁷⁵ which is reminiscent of the reference in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prayer to the mere "murmur of syllables and sounds," a murmur that needs to be transcended by "the holy ecstasy of prayer"...in which..."all things may be merged into nothingness before the revelation of Thy splendor."⁷⁶ The deconstructionist anti-monument has become a modern Tower of Babel at whose foot those who seek after meaning and substance pass by one another and distractedly exclaim: "I can't understand you. What do you mean?" This situation creates a climate of oppression either by default and/or negativity. For as Bahá'u'lláh reminds us in the *Kitáb-i-Iqán* as he comments on Christ's *parousia* text beginning "Immediately after the oppression of those days..." in Matthew 24:29-31:

What "oppression" is more grievous than that a soul seeking the truth, and wishing to attain unto the knowledge of God, should know not where to go for it and from whom to seek it? For opinions have sorely differed, and the ways unto the attainment of God have multiplied. This "oppression" is the essential feature of every Revelation. Unless it cometh to pass, the Sun of Truth will not be made manifest. For the break of the morn of divine guidance must needs follow the darkness of the night of error. For this reason, in all chronicles and traditions reference hath been made unto these things, namely that iniquity shall cover the surface of the earth and darkness shall envelop mankind.⁷⁷

Conclusion

By making its referent the human condition, literature and literary criticism can put an existential human face on the analytical, propositional world of theology and the ideal, rigorous, precepts of scripture. Despite the shifting fluidities of deconstruction, theology, while being cognizant of the varieties of meaning inherent to scripture, must continue to be logocentric, to seek and to find objective meanings in words, and to articulate faith-anchored belief systems and ethical norms. Theological language, unlike deconstruction, which sees no absolute truths anywhere and which attempts to desystematize and atomise human thought by a process of

⁷⁵.Robert Detweiler, "No Place to Start: Introducing Deconstruction" in *Religion and Intellectual Life*, vol. 5, no. 2, Winter 1988, p. 15.

⁷⁶. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í Prayers*, U.S. edition, p. 71. The complete lines reads: "Reveal then Thyself, O Lord, by Thy merciful utterance and the mystery of Thy divine being, that the holy ecstasy of prayer may fill our souls - a prayer that shall rise above words and letters and transcend the murmur of syllables and sounds -- that all things may be merged into nothingness before the revelation of Thy splendor."

⁷⁷.*Kitáb-i-Iqán* pp. 31-32.

constant recontextualisation, leaving the reader abandoned on the shifting sands of an ever-ending series of conversational relativities, attempts to systematize its thinking into a unified field or coherent propositional whole of “true” statements. Finally, believers persist in believing that God is present in the word.