Ocean of His Words, by John Hatcher: Review

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Review

Sen McGlinn

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The Ocean of His Words: A reader’s guide to the art of Bahá'u'lláh

Author: John S. Hatcher

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Review by: Sen McGlinn

The aim of this book is "to demonstrate how applying the tools of literary criticism can help readers become more creative and confident in studying the art of Bahá'u'lláh" (xiii). It explains the use of the principal tools of literary criticism in a way accessible to those without a formal education in literature. In this approach, "criticism" does not mean detecting faults and influences in a literary work, or ranking works by quality from classic to pulp, or of classifying them by genres. Literary criticism is art-appreciation as applied to literature. It enables the reader to get more out of a text by systematically applying specific questions. Each question corresponds to a particular branch of literary criticism and is dealt with in one chapter, providing a clear structure for the book as a whole. The book's virtues in explaining literary methods must be set against considerable shortcomings in methodology, the author's lack of knowledge in relevant fields, and the imposition of a strong ideological agenda at some points.

Narrative perspective

Chapter 2 deals with narrative perspective, which is to say, how it can illuminate our reading if we ask, "who is speaking to me?" Bahá'u'lláh says, "At one time We spoke in the language of the lawgiver; at another in that of the truth-seeker and the mystic" (35). Hatcher adds a number of other voices: God speaking in the first person, in the Hidden Words; the Maid of Heaven speaking about the prophets in the 77th Persian Hidden Word; Bahá'u'lláh as a prophet reflecting on his mission in Epistle to the Son of the Wolf; and the

formal third person of theological argumentation in the Book of Certitude. Hatcher has difficulties in dealing with the prayers of Bahá'u'lláh, since in Hatcher's prophetology the Manifestation represents God's will to us, but does not manifest a human response to God. This forces him to read even Bahá'u'lláh's most heartfelt cries as "works … narrated from the perspective of the believer ... the supplicant, not from the perspective of the Manifestation" (53). This is often a plausible reading, but not where Bahá'u'lláh says "Every man of insight who considereth what hath been revealed by me, will be persuaded that Thy Cause is not in my hands, but in Thy hands, and will recognise that the reins of power are held not in my grasp but in Thy grasp ..." (Prayers and Meditations CXXIX, cited page 58). The persona in this case cannot plausibly be God or the follower. It must be the Manifestation of God, as a suppliant, confessing his powerlessness before God. Any other reading is forced.

Historical criticism

Chapter 3 deals with historical criticism, that is, with the question "In what context are these words spoken?" Since the revelation comes to us from a particular historical setting, it is often essential to study the circumstances to arrive at a valid interpretation. The primary context is the Islamic background. More specific information, such as the person to whom a work is addressed, may also be important. The chapter provides some examples, such as the importance of Bábí messianic expectations when reading the Book of Certitude, but does not tell the reader how to find relevant and reliable knowledge about the Islamic background. Given that the book is aimed at a readership without any training in the field, it would have been useful to provide descriptions of the most basic sources such as encyclopaedias, concordances, and introductory works on Islam and the history of the Middle East in that period. The chapter seems lopsided: it begins with a quotation in which Shoghi Effendi urges Bahá'ís to obtain a sound knowledge of the Islamic background (66), but the author has not done so himself. All the examples in the chapter draw on information from the works of Adib Taherzadeh concerning the internal history of the Bahá'í community. Hatcher supposes that the reader will not be able to find background information independently, but will obtain it from Bahá'í scholars (96). I think this is a pity: Shoghi Effendi clearly supposes that any Bahá'í can learn about Islam, and an opportunity has been missed here to encourage and help readers to make this study for themselves.

Genre and style

Despite it's title, chapter four does not in fact deal with style, which would require reference to the original languages. Genre criticism addresses the question "In what literary form is this work written?" and (what Hatcher does not add) "what does this tell us about how to read it?" As he says, there has been little research on Bahá'u'lláh's use of Persian and Arabic literary models, and the author does not himself have the necessary knowledge of Persian and Arabic literature. This chapter is therefore confined to outlining nine

broad categories: mystical treatise, lyrical works, doctrinal essays, gnomic verse, epistolary, allegory, prayers and meditations, homiletics and "documents of the covenant", of which the last is defined by subject rather than form or style. It was odd to find the Hidden Words classified as a collection of lyric poems; that most of the works classified as "gnomic verse" are neither gnomic nor verse; and that actual letters are not distinguished from the epistolary genre proper, in which a narrative framework is constructed from fictional letters.

Any use of literary critical methods without specific knowledge of previous literatures will inevitably lead to some false starts, since literary criticism consists largely of finding correlations, and then of selecting those that are relevant. Without a store of factual information to draw on, the methods may amount to no more than building castles in the air. There are large areas of Bahá'í scholarship in which Persian and Arabic scholarship are not a prerequisite, but literary criticism cannot be performed from translations, however accurate. Any word in the original may contain an allusion to a text or a concept that will be missed in translation. This problem runs throughout the book, but one example from this chapter will be sufficient by way of illustration.

As noted, Hatcher identifies nine broad categories of genre in relation to a passage in Haddad's translation of the Surat 'ul Hykl which says "We have caused the signs [áyát, verses] to descend [be revealed] after nine conditions [`alá tis`a shu'ún, in nine grades]." The Arabic phrase transliterated here reveals something concealed in the English "nine conditions". The word shu'ún points to the Báb's Kitáb-i Panj Shu'ún (Book of Five Grades),[1] a work which identifies five types of writing in the Báb's corpus. One of the arguments Bahá'u'lláh is making here is in refutation of the Bábí criticism, mentioned a few lines earlier in the Surat 'ul Hykl, that his writing is deliberately literary rather than flowing without premeditation as the revelation "is sent down."[2] With one word (shu'ún) he reminds the reader that the Báb, in writing the Kitáb-i Panj Shu'ún, set out to compose one passage in each of the five "grades" each day: that is, he points out that revelation is not incompatible with planned literary artistry. Moreover, the Báb's five "grades" in the Kitáb-i Panj Shu'ún do not in fact correspond to what we would call styles or genres in English literature. The fifth is simply Farsi works, and the others might be better called "modes of transforming semantic roots". So it is a considerable assumption to suppose that "genre" as a concept of literary criticism corresponds to what Bahá'u'lláh had in mind when he spoke of "nine grades".

Figurative language

The first section of chapter five explains how figurative language works. Later sections deal with metaphors, symbols, allusion and allegories, defining the terms, describing how they work, and illustrating their use. The chapter is a long one and the many illustrations it contains are one of the strong points of the book. Those based on New Testament texts show a good understanding of the

literary criticism of the Bible.

It is unfortunate that the first example Hatcher chooses (181) to illustrate his approach to interpreting figurative language is the 72nd Persian Hidden Word, in Shoghi Effendi's 1929 translation. This contains the ambiguous phrase "Thou art even as a finely tempered sword .... its value hidden from the artificer's knowledge." Hatcher supposes that "the artificer" is God, who made the "sword", which would mean that the Creator does not know his own creation. Reference to Shoghi Effendi's clearer if less poetic 1925 translation ("is unknown to the expert eye") or to the Persian text (literally, "remains concealed from jewellers"), would have shown that "the artificer" here is not the maker of the sword, but buyers or valuers in general: it is a metaphor for the people of the world.

The section on tree imagery could have been much richer if Hatcher had known that the Sadratu'l-Muntahá is the same as the Sidrat al-Muntahá of Surah 53:14, a tree standing beside God's throne at the highest point of paradise, representing the closest point to the Divine Presence that either humans or angels can hope to attain, and described in imaginative detail in the hadíth[3] and in Sufi literature. It is said to be a symbol of faith and virtue, its fruit representing the mystical experience. From its foot flow four rivers, which some say represent the Pentateuch, the Psalms, the Gospel and the Qur'án. The entire community of the faithful can gather under the shade of a single leaf. It is hardly surprising that this is a repeated image in Bahá'u'lláh's writings. The same tree, in another guise, stands in the midst of the garden in Canto XXXII of Dante's

Purgatorio.

Subject and structure

Chapter 6 deals with the patterns of ideas that tie together the various parts of a single work, using the examples of the Lawh-i Hikmat and the Book of Certitude. The Lawh-i Hikmat, and the Tablet of Ahmad in the following chapter, are referred to using paragraph numbers rather than page numbers, a welcome innovation that should be carried out systematically throughout publications of the Bahá'í writings in translation and in the original languages, so that we no longer need to refer to the same edition of a work in order to locate a reference.

Structural analysis of the argument of a single work is one aspect of literary criticism that can in principle be carried out from translations. However the Lawh-i Hikmat contains many terse allusions to issues in Islamic philosophy, the contest between the philosophers and the theologians of the early classical period, and the difficult reappraisals forced on the 19th century Islamic world by Western political and technological superiority. For this tablet, considerable background knowledge is required simply to discern the structure of the argument. Hatcher has not even picked up a point that apparently lies on the surface of the translation: that the Word of God is above and behind, and therefore not identical to, the words of a particular revelation (para 10,

pages 140-141 in Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh). He could have used this distinction to answer his own unresolved question in chapter 1: "If the Manifestations are perfect mirrors of Divine attributes and if Their speech is naught but the Word of God, in what sense is Their revealed utterance Their own art? And if this is not Their art but the words of God, then are we correct in studying Their words with the same tools we might use with the work of a human artist?" (9).

It would have been useful to say that each reader should do his or her own structural criticism, and not rely on a structure provided by someone else, since this method can both obscure and clarify the meanings in the text. In Hatcher's summary of contents of the Lawh-i Hikmat, the content summarised under points III.A, VI.A and VII.A (238, 241 and 242) is not even present in the original, and the "tablet" Bahá'u'lláh refers to in paragraph 35 is incorrectly identified (242) as the Lawh-i Hikmat rather than that heavenly "Tablet" which is the source of revelation as a whole. Hatcher's readings of paragraphs 34 and 35 are against the grain of the text, imposing a theory of literal verbal revelation which Bahá'u'lláh, in this tablet, denies.

Something similar happens in the heading to section IV (239). Bahá'u'lláh says "Make thou mention of this Day and magnify that which hath appeared therein. It will in truth suffice all mankind". Hatcher reads this as "the knowledge of this Revelation will in truth suffice all mankind."[4] That is, "what has ... appeared in this Day" is being equated with "this Revelation." There is a parallel interpretation further on, where Bahá'u'lláh warns his "loved ones" not to "despise the merits of My learned servants whom God hath graciously chosen to be the exponents of His Name 'the Fashioner' ... Exert your utmost endeavour that ye may develop such crafts and undertakings ..." (para 41). This is addressed to Muslim leaders who rejected the technologies of the west because they were produced by a materialistic, non-Islamic science. Hatcher summarises this sentence as "Don't judge the 'learned' of Bahá by common standards" (242). But is Bahá'u'lláh talking about his own revelation here? Let us return to "what has ... appeared in this Day" and consider its place in the development of Bahá'u'lláh's argument. This is what structural criticism is about.

We can see that the previous paragraph (para 14) begins "Nature in its essence is the embodiment of My Name, the Maker, the Creator." and continues "Nature is God's Will and is its expression [zuhúr, manifestation]." If Nature is God's Will, the natural sciences and the empirical scientific method of the west are a path to knowledge. Then those who manifest the name of God "The Fashioner" are the scientists, technologists, industrialists and designers of the modern world, who should be honoured. What "has appeared in this day," by way of scientific knowledge and its application, is indeed wonderful. Bahá'u'lláh is saying that there is one "Word" or Primal Will which is the cause of existence, manifest both in nature (in the aspect "The Fashioner") and in another aspect through revealed religion, and that the faithful should therefore respect the servants of science. But in Hatcher's interpretation this becomes a claim that Revelation is sufficient, that science is in any case dependent on the

inspiration of the prophets (119); that there is a religious class, the "learned" of Bahá' who are exempted from judgement by "common standards"; and that "secular humanist scholars" produce unreliable "esoteric knowledge" (sic, 245).

These are readings that have lost all contact with the original text. The political agenda is clear, and should be put in the context of the continuing strength of the politics of conservative religion in the United States. Hatcher is writing in and for a society and a Bahá'í community that is, in this respect, quite different from those of Europe. There is a legitimate need to present the Bahá'í teachings in a form that will speak to one's own society, and it is treacherously easy to slide from this to imposing interpretations that will align the Bahá'í Faith with particular social and political agendas, as has happened here.

The second part of chapter 6 deals with the structure of the Book of Certitude. Hatcher begins by saying that the Book of Certitude is structured around the theme set out in the first two pages of the work: "if we wish to acquire certitude that a Prophet is Who He says He is (i.e., God's Viceregent), we must become detached ..." (247). But the opening pages of the Book of Certitude do not contain any claim that the prophets are God's Viceregents, and reading the book as a whole will show not only that the term is not used there, but that the Book of Certitude is explicitly directed at showing that the sovereignty of the prophets does not imply that they must act as God's governors in this world. "Were sovereignty to mean earthly sovereignty and worldly dominion, ... such [a] form of sovereignty would not be true of God Himself, the Source of all dominion" (125).[5] Despite this inauspicious beginning, the 80-page detailed structural analysis is generally accurate, with some exceptions and a notable omission that will be mentioned separately.

Putting it together

Chapter 7 shows how to combine the methods of literary criticism to achieve a "close reading", using the Arabic Tablet of Ahmad as an example. Hatcher's reading is an equal mixture of the devotional and scholarly, after the manner of Adib Taherzadeh or what were quaintly called "improvements" on Biblical texts in the 18th century. For example, one might doubt whether the coincidence of names in the two Tablets of Ahmad (Arabic and Persian) is really so significant, but the improving moral that Hatcher deduces from this coincidence is admirable.

Hatcher's reading of "the reward of a hundred martyrs" as "the assistance of a hundred martyrs" cannot be sustained either by the translation or the original. The context one needs to interpret this promise is the distinction between an earned reward (ajr) and God's power and freedom (qadr) to bestow grace, and the emphasis put on the latter in Islamic theology as a result of the Qadarite controversies. But this is a detail. The chapter is a good example of scholarship in service of the devotional life. At worst, more is being read from the tablet than is there, which is quite different to reading prior

theological positions or political programmes into a text.

The six chapters (2-7) discussed above explain what literary criticism is and how it can be useful. Their virtue is in demystifying the critical method as such, rather than conveying new information about Bahá'u'lláh's writings. Although the result is something of a curate's egg, Hatcher clearly does have considerable skill in explaining how literature works and how literary criticism is done in practice. One can only regret that he did not work with someone with an equally deep knowledge of the Bahá'í writings and the Islamic background. Collaboration could have produced a much more useful book. Even as it stands, the sections of chapter 5 dealing with the New Testament, and chapter 7, can be recommended.

Methodology

I will now turn to chapter 1, left until last so that what must be quite fundamental criticisms should not obscure the book's other virtues. This chapter begins with a less technical rewriting of Hatcher's earlier paper on "The validity and value of an historical-critical approach to the revealed works of Bahá'u'lláh",[6] the title of which is self-explanatory. Part of the chapter proposes a methodology for the reading part of Bahá'í scholarship which is quite misguided, and which has a negative effect on readings throughout the book.

Hatcher himself seems to be struggling with his methodology. On the one hand, he asks "If the Manifestations are perfect mirrors of Divine attributes and if Their speech is naught but the Word of God, in what sense is Their revealed utterance Their own art? And if this is not Their art but the words of God, then are we correct in studying Their words with the same tools we might use with the work of a human artist?" (9). He argues that literary tools can be used, on the basis that the revelation is designed to speak to people within a particular historical, religious and linguistic context, and because much of literary criticism aims at analysing the reader's response to a work without necessarily involving suppositions about its origin. On the other hand, he wishes to consider revelation as a special case for literary criticism. As he says, "If we establish to our satisfaction that Bahá'u'lláh is a Prophet, then there is a distinct difference in the attitude we assume as we approach His art" (13).

The argument here is difficult to summarise with justice since it is partly expressed in what may be rhetorical questions, and is far from clear: it appears that Hatcher himself has not found a satisfactory way of expressing a position that involves accepting scientific methods while rejecting their underlying logic. He states that the prophets are entirely different to "human" artists, they "are preexistent, are perfect incarnations of all the attributes of God, and Their utterance is a precise expression of the Divine Will" (7). He concludes that this means, in their case, that there is no risk of over-reading the text, "... if His art is perfect, can we not rest assured that any effort we invest, however rigorous and imaginative, will never exhaust the potential

meanings of the Prophet's craft?" (11-12). But, he says, we can make the same assumption about the masters of literature. "We have no qualms about trying to discover all manner of hidden meanings and elaborate structural patterns in a Shakespearean tragedy without ever worrying that ... we may be imposing something on the work that the artist did not intend and that the art does not uphold" (12).

This is odd in two respects. First, he is arguing that the Prophets are not human, are not just inspired men, and that they are like the literary masters. Second, the statement is not correct: it is quite possible to read meanings into Shakespeare's works or those of Bahá'u'lláh that were not intended: Hatcher himself does so. This is a question of the fairness of the reader, not the stature of the author. He argues that we should assume Bahá'u'lláh's writings have the status of a masterwork and approach them "with this kind of reverence," which is evidently the reverence of belief rather than of literary respect, since he continues "we can make this presumption only if we have proven to our satisfaction that Bahá'u'lláh's claim to Prophethood is correct." But why is the assumption even necessary, if it is not necessary before attempting a literary appreciation of Shakespeare? And what is achieved by it? He says (13) that "Over the course of time, Bahá'u'lláh's work will assume its proper place" (i.e., among literary masterpieces), so it might appear that this a question of giving them the high literary status now that we think they will have in centuries to come. But he concludes from this that "the standards by which we judge this art must often transcend criteria that are precisely quantifiable or empirically demonstrable according to the standards of contemporary scholarship," (13) so clearly he is not talking about literary status, or applying the standards of literary criticism according to their own logic.

My sense is that this approach has been adopted as a deliberate experiment, as an attempt to clarify through practice the implications of an approach whose imprecision and internal contradictions are felt by the author as much as the reader. Given the author's background, we can assume he understands "the standards of contemporary scholarship" and their rationale: how a critic or a reader brackets out a priori beliefs and any expectations about what a particular text will have to say, in order to read what is really being said. Or, as Bahá'u'lláh says, in a passage Hatcher cites, "he must so cleanse his heart that no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error, or that hate repel him away from the truth." If it is experimental, the book can be read as a record of successes and failures in an attempt to define the much-discussed "new paradigm" of Bahá'í scholarship.

Subjectivism

Experimental or not, the overall results are clearly negative. Hatcher's method appeals to the inevitability of subjectivism to justify reading the text through an ideological framework consciously imposed on it by the reader. As he says himself, the approach could only be used or understood by a Bahá'í.

Moreover, although he does not add this, it speaks only to a Bahá'í who both agrees with the approach in theory and shares Hatcher's theological position. Literature's capacity to speak across boundaries and share viewpoints and experiences between peoples of differing life worlds has been abandoned, and what is left can only be the murmuring of the like-minded among themselves.

The issues here have a significance that extends beyond the evaluation of this book, justifying a brief digression to mention three considerations which are often overlooked in discussion of the methodology of Bahá'í studies when performed by Bahá'ís. The first is that "bracketing out" one's theological a priori positions does not mean writing as if one has adopted the opposite viewpoint. It is not necessary to adopt hate to avoid being "blindly led into error by love." It is not a choice between reading "as if the Manifestation is an ordinary human being" or with the assumption that "the utterance of the Manifestation is perfect art precisely because He is inherently perfect" (23, 13-14). Rather we have to set aside what we think we have discovered as believers in order to listen carefully as readers.

The second is that this "setting aside" or bracketing out does not mean accepting the ideal of objectivism and all the philosophical baggage of modernism, abstracting somehow from our own existence as the reading subject. Objectivity, in the sense of a "fair" or "tactful" reading of the text, is the goal, but impersonality is not. Rather, we bring our literary subjectivities to the fore and press our believing selves into the background, because this is what the activity of reading for understanding demands. When we pray or read for devotional purposes the roles are reversed. It is a choice between our own multiple subjectivities, not between the subjective and an impossible objectivity. No absolute priority need be claimed for rationality over other aspects of the self. In fact reading is a literary act, and good reading is creative as well as analytic. But it is necessary to say that reading demands both the maximum use of our analytic and creative modes of being and the suspension of belief and disbelief.

Thirdly, if I decide to read Bahá'u'lláh's writings within the framework of belief that the author is a Manifestation of God, I also confine those writings within the limits of what I already understand "Manifestation of God" to mean. The way to avoid weighing "the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you" is not to put Bahá'u'lláh's writings in a special category exempt from "the standards of contemporary scholarship" (13), but to set aside whatever we think "a book of God" ought to be or say. We empty the category "revelation" of assumed meaning in order to let it be filled again from the particular passage we are reading. Or not to be filled, as the case may be (if we are honestly open in reading, there can be no guarantees about the results). This approach is functionally identical to the approach used in what is sometimes sneeringly referred to as "secular" scholarship, and it is the only appropriate method for the "reading" component of Bahá'í scholarship.

Having performed the reading, we may find that the text is open to two or more

mutually exclusive readings, and may explicitly choose that which corresponds to the needs of the community as we conceive them and the world we would like to see in the future, that is, to our political agenda in the broadest sense. This is known as istihsán or istisláh in the formal rules of Islamic exegesis. It is sometimes necessary, where the primary texts, with the best knowledge and rigour available to us, do not make one reading more probable. We may also wish to go "behind" the texts, to elaborate a theological rationale that seems to underlie what we read in the text itself. This may involve correlating it with other passages from the scripture, selecting those that suit our purposes, and building a theological system around the bare text. Again, this is legitimate, but in both cases the political agenda or doctrinal constructs should be explicit and distinct from the reading, not imposed on the reading itself.[7]

Another fundamental problem throughout the book, which may well flow from Hatcher's methodological approach, is the very limited use of sources. Apart from citations from the Bible and Qur'án, and from Holam and Harmon's Handbook of Literature, all of the sources used are written by Bahá'ís. None are written by those Bahá'í scholars employing literary and historical criticism who have adopted the method of "bracketing out" or "freeing oneself from love and hate" described above. That is, Hatcher is not only speaking to a like-minded audience, his selection of sources is so narrow that it resembles sectarianism. A scholarship worthy of being called "Bahá'í Studies" has to be prepared to seek knowledge "even from China". Sources by non-Bahá'ís are indispensable in reconstructing the relevant historical contexts, textual allusions and genre conventions, and especially to understand the questions in Islamic theology and philosophy that Bahá'u'lláh answers. It would be ludicrous to try to construct Bahá'í scholarship as a closed shop. And surely, if the purpose of the book is to introduce Bahá'í readers unfamiliar with literature to the methods of literary criticism, it would have been useful to say that many scholars, from Browne onwards, have already been applying them to Bahá'u'lláh's writings. Chapter 6 manages to deal with the Lawh-i Hikmat without mentioning Juan Cole's "Problems of Chronology," in World Order 13:3 (1979), and deals with the Book of Certitude without reference to Christopher Buck's Symbol and Secret, the most extended application of genre criticism and other critical techniques to the art of Bahá'u'lláh published in English to date.[8]

Docetism

The decision to read within an ideological position – in this case a theological position - is clearly wrong in principle. The theological position adopted here is itself a problem. All theologies are necessarily partial, but Hatcher takes one aspect of Bahá'í prophetology and represents it as necessarily the whole (and as applying equally to Islam and Christianity). The aspect Hatcher emphasises can fairly be called docetism, the belief that the humanity and limitations of the prophet are only apparent, assumed for didactic purposes or for reasons beyond our ken.[9]

Hatcher's docetism is explicit in a passage on page 35, where he says that "the Prophet ... is a master of dramaturgy because he conceals His true identity in the guise of an ordinary human being. For example, he veils all the attributes, power and unspeakable glory of God in the persona of a lowly carpenter's son." On page 52 he says the Manifestation "appears in the guise of a human being ... he appears powerless ... [but] is fully capable at any point of extricating Himself ..." But in the Book of Certitude (73, 74), Bahá'u'lláh interprets "clouds" by referring to the fact that the prophets "have been subject to poverty and afflictions, to hunger, and to the ills and chances of this world." They are "subject to such needs and wants", "had to suffer whatsoever [their enemies] decreed" and "with respect to every human limitation" were the same as the people around them. When Hatcher summarises these pages in chapter six he tidies up the points contradicting his own theological position, by adding "seems" and "illusion of" at appropriate points (266). The humanity of the prophets is said to be an "image". On page 16 he says that "the experience in the Síyáh-Chál is presented as if it were something quite new and, so some extent, overwhelming ..." (emphasis added).

Again in the Book of Certitude, pages 184-5, Bahá'u'lláh says that he once "felt it necessary to refer to [Hájí Mírzá Karím Khán's] books, in order that We might answer Our questioners with knowledge and understanding. His works, in the Arabic tongue, were, however, not available, until one day a certain man informed Us that one of his compositions ... could be found in this city." This is inconvenient for a docetic theology, since Bahá'u'lláh's says that his knowledge and understanding was conditional upon the resources available to him, and that he did not have miraculous access to all published works. Moreover, Hatcher has already (241) given a literal reading of paragraph 34 in the "Tablet of Wisdom,"[10] even adding a miraculous element not in the original ("We [the Prophets] receive Our knowledge direct from God, not from Our own devising."). In his otherwise detailed structural analysis of this part of the Book of Certitude (300), Hatcher has simply omitted the offending passage. This is evidence enough I think that what Bahá'u'lláh has to say is being accepted only in so far as it can be brought into accordance with Hatcher's own agenda.

One implication of an emphasis on docetism is that there is no room for development in the Manifestation's ideas and art, or for chronology in literary criticism. So we have a book devoted to the literary appreciation of Bahá'u'lláh's works as a whole, without any mention of development over time, in terms of style, ideas, the types of works written and the audience addressed in the various periods. The Manifestations are supposed to be pre-existent as individuals and fully self-aware, presumably from birth. Hatcher cites Bahá'u'lláh's description of his experience in the Síyáh-Chál ("I was but a man like others ...") and refers to other similar statements cited by Shoghi Effendi that "imply that an essential change had ... taken place in the Prophet." He refers to, but does not cite, Shoghi Effendi's own characterisation of this experience as "The first intimation which its Bearer received" of his calling (God Passes By, 101), but concludes that Bahá'u'lláh

merely "received the summons to openly proclaim what he Himself had known all along..." (18).

A docetic approach is not illegitimate in itself, as one of several ways of thinking about the relationship of the Manifestation to God that are found in the Bahá'í scriptures and the Qur'án, ranging from "I am but a man like you." to "I am God," (Gleanings, 54). Corresponding to this, the Manifestation has a variety of roles, manifesting the will of God to us, and also manifesting for our benefit a perfect human response to God. Hatcher takes a slice out of this whole, starting with a very "high" theology of the Manifestation. Every reader will emphasise one or other of the many tongues in which the Bahá'í writings speak of the essential mysteries (the nature of God, of the Manifestation and of the human soul, life after death and the existence of evil). A reader without a wide knowledge of the Bahá'í scriptures may be unaware of the plurality of voices they contain. This is no difficulty, providing the reader ignores Hatcher's advice and is prepared to bracket out whatever conceptions he or she has already attached to the notion of "prophethood". Failure to do so creates a hermeneutic short-circuit: nothing may be learned from the text which does not conform to one's – inevitably partial – starting-point.

We can see how this works in the section on the dramaturgy of the Manifestation just mentioned (35). Having set out a docetic view, Hatcher goes on to quote a passage from God Passes By (1974 edn.) page 244, in which Shoghi Effendi says that the soul of the Manifestation, during his earthly life, was subject to "restrictions" and "circumscribed by ... physical limitations, its radiance ... beclouded by its human temple". Hatcher has simply not noticed that the quotation he uses does not support what he has just said. The theology Shoghi Effendi is using here is "kenotic", from the Greek kenós, "empty" or "without". A kenotic theology says that limitations such as suffering, mortality, powerlessness and ignorance to which a Manifestation is subject are real, and not merely a dramatic role adopted to preserve a secret or shield our eyes from too much glory. But kenotic theology accommodates a high prophetology by saying that these limitations, although real during the prophet's earthly life, were freely chosen by him in pre-existence when he "empties" himself of that aspect of the attributes which is proper to the Godhead.

Although this is clear in Shoghi Effendi's text, Hatcher has missed a meaning which would in fact have been useful to him. In the framework of a docetic theology he supposes that the art of the Manifestation is perfect (14) and not subject to "limitations imposed ... by His cultural perspective, by His intellectual background, by His academic training, or by His exposure to other writers" (11, 12), and then spends some time explaining why literary criticism may nevertheless be applicable. If we follow Shoghi Effendi at this point, and say that the soul of the Manifestation is indeed (temporarily) subject to "restriction ... imposed upon it", there is no need even to suggest such casuistic arguments. More to the point, if we can approach the text without supposing that we can already define the parameters within which it will speak,

there is some possibility of learning something new from it. It is not that Hatcher personally is a bad reader, but that the methodology he has adopted makes bad readings inevitable.

Literary appreciation

The use of a priori readings not only makes it impossible to learn new truths from the text that might force the reader to modify previous ideas, it also interferes with a sensitive literary reading. In chapter 2 again (39-40, repeated at page 216), Hatcher cites the 19th Persian Hidden Word:

Have you forgotten that true and radiant morn, when ... ye were all gathered in My presence beneath the shade of the tree of life, which is planted in the all-glorious paradise?

'Abdu'l-Bahá, according to Hatcher, says that the human soul begins at conception. As far as I know, 'Abdu'l-Bahá does not say this: the reference Hatcher is seeking is probably from a letter written by Shoghi Effendi's secretary to an individual believer, printed in High Endeavours.[11] What 'Abdu'l-Bahá says is that "the human soul has existed on the earth for prolonged times and ages" (Some Answered Questions 151). However the question of sources is incidental: for whatever reason, Hatcher works within a framework in which the soul cannot, a priori, remember "that true and radiant morn", because the concept of pre-existence is "contrary to explicit Bahá'í teachings" (216). Therefore he reads the Hidden Word as "reminding the human race as a collective organism of the guidance that has been given in the past through other Manifestations" (40). The negative effects of imposing a doctrinal position are evident here: the magic and mystery of a primordial dreamtime have been flattened to fit into historical time. The Hidden Word whispers in our ears, asking us to seek within ourselves and, in discovering our own transcendence, to realise that we were created from the beginning to respond to the Word of God. Hatcher reads it as conveying a universal and objectively verifiable truth to the race collectively – even though he has elsewhere said that the first person voice of the Hidden Words is used "to evoke a sense of intimacy and familiarity between the speaker and the reader" (37). Instead of invoking our own transcendent capacity, Hatcher reads the verse as asking us to study the history of religion: mysticism is reduced to prophetology, and the literary beauties are no more than potentially misleading statements that have to be explained away. The reading is distorted to the point of doing violence to the text.

If the text is allowed to say what it says, without being explained away, and is then placed alongside the references from 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the letter published in High Endeavors that were just mentioned, it would be evident that the first speaks of individual pre-existence in a "time" before time (the "conference of Alast" described in the Qur'án, 7:172),[12] the second of the human species as coming into existence in time (evolution) and the third of individual pre-existence in this world (reincarnation). A sensitive contextual reading can reveal new insights, but only if the differences between the

different texts are allowed to stand.

In summary, the book succeeds in showing that the tools of literary criticism can indeed be helpful, explains what they are in an accessible way, and demonstrates by its failure that the best literary training is of little help, unless one is also prepared to approach the text without presuppositions and to listen tactfully to what it is saying.

End Notes

See John Walbridge, "The Bab's Panj Sha'n (Five Modes)," Research Notes in Shaykhi, Bábí and Bahá'í Studies 2.3 (April 1998). There may also be a reference to his Kitáb-i Chahár Shu'ún (Book of Four Grades, an alternative title for the Kitáb al-asmá'), that is, to Bahá'u'lláh's writings as the sum of these two works of the Báb.
The objection is stated specifically in the Súrat ul-Haykal: "Má nazzalat álá al-fitra". Fitra or fitrat has a range of meanings in different kinds of Islamic literature and there does not appear to be any adequate treatment of fitra in the literature in European languages, so the reading here, as referring to spontaneity in revelation, is necessarily a personal interpretation from the context. It is clear that in relation to personal hygiene and adornment fitra refers to the natural appearance of the body as created in the image of God, and the extent to which it is permissible to alter this appearance; in the literature relating to the legal position of minors it refers to a sort of primal religion which children are considered to belong to at birth; and in rationalist Islamic apologetics it is the natural religion accessible by untainted reason.

Bukhari, Sahíh, 1.345, 5.227, 7.514, 9.608.
Hatcher's interpretive interpolations are in italics.
References are to page numbers in the 1983 American edition of the Íqán. Readers using the 1946 British edition should multiply by about .64. In this case, the corresponding passage is on page 80. A uniform paragraph numbering system for the Íqán would be a considerable help.
In Moojan Momen (ed.), Scripture and Revelation (Oxford: George Ronald, 1997).
Examples of these two methods can be found in S. McGlinn, "Some considerations relating to the inheritance laws of the Aqdas," Bahá'í Studies Review 5.1 (1995): 37-50, and idem, "A theology of the state from the Bahá'í writings," Journal of Church and State 41 (1999): 714-729.

It will be noted that Hatcher explicitly took issue with Buck's methodology in his review of Symbol and Secret in the MESA Bulletin 30 (1996): 70-1.
My use of the term is not meant to imply that the position is heretical in the Bahá'í context, although the corresponding position in Christian theology is usually labelled as a heresy. Individual doctrines are parts of belief systems, and their truth is to be determined in relation to the system. Susan Maneck also criticises Hatcher's docetism in her review of The Law of Love Enshrined in Bahá'í Studies Review 7 (1997): 114-16.
Page 149 in Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, beginning "Thou knowest full well that We

perused not the books which men possess."

(Anchorage: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976) 71.
"When thy Lord drew forth from the children of Adam – from their loins – their descendants, and made them testify concerning themselves, (saying):'"Am I not your Lord?' 'Yes!' they testified."

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