

Beyond Methodology: Forms of Bias in Western Literary Criticism

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THE FOLLOWING remarks attempt to substantiate the thesis that the methods of literary criticism in the West are in essence biased in favor of the cultural context that engendered them. In other words, as literary theories, or approaches to the study of literature, such methods carry cultural implications that are in keeping with their Western cultural milieu. Consequently, if the non-Western critic, such as the one whose culture is essentially Arabo-Islamic, is to apply any of these methods to the literature produced by his/she Arabo-Islamic culture, he/she is faced with two choices:

1. To apply such methods as they are, thus adopting involuntarily the implications and ideologies that formed them. Such an application will inevitably lead to misunderstanding of the literary material which is to be critically analyzed.
2. To cause radical change to such a method whereby the resultant applied method departs dramatically from the original one.

The claim that methodology can be stripped of its context with little or no change is rendered groundless by a historical analysis of the cultural and philosophical background of such a methodology. The context for this argument is to be found in the situation prevailing in many non-Western cultures, including the Arab world, where Western literary criticism, among other Western cultural forces, has been exerting an impact which is at once attractive and hegemonic. Ready-made and easy to adopt,

Western literary theories and methods offer themselves in easy-to-swallow, large chunks that are rarely subjected to the scrutiny or revision displayed by Western literary critics themselves. Under the banner of universal unity, many contemporary Arab critics argue that what is used (and applied) in the West is good for all places. Their polemics are better understood in view of what an opposing party of conservatives has been arguing. These conservatives are against almost all types of cultural interaction with the West. Yet if the argument of these conservatives is difficult to justify, neither is the opposing stand of opening up indiscriminately to Western methods.

It should be noted that this argument is not completely new to the ancient or modern Arabic critical consciousness. In fact, it is one of the fundamental tenets of the longstanding Arabo-Islamic dialog with Western civilization. In the 7th Century, Ḥāzīm al-Qarṭājannī stated that the critical premises in Aristotle's *Poetics* were not fit subjects for Arabic literature, as the Greek philosopher "only cared for poetry in so far as Greeks cared for it."¹ In the modern age, the Egyptian critic Mohammad Mandour has voiced a similar viewpoint by emphasizing that when we "study Arabic literature, we must be diligent to avoid applying to it the points of view of Europeans, who formulated them with other literatures in mind."²

The problem with these recurrent opinions is that they are scarcely substantiated, which is a good reason to reconsider the whole question and to check its justifications as a significant cultural issue that affects the humanities generally and not merely literary criticism. Some contemporary Western critical methods such as structuralism have cast their shadow on more than one of the human sciences. The general complexity inherent in such methods also makes it difficult to pass absolute and hurried judgments about them. Yet it is not only the simplicity with which this topic has been dealt with that makes reconsideration so urgent. As I have already indicated, there are those critics and scholars who do not even believe that some methods are biased; rather, they believe that methods, which are in this case Western, are neutral tools which can be used unproblematically to study any literature, whether it is Arabic, French or Chinese. Abdallah Laroui, the well-known Moroccan historian and novelist, locates this problem while differentiating between methodology and epistemology: some critics, says Laroui, jump from one to the

other: "... what really happens is that a given program may yield satisfactory results in studying a certain subject, after which its author looks into its logical bases, thus jumping from the first to the second level." He exemplifies this by adding that "historicism or structuralism can be at once rejected as a philosophy and manipulated as a method of analysis within certain limits."³

This differentiation between methodology and its philosophical content is adopted by one of the most active contemporary Arab critics in his use of the structuralist method. In his book *al-Khafā' wa al-Tajallī* [Covertness and Overtness], Syrian critic Kamal Abu Deeb goes so far as to abrogate any philosophical content in structuralism by maintaining that "structuralism is not a philosophy but a vantage point and a method of exploring the universe."⁴ Therefore, his argument goes, structuralism remains a neutral critical method that can safely be adopted and applied.

An important point here is that Abu Deeb believes that the application of structuralism enables Arabic critical thinking to arrive at a stage where it can "enrich world thinking" and through which the entire Arab nation can be "uplifted to the ... level of cultural contemporaneity." This is in view of the fact that "enrichment is not to be achieved by translation and representation, but by participation in the process of exploration, in exerting strenuous efforts, and in personal initiative on the level of thinking and analysis." Abu Deeb's outlook is predicated on a comprehensive humanist tendency that looks forward to the unity of human thought through overcoming the barriers of difference in cultural contexts. This is a sufficiently familiar viewpoint in the history of Arabic thought and literary criticism, a view that has almost as strong historical and ideological roots as the contrary viewpoint. Those who called for making use of Greek thought, such as Mattī ibn Yūnis, al-Fārābī, and Ibn Rushd [Averroes] adopted such a view in the past. Later on it came again to be emphasized by modern scholars, whether the pioneers of the contemporary Arabic revival in the nineteenth century, or those who followed them like Taha Hussain, Elias Abu Shabaka, Muhammad Ghonaimi Hilal, and, to some extent, Mohammad Mandour.

The Egyptian Muhammad Ghonaimi Hilal presents an overview of Western critical approaches in his *Dirāsāt fī Madhāhib al-Shī'r wa Naq-dibi* [Studies in the Schools of Thought and Criticism of Poetry]: "[These approaches] have become universal artistic currents, a common resource

fulfilling the needs of the talented from all nations, and a common heritage for all mankind which can quite safely be consulted ... Our being affected by these currents is not a novelty in the history of world art and criticism, for world cooperation in the history of literature and art is just like world cooperation in the history of science. Both are a way of achieving integration and revival of the national heritage so that it can keep pace with world progress.”⁵

Evidently, the concepts dominating the foregoing statement – “world thinking,” “cultural contemporaneity,” “world cooperation,” and “keeping pace with world progress” – derive their referential power from a Western context first and foremost. The “world” in this context is the West rather than the East: America, England, France, etc., rather than China, Japan, India, etc. Universality itself connotes evolution according to the cultural standards charted by the West. It is no wonder then that Western methods of criticism have allegedly become universal and have gained a measure of impartiality that exceeds the boundaries of location. All other alternatives – and one has to admit that there may not be many of these – are, consequently, not taken into consideration, and the non-Western cultural heritage shrinks accordingly. The critical discourse employed in these statements reveals bias in favor of the West, not only through adoption of its methods and abrogation of other ones, but through identification with a Western critical discourse which speaks for itself and for the whole world from a purely pro-Western perspective. It conceives of the world in much the same way that critics like Matthew Arnold in the 19th Century and T. S. Eliot in the twentieth have done, both having been affected by the notion of European supremacy and Western cultural centrality in general.⁶

The decisiveness and simplicity with which Western critical methods are sometimes dismissed by ultra-conservatives, at other times characterize the acceptance of the same methods. If it goes without saying that rejection cannot weaken the presence of these methods in cultural contexts other than their original ones, it can similarly be decided that acceptance of such methods will not endow them with the impartiality which might enable them to be harmonious within frameworks different from the ones where they developed. We are faced here with two attitudes that can be regarded as all too easy solutions to a highly complicated and important question. Nor is it enough to call for selectivity and syncretism,

for adopting what is “appropriate” and rejecting what is not. For this attitude frequently develops into a ready-made excuse for surmounting all complications so as to arrive at a group of ideas that have no logical justification other than the mood of their author. In most of these cases – whereby the critic manages to select certain methodological elements which he/she considers valid – the character of the selected elements will have changed to the extent that a question mark rightly hangs over whether anything remains of the essence of that method which would justify calling it by the same label. A cogent example in this respect is talking about an “Arabic” structuralism or Marxism and the like, and the concomitant question of what is left of structuralism or Marxism after “Arabization” whereby they can still be termed as such. This does not preclude, however, the relative success of sporadic attempts to adapt Western methods.

Nevertheless, there remains an inevitable and nagging question as to the degree of distortion afflicting literary works and even the cultural structure as a whole no matter how much success is achieved. The following pages attempt to reply to this question in light of the initial thesis that the Egyptian Salah Fadhl aptly recapitulates as follows:

[When we] began to be acquainted with these [critical] methods, when some of us were affected by them, such methods lost their two most important characteristics: their being directly rooted in their cultural reality, responding to its internal development and the details of its history, as well as the quality of succession along a straight time sequence. Therefore, these methods have entirely dominated our thinking; they have changed from doctrines relying on integral philosophical bases and finite theoretical principles into individual *tours de force* and limited ventures. They have thus simultaneously led to the re-arrangement of our literary field and the redirection of its production and output.⁷

However, the present study will not deal with the effects of applying Western critical methods as glimpsed by Salah Fadhl. For, though examination of these effects is necessary to uncover the bias of methodology, this has to be preceded by a reading of the methodology itself so as to reveal bias in its origin prior to its actual manifestations. Beside this methodological point, I should also define the outlines of my vision and the epistemological framework behind the whole argument. In other

words, my questioning of bias has to involve the argument of this paper also, even more so than the arguments being discussed.

To say that the methods developed in Western criticism are biased is to describe critical methods developed everywhere, and not only Western ones, in the same fashion. The bias I have in mind is the one implicit in such concepts as cultural specificity, a concept without which no one can talk about a Western or an Arabo-Islamic culture or any other of the concepts, based on the assumption that human cultures are significantly, though not totally different.

My second point is that assuming the bias of method or the significance of cultural specificity does not necessarily mean that methods as a whole are rendered entirely irrelevant. It does not preclude the possibility of mutual benefit or the presence of common characteristics. To abrogate all this is to risk naiveté and to run counter to the development of human thought throughout history. What bias of method means here is simply the presence of a high degree of homogeneity among the various elements of a given culture, which makes it difficult to make such elements function in another culture for the same purpose or to have the same significance. To accept the validity of such an argument suggests, in the first place, the preclusion of direct translation or free borrowing of such elements as theories and methods to contextualize them in a foreign framework, and working instead with full awareness that a greater degree of revision and reworking is needed to achieve cultural interaction.

This brings me to a third theoretical point with which the nature of cultural differences can be clarified, and which is an implicit touchstone of this chapter. My exploration of the para-methodology of Western criticism is in fact based on an implicit view of the specificity of Arabo-Islamic culture, a view which I rely on in my discussion of bias in Western methodology. It is difficult to expatiate upon the outlines of this view, as this in itself is a huge, self-contained issue. But I may refer in passing to the profound and comprehensive studies on this subject undertaken by a group of contemporary Arab thinkers, such as the Moroccan Mohamed Abid al-Jabiri in his critique of the Arab mind.⁸ Al-Jabiri highlights the specificity of the Arab mind, or rather its ancient cultural output, mainly in relation to its Greek counterpart. Other examples include the analytical explorations of those who have studied the role of basic concepts such as “heritage,” “society,” and “home” in shaping our thinking and culture. It

suffices to go back to the roots of some basic critical and cultural terms to realize the sometimes great degree of difference between the Arabo-Islamic culture and its Western counterpart.

The concept of “text,” for example, has been decisive in forming some contemporary Western critical methods. It is one of the major keys to understanding Western cultural specificity. Simultaneously, the same concept infuses Arabo-Islamic culture with an important difference. There is almost unanimous agreement among Arabic dictionaries on the view that “text” implies “specific reference and definition” (*isnād, ta’yīn*). Al-Azhari states that “the origin of the text is the far end and ultimate goal of objects; the texts of the Qur’an and that of the Sunnah [the Prophet’s sayings or traditions] are the judgments indicated by the overt terms of those texts” (*Lisān al-‘Arab*). In *Tāj al-‘Arūs*, “the text suggests specific reference and clarity. Consequently, the text of the Qur’an and the prophetic traditions can be understood in terms of this definition as consisting of words having specific significance ...” This is quite remote from the etymological implications of “text” in modern European languages such as English or French, which derive from the Latin *texere* the meaning of “weaving” and “fabrication,” a link which eventually led to the emergence of the theory of textuality or rather the process whereby texts interlace with one another to constitute the post-structural concept of “intertextuality”.

It is true that the contemporary Arabic concept of text differs from that found in old dictionaries. Whereas some still see the old semantic content prevailing, there are those who wholly embrace the modern, i.e. Western concept, or perhaps the fusing of the Western concept and the one which has come down from ancient Arabo-Islamic culture. Whatever the case may be, it does not justify projection of the Western concept, or even our amalgamated one, onto a culture produced in essentially different circumstances. Concepts remain different so long as their cultural contexts are different. No matter how relative this difference may be, the Arabo-Islamic world is required to be fully aware of it and even to reject it whenever necessary. There is a major emphasis in the Arabo-Islamic philosophical and critical heritage on the importance of this awareness and on the necessity of illuminating some aspects of methodological bias. This represents one of two major reasons why the Arabo-Islamic world needs to take a look, though cursory, at this heritage, as I propose to do here. It

is a need rendered even more urgent by the fact that this inherited sort of thinking involves a historical model that may be unprecedented in the history of thought, one which is badly needed so as to reinforce the Arabo-Islamic world's critical attitude toward the Western thought which surrounds it from almost all directions and in a manner that is much more intense and deliberate than before.

In the ideological encounters of such Muslim thinkers as Ibn Sīna, al-Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd, and others, there is a reminder that philosophical and literary borrowings are too sensitive to be indulged in freely. This does not necessarily entail suspicion of the "Other"; rather, it merely helps the Arabo-Islamic world to realize the existence of difference and to be more concerned for cultural integrity, no matter how fictitious such a concept may be for Western post-structuralists. Despite some significant differences among them, the ancient Muslim thinkers offer a model which largely supports such an interrogative attitude by problematizing the relationship to the West. The Arabo-Islamic world is bound to feel this, despite the inadequacy of its reception of that model and, more importantly, despite the difference in historical circumstances. For its relationship to the West is not identical to the one crystallized in the 3rd, 4th or 5th Centuries AH (roughly the 8th, 9th, and 10th centuries AC). The West itself is not the same as before, and the Arabo-Islamic world has come a long distance from where Ibn Sīna and Ḥāzīm al-Qarṭājannī once stood. However, the cultural encounter remains as intense as ever. Nothing is more illustrative of this hypothesis than the fact that contemporary Western thought deals with the problem of bias and with its relationship to the "Other" in much the same way that was once adopted the length and breadth of the Islamic world.

The Western critical output discussed in this paper is understandably not concerned much, if at all, with Arabo-Islamic elements interwoven into its culture (i.e. Western culture). Rather, some of that output is significantly conscious of another sort of bias: its limitation and self-involuteness. There are Western critics who in recent years have shown sensitivity towards the limitations of Western patterns, articulating an uncomfortable position towards their prevalent cultural models, and looking forward to breaking them. Numerous Western thinkers and critics have expressed a desire to overcome Western self-enclosure. And some of these have been highly effective in the formation of contemporary West-

ern critical methodology, such as the French Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and the American, Fredric Jameson. What their argument implies is a serious questioning of the universality and neutrality hastily claimed for such methodology by some non-Western critics who think that only by adopting Western methods of thinking and analysis could they ascend the ladder of cultural “progress”.

BIASED LOGIC: A TRADITIONAL PARADIGM

In his introduction to *Logic of the Easterners*, Ibn Sīna (Avicenna) presents the problem of methodology as one that belongs in the realm of logic. Like many of our ancient philosophers, Ibn Sīna defines logic in a way that endows it with many of the characteristics of what is currently termed methodology. He states that “the science of logic is but a tool permeating all sciences; it attracts attention to the bases with which the unknown can be distinguished from what is known by manipulating the latter in such a way as to enable the inquirer to be acquainted with the unknown ...”⁹

The problem Ibn Sīna refers to here is that the bases of the science of logic, or the methodological bases of what we know now as epistemology, consist of a comprehensive philosophical outlook. Consequently, the difference in this philosophical outlook hinges, of necessity, on the difference in methodological or logical bases. In other words, if philosophy changes, there have to be concomitant changes in the methodological bases of inquiry and epistemological deduction on which such a philosophy is based. Ibn Sīna is aware of this problem in his attempt to establish a philosophical outlook that is different from Aristotelian philosophy or, rather, from the philosophy of Ibn Sīna’s contemporary Aristotelians, the peripatetics. For Ibn Sīna, the logic of the Easterners, which for him meant a mixture of Indian, Persian, and neo-platonic elements, can be a viable alternative to that of the Greeks. The methodology he followed in distinguishing the true from the false is that of comparing two dissimilar alternatives so as to undermine the halo surrounding a given method and stressing the numerous potentialities of selectivity. He sums up his stance as follows:

As for us, it became easy to understand what [the Greeks/the Aristotelians] said, and what we worked on. And it is not unlikely that we recei-

ved some sciences from nations other than the Greeks. That was when we were still young, yet God's help made it easier for us to shorten the period of learning what was handed down. Then we carefully compared all that with what the Greeks called "logic" – and it is not unlikely that the Easterners know the same by a different label – and realized what was similar and what was not. Following that we evaluated the entire matter, and realized what was right and what was wrong.¹⁰

Ibn Sina's epistemological encounter with the Greeks can also be traced in the field of literary criticism. In his summary of Aristotle's *Poetics*, he emphasizes the importance of selectivity and creativity in dealing with Greek literary criticism. He declares that his objective in summarizing this work is to "select whatever sciences can be of use." Still, he exhorts us "to be creative in order to produce – in pure poetics and the poetics of this age – work which is very knowledgeable and very detailed." Yet his achievement in this respect is still regarded as marginal. He left the more solid work to an important critic who was to follow.

In *Minhāj al-Bulaghā' wa Sirāj al-'Udabā'* [The Method of the Eloquent and the Lantern of the Men of Letters], Ḥāzīm al-Qarṭājannī says that the details in his book aspire to embody the kind of details about poetics that Ibn Sīna was looking forward to.¹¹ He states that though Aristotle talked about poetry in some detail, he operated under the influence of Greek poetry, which was rhyming and limited in scope. Unlike Arabic poetry which teems with wisdom, proverbs, deduction and creativity, Greek poetry was "flawed by the prevalence of superstitions and unreal suppositions."¹²

Al-Qarṭājannī's criticism of the bias in Aristotle's *Poetics* calls to mind Ibn Rushd's argument as the latter – though a great exponent of Aristotelian philosophy – points out that some of what Aristotle says about poetry may not be applicable to poetry from other cultures. Thus, for both al-Qarṭājannī and Ibn Rushd, the examination of Aristotle's book reveals the Greeks' bias towards their culture and the limitation of their assessment as one that fails to apply to non-Greek cultures. Ibn Rushd is known to be among the most enthusiastic proponents of Greek thought in Islamic civilization, but his assessment of the limited applicability of Aristotelian poetics is a strong indication of a general sensitivity with regard to the potential bias engendered by cultural difference. This sensitivity naturally increases in the case of those on the other side of the argument,

the people known to be conservative among ancient Muslim intellectuals such as Abū Saʿīd al-Sīrāfī, Ibn Taymiyyah, and al-Ghazālī who, at different times and places during the evolution of Arabo-Islamic civilization, resisted the call for a cultural open-door policy. In a famous debate with al-Mattī ibn Yūnis, Aristotle's translator in the 10th Century (the 4th Century AH), al-Sīrāfī objected to the claim that logic in its Greek form is an accurate criterion for distinguishing truth from falsehood. He supported his objection by referring to cultural bias. "If logic," he argued, "was invented by a Greek thinker who mastered the language, terminology, and structure of Greek thought, then it would be hard for Turks, Indians, Persians, and Arabs to regard it as *the* criterion governing their thought."¹³

Though it is likely that historians have been biased in favor of al-Sīrāfī against al-Mattī ibn Yūnis, the latter's opinions were adopted and elaborated by many. Ibn Rushd, for instance, disagrees in his treatise *Faṣl al-Maqāl* (the Decisive Statement) with the argument elaborated by al-Sīrāfī over the bias of philosophical methodology and calls for a vision that transcends ideological and religious differences "on the basis that the instruments used for slaughtering [animals] are not judged to be usable on the basis of whether or not they are used by people who do not share our religion, as long as they can be used."¹⁴ The problem with this argument is the difficulty of defining the conditions of usability. According to the American philosopher John Dewey, logic is naturally biased in favor of a certain philosophical principle; logicians are strongly affiliated with, and often base their analyses and conclusions on, a given philosophical doctrine.¹⁵ To say that methodology has to be dissociated from its epistemological objective is to call for a separation between form and content. Similarly, the presence of common human objectives does not preclude the diversity of means leading to such goals.

FROM THE SACRED TO THE PROFANE:
THE FORMALISM OF ARCHETYPES

According to Northrop Frye the harmony between the methods and objectives of criticism could only be achieved if critical principles and hypotheses were to issue from the art dealt with in criticism. "Critical principles cannot be taken over ready-made from theology, philosophy, politics, or any combination of these."¹⁶ For literary works represent an organic

unity based on common symbols, traditions, or models, the latter contributing to the close connection between one poem and another, thus unifying all literary experiences.¹⁷ By way of these denominators, Frye's method shares common ground with formalism whether it is Russian formalism or its American counterpart, the New Criticism. They all converge on the principle that literature is independent from other forms of linguistic discourse, as the referentiality of literature is held to stem from within literature itself and not from social life or the movement of history. In this context, Frye¹⁸ agrees with Eliot's assertion in "The Function of Criticism" that fundamentally criticism regards "the existing monuments of literature [as they] form an ideal order among themselves ..."¹⁹

Frye's methodology remains different, however, from other formalist tendencies in that it attempts to be comprehensive by studying types as symbolic or typological connections among literary works. His great achievement in this project represents a viable bridge between the New Criticism and Structuralism, a vantage point which makes his extremely important work one of the most appropriate for launching this assessment of the cultural specificity of Western literary methods.

To begin with, modern Western culture is characterized by its general and strong inclination towards secularity. This is a commonplace, but it has to be restated as a point of special relevance here. In modern Western intellectual output neither is God present, nor does the Bible have any credibility outside its symbolic, mythic or literary significance. The mainstream of Western thought, including its diverse philosophies and theories, is secular. This secularism has, since the late Middle Ages, but more so since the Renaissance, been gaining increasing dominance over the whole of Western civilization. M. H. Abrams sums up this phenomenon by stating that "it is a historical commonplace that the course of Western thought since the Renaissance has been one of progressive secularization."²⁰ The increasing authority of secularism, however, does not necessarily mean the disappearance of religion, which is in this case the Judeo-Christian tradition, from Western thought or culture as a whole. There is, rather, a conscious rationalist rejection of such a tradition accompanied by an informing conscious, or unconscious, presence of what Michel Foucault terms "the codes of culture."²¹ Harold Bloom, in response to a question about heresy, sees this unconscious presence in the form of assumptions which go unchallenged: "... there is no such thing as reli-

gious heresy anymore because there is no such thing as religious orthodoxy anymore. What exist in fact, are unchallenged assumptions, unchallenged metaphysical assumptions, unchallenged epistemological assumptions, unchallenged procedural assumptions in every field of academic study, but particularly in the study of literature.”²²

Frye’s typological criticism provides a clear example of the unchallenged assumptions Bloom talks about. Religious doctrines and secularist tendencies coexist in the critic’s belief at once in the mythological nature of the Bible and the independence of literature. Frye’s statements carry this confluence, though in terms that carry some measure of vagueness: “I *feel* that historical scholarship is without exception ‘lower’ or analytic criticism, and that ‘higher’ criticism would be a quite different activity. The latter *seems* to me to be a purely literary criticism”²³ (my italics). The traditional Christian interpretation of the Bible, as Frye reminds us, symbolically conflates the Old Testament and the New Testament in that the events and people of the former foreshadow those of the latter (Adam is a forerunner of Christ). This typological interpretation is highlighted by Frye as a model methodology already established by “typological” criticism and is now fused into its contemporary secularist version: the literary criticism performed by someone like Frye himself.

Meanwhile, Frye rejects the historical analytic study of the Bible as embodied in the kind of criticism that prevailed in the 18th and 19th Centuries and constituted the secular link between the religious criticism of Augustine and the secular criticism of Frye. However, Frye does not refer to this linkage, and he may be right in attacking it. Yet this does not lessen its importance in the development of Western literary criticism, especially the formalist approach. The methodological assumption about the mythic nature of the Bible, the assumption emphatically adopted by Frye, began in 18th-Century European criticism, as did also the basic formalist hypothesis about the autonomy of the text.

Towards the middle of the 18th Century, propelled by the Enlightenment, which was generally antagonistic to religious orthodoxy, there emerged a religious critical movement which attempted a defense of religion through a new interpretation of the Bible that emphasized its literary and mythological nature as Oriental poetry, Hebrew in particular. This in turn was expected to stop people from literally interpreting the Bible and consequently from stultifying the rational, scientific mind. The objective

of such critics was to show that the poetry of Hebrew sacred writings was a fit subject for appreciation and criticism.²⁴ The religious text was thus read anew in the context of poetry. According to Robert Lowth, the greater part of the Old Testament is poetry, and it should never be read in light of rules other than those applying to poetic language.²⁵

It has to be remembered that such developments paralleled the rise of Romanticism, and that Coleridge – the pioneering critic of formalism in the Anglo-Saxon tradition – was an important contributor to the crystallization of the new sacred/secular criticism combination, which is part of the secularization process. As critics of the Bible tried to defend their scripture, they employed a formalist defensive methodology that led to the marginalization of such a scripture; that methodology turned out to be no less secular than the stance of many extremists in the non-religious Enlightenment movement. Eventually this led to the profanation (desacralization) of the religious text in Western literary criticism and to equating it with human, worldly texts. As E. S. Shaffer says, “if in our time ‘text’ has been liberated from ‘writing’ and become a system of signs, so in that period text was liberated from the letter of divine inspiration and became a system of human symbols.”²⁶

Liberating the text from its sacredness at the hands of formalist critics was not unprecedented. In the mid-17th Century, Spinoza’s *Theological Political Treatise* (1670) played an important role in the development of Biblical criticism,²⁷ which, as we have seen, adopted a more or less formalist approach. Spinoza’s interpretative methodology suggests that “Scriptural interpretation proceeds by the examination of Scripture.”²⁸ The sacredness of the Bible, according to Spinoza’s suggestion, should not be an *a priori* stipulation; rather, it should result from intensive research. Spinoza himself does not reach this conclusion; rather, he announces that the application of his methodology will lead the interpreter to such a conclusion. His warning is simply against the hypothesis that all that God says to anybody in the Bible is a prophecy or revelation.²⁹

Spinoza’s conclusions, therefore, call to mind the historical terminology underlying some of the chief principles enunciated by Northrop Frye, such as Biblical mythology and the necessity of deriving the principles of literary criticism solely from literature. The only difference is that literature has replaced sacred religious texts. This is a long story of replacements that involves the emergence of Romanticism, William Blake’s

prophetic books, Wordsworth's revolt against classical poetry, and Emerson's call upon his countrymen to be on a par with the masters of the ancient world. Every age, exhorts the American sage, has to write its own books, and the books of the ancient ages are not necessarily appropriate for later times.³⁰

All of this is part of the background explaining Northrop Frye's archetypal/formalist approach. An important component in that background is pinpointed by Geoffrey Hartman:

The value of Frye's system is that it methodologically eliminates the last obstacle barring art from spreading its influence: the qualitative distinction between the sacred and the profane, or the popular and the aristocratic. His general sense of art is extremely Protestant: every man is a priest of the imagination ...³¹

Needless to say, the Protestantism Hartman refers to in connection with Frye is not the dogmatic adherence to religious principles, the "religious orthodoxy" Harold Bloom refers to. Frye is far from that; rather, it is the cultural context informing the critic's ideas, the totality of criteria and rules affecting his principles and worldview. Prominent among these criteria and rules is the traditional Protestant iconoclasm that, for instance, informs the title and content of one of Frye's books: *The Secular Scripture*.³² Literature is thus presented as an alternative, a semi-alternative to be more accurate, to religion, an essential backdrop, as Terry Eagleton saw it, for the failure of religious ideology.³³

These "unchallenged assumptions," to use Blooms' words again, only highlight the difficulty involved in trying to part with metaphysics in contemporary Western culture. It was this difficulty that Martin Heidegger summed up in his conclusion that "yet a regard for metaphysics still prevails even in the intention to overcome metaphysics."³⁴ Frye's approach to metaphysics is predicated on his concept of the archetype with its structuralist, linguistic, and transcendental connotations. The *arch* or "beginning" in Greek gives the last part of the work, the *type*, its transcendence. It is as if the archetype is a religious type devoid of its verbal habiliments.³⁵ Frye's apparent overlooking of these latent metaphysics does not, however, prevent him from agreeing with Heidegger's conclusion regarding the impossibility of getting rid of the metaphysical dimension in human thought. In *The Secular Scripture*, he points out that the

use of orthodox terminology is part of a dilemma: “Not all of us will be satisfied with calling the central part of our mythological inheritance a revelation from God ... I cannot claim to have found a more acceptable formulation.”³⁶

In other forms of critical methodology like structuralism and Marxism, both secularism and metaphysics (here synonymous with religiosity) are variably correlated and perhaps conflated. What this suggests is that there are attempts to dethrone metaphysics or at least to supersede its concepts. Despite Nietzsche’s declaration of the death of God and the consequent prevalent conviction that religions are mythological and traditional values are delusive, there has been constant tension in Western thinking resulting in, among other manifestations, a perpetual attempt to purify language of metaphysical presence. Contemporary Western culture has long been characterized by the absence of the sacred; its chief criterion has therefore been the degree to which thinking has gotten rid of the effects of the metaphysical. A striking example is Tzvetan Todorov’s statement in the introduction to a book announcing a shift of critical stance on his part: “... this book will deal both with the meaning of some twentieth-century critical works, and with the possibility of opposing nihilism without ceasing to be an atheist.”³⁷

STRUCTURALISM: COLLAPSE OF THE DREAM

According to Todorov, post-Spinoza critics are no longer preoccupied with whether what the text says is correct or not; they are rather concerned with exactly *what* the text says. He justifies this shift in the following terms:

... in the absence of transcendence, each text becomes its own frame of reference, and the critic’s task is completed in classification of the text’s meaning, in the description of its forms and textual functioning, far removed from any value ... Earlier, people believed in the existence of an absolute and common truth, in a universal standard (for several centuries, absolute truth happened to coincide with the Christian doctrine). The breakdown of this belief, the recognition of human diversity and equality led to relativism and individualism, and finally to nihilism.³⁸

In the past also, but not the remote past, this statement, which sums up a great deal of what this discussion argues, would not have been arti-

culated by one of the most active structuralist critics in the West. Now it has become all too clear to Todorov that nihilism is the logical conclusion of limiting the critic's role to the discussion of the meaning of a text, its forms, and its performance, far from value-judgments; it is the conclusion, that is, of the preoccupation with a critical method such as structuralism. The philosophical implications of such a method become now clear to the author of *The Poetics of Prose*,³⁹ who has now shifted to a method he calls: critical humanism.⁴⁰

It would, however, be fair to say that the Bulgarian/French critic did not write his book to announce the abandonment of structuralism. His method is rather to make a counter-statement to some of the theses constituting the new era of post-structuralism. Proponents of the new era are, needless to say, in disagreement with what they might regard as Todorov's "regressive" attitude. Roland Barthes, Todorov's mentor and the one whose works form a large curve showing the appearance and decline of critical structuralism, is one of those proponents.

Roland Barthes's works are in fact closer to demonstrating the decline than the emergence and prosperity of structuralism. His equivocal role as at once founder and deconstructor of structuralist methodology is one strong testimony to the fact that structuralism, like other methods, is full of variables that render it less objective than it claims to be. For Barthes has revolted against the very ideology he espoused when younger, and later on came to call for the very nihilism that his disciple was afraid of. Though more radical, Barthes's attitude is still more in harmony with the logic of its cultural climate than that of his student.

In his famous essay "An Introduction to Structuralist Analysis of Fictional Texts,"⁴¹ Barthes defines the outlines of the structuralist method and suggests that linguistics should be the chief model for structuralist analysis. Only one year later did Barthes decide to follow another totally different critical course by calling for the presence of an analytical tool which, instead of appraising structures, would be concerned with the illogical play and reversion of such structures.⁴² The following stage in Western critical thought, namely post-structuralism, has been characterized by the rebellion of structuralists against unchallenged premises in the realm of science.

One of the most important issues addressed by structuralism is how literary criticism, with the help of the linguistic model, can be so scientific

that knowledge itself - as Northrop Frye put it - moves from accidental to the causal.⁴³ The synchronic aspect of language is transmitted, through the structuralist analysis, to the structure of the literary work, ultimately producing a perennial entity that is divorced from the movement of time, sociological and economic factors and all that is outside the text. Finally, the text is seen as a self-contained structure that is completely independent of outside elements.

In a dialog with a number of French intellectuals, Claude Lévi-Strauss, the pioneer of structuralist methodology, conceded that structuralism may be described as a materialistic philosophy.⁴⁴ In response to Paul Ricoeur's observation regarding meaning, Lévi-Strauss highlighted an aspect of the philosophical underpinnings of structuralism by indicating that his method had little room for meaning: "In my perspective meaning is never the primary phenomenon: meaning is always reducible."⁴⁵ In this sense, structuralism appears to have developed a secularist stance not very different from the one articulated by its later, staunch critic - deconstruction.

Other aspects of the philosophical basis or bias of structuralism are revealed by others such as Jean-Paul Sartre,⁴⁶ who criticized it from a Marxist, materialistic perspective, describing it as the last ideological setback to Marxism that is presented by the bourgeoisie. Paul Ricoeur, on the other hand, sees in structuralism an "extreme form of modern agnosticism."⁴⁷ The critic whose critique of structuralism seems more probing and effective, however, is the American Marxist Fredric Jameson.

In his *The Prison-House of Language: a Critical Reading of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*, Jameson begins with the premise that "the history of thought is a history of its models."⁴⁸ He points out the structuralist emphasis on linguistics in its historical perspective so as to examine the sociological and economic circumstances leading to its emergence. It soon becomes clear that the model used here is not only different from the organic model which dominated 19th-Century thought, but is here to displace that model. The new model of linguistics depends for its meaning on the social system of contemporary Western societies:

It lies in the concrete character of the social life of so-called advanced countries today, which offer the spectacle of a world from which nature has been eliminated, a world saturated with messages and information,

whose intricate commodity network may be seen as the very prototype of system of signs. There is therefore a profound consonance between linguistics, as a model, and that ghostly, systematic nightmare, which is our contemporary culture.⁴⁹

Ten years after these words, Jameson reconsidered the relation he had charted between the model and culture in order to put on one end the ideology of Western modernism, the ideology responsible for the formalist currents in general, and, on the other, the capitalist culture dominating post-industrial societies of the West. In so doing, he found that Modernist ideology imposes a distorted model of literary history through its aesthetics and conceptual limits. This conceptual and aesthetic domination is the consequence of the capitalist system being able to spread out like any trademark. “For we all know,” writes Jameson, “capitalism is the first genuinely global culture, and has never renounced its mission to assimilate everything alien into itself.”⁵⁰

As for the way out of this domination and the resulting isolation, which Jameson compares to that of the cave men in the well-known Platonic analogy, Jameson prescribes a comprehensive and far-reaching reformulation of “our” economic and social system.⁵¹ Yet it soon becomes clear that the new model being suggested is not only a part of Marxist theory, but is highly reformulated, with the deconstructive climate overshadowing the entire critical and ideological scene at the time.

JAMESON AND MARXIST DECONSTRUCTION

As Marxist criticism falls under the impact of deconstructive thinking, it becomes difficult to talk about Marxist theses in the traditional sense. For Marxism is itself touched by the deconstructive skepticism, and the end result is what Jameson calls “post-Marxism.” This is the stage which represents the equivalent to what is known as “post-structuralism,” and all the other “posts” dotting the contemporary Western cultural landscape (postmodernism, post-capitalism, post-colonialism, etc.). As is well known, deconstruction is at the heart of these “posts,” particularly post-structuralism.

If deconstruction is at the heart of post-structuralism, nihilism is at the heart of deconstruction. Nihilism here is understood in its original Nietz-

schean sense, which is articulated in the introduction to *The Will to Power*. Here Nietzsche asserts that nihilism implies a full conviction that life has no meaning in the light of the highest values known, that human-kind has no right to assume that there is a supernatural or sacred level of existence.⁵² The way deconstruction relates to this nihilist conviction is of course to be sought in the major work of the authorities in the field: Derrida, Paul de Man, and J. Hillis Miller. Roland Barthes lends the authoritative voice of a kindred spirit when he expresses his conviction that “nihilism is the only philosophy possible in our present situation.”⁵³

Barthes is not usually linked to deconstruction, but he was always aware of a link that came directly from Nietzsche. This was the link bringing him, along with Derrida, to the older philosophy of nihilism. Both he and Derrida, he said, felt the need to partake in a stage of history that Nietzsche called “nihilism.”⁵⁴ This stage of history is, of course, what we now know under different “posts”: post-structuralism, postmodernism, etc.

In his *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson highlights his own role as pioneer of post-structuralist thought. He states:

The Political Unconscious ... turns on the dynamics of the act of interpretation and presupposes as an organizational fiction, that we never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read... This presupposition then dictates the use of a method (which I have elsewhere termed ‘metacommentary’) according to which our object of study is less the text itself than the interpretation through which we attempt to confront and to appropriate it.⁵⁵

Jameson’s use in this book of the word “fiction” instead of the more familiar “thesis” or “point of view” is in keeping with deconstructive criticism, which emphasizes the literary and imaginary character of *all* texts. For criticism is a kind of literature, and both criticism and literature are a kind of writing or “écriture”.⁵⁶ Jameson’s method in this context is parallel, if not identical, to that of semiotics, which “attempts to identify the rules and conventions which, consciously or unconsciously are assimilated by members of that culture [and] make possible the meanings which the phenomena have.”⁵⁷

Jameson’s ideological stance rests on a post-structuralist conviction

that acknowledges the literary nature of criticism and the fictitious character of scientific discourse. Nonetheless, his interpretation of literary history is Marxist in so far as it looks at class conflict as implicit in literary texts. Political interpretation of texts, therefore, is given priority over other different interpretations.⁵⁸ In other words, Jameson's deconstruction is bent on undermining the interpretations that claim to be innocent of political purport; he has even attempted deconstruction of Marxism itself by rejecting some of its tenets so as to make it harmonious with the reality of contemporary Western thought. In his view, traditional Marxism can itself be seen as fraught with metaphysics, especially in its utopian vision of a classless society.

However, Jameson's attempt to modify his Marxism has naturally led to contradiction and to the criticism of deconstructionists whose method he tried to adopt. An example of this is his description of the approach which he calls "immanent analysis":

... the ideal of the immanent analysis of the text, of a dismantling or deconstruction of its parts and a description of its functioning and malfunctioning, amounts more to a wholesale nullification of all interpretive activity than to a demand for the construction of some new and more adequate, immanent or antitranscendental hermeneutic model which it will be the task of the following pages to propose.⁵⁹

Jameson's proposal here is to adopt a deconstructive approach which he describes as "immanent" and, elsewhere, as "metacommentary." The only problem with this proposal is that it remains faithful to a Marxism that insists on being second to none. This double stand becomes ironically incongruous once Jameson's description of his approach starts deploying terms more familiar in the description of traditional approaches. Jameson, for example, refuses to compare Marxism with other methods: "Marxism cannot today be defended as a mere substitute for such other methods, which would then triumphantly be consigned to the trash bin of history."⁶⁰ This becomes even more interesting when the same critic who describes his method as "antitranscendent" moves on a little later to rely on the implications of 'transcendence' to describe the method itself: "In the spirit of a more authentic dialectical tradition, Marxism is here conceived as the 'untranscendable horizon'."⁶¹

Deconstructionists are likely to see Jameson's efforts to reconcile his

Marxist approach, with all its “untranscendable” claims, as nothing but another instance of the inevitable succumbing to the potent forces of metaphysics. Eventually one would find the term used earlier by Marxist critic Pierre Macherey to describe structuralism likewise appropriate for his fellow American’s method, namely: “... a variant of theological aesthetics.”⁶²

DECONSTRUCTION: RECONCILING THE IRRECONCILABLE

The religious and philosophical bias which I have set out to outline here should now be clear: Northrop Frye highlights the mythological nature of the Bible yet holds to a metaphysical concept of the archetype; Claude Lévi-Strauss describes structuralism as materialistic, yet sees it as divorced from history and causality. On the other hand, Fredric Jameson believes in historical materialism and rejects metaphysics, yet he describes his Marxism in terms highly fraught with transcendence.

This doubletalk is one of the very significant dilemmas of a culture embracing the secular yet unable to break away from its religious and metaphysical roots. The deconstructionists were the last to try to accomplish what they call a cultural “free play,” the attempt initiated so vigorously by Nietzsche who early on saw the inevitability of this happening as Christian morals harbored their enemy: nihilism.⁶³ More recently, American critic J. Hillis Miller quotes Nietzsche and moves on to highlight the role of deconstruction, “of which Nietzsche is one of the patrons,” in tackling the problem of metaphysical domination of culture.⁶⁴ Miller argues that deconstruction is as old as the Greek sophists and Plato; however, he does not explain why such an ancient critical method has acquired such a strong momentum at the present time, and in the United States in particular.

It is difficult to come up with a definite answer to this question. The history of secularism glimpsed might, despite its vagueness, be the only answer possible. American critic Robert Scholes, in an unsympathetic discussion of deconstruction, suggests that deconstruction is strong among “us” because “we deserve it.” Western history as a whole, in other words, prepared Western culture for such a rationalist “invasion.”⁶⁵ Scholes does not clarify exactly what he means, but he seems to have in mind the entire history of secularization since the Middle Ages, and the ceaseless

efforts to overcome the metaphysical over the centuries, especially in the work of Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger.⁶⁶ The confrontation of the problem in the work of deconstructionists such as Derrida, Paul de Man, and Miller would thus seem to be only the latest episode. In *Writing and Difference*, Derrida highlights this ongoing confrontation: “Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger, for example, worked within inherited metaphysical concepts. Since those concepts are not elements or atoms, since they are taken from a linguistic structure and a system, each metaphor pulls with it all metaphysics.”⁶⁷

In terms of literary criticism, Derrida’s statement translates as follows: metaphysics is another name for such concepts and values as “truth,” “reality,” “meaning,” etc.; on the other hand, nihilism becomes shrouded in “language,” “literature,” and the labyrinth of texts that are recalcitrant to all kinds of conventional rationalism. Paul de Man states that poetic language constantly names this vacuum (the presence of nothing): “This persistent naming is what we call literature.”⁶⁸ In other words, literature is the awareness of nihilism; it is the constant realization of whether there are meanings in as much as there are readers and that it is impossible to agree on one transcendental meaning or criterion. For meaning ultimately evaporates into sheer absence and the quest for it becomes a sort of critical absurdity. Yet as Edward Said has observed, these de Manian “intellectual hobbles on the possibility of statement have not ... inhibited de Man from stating and re-stating them ...”⁶⁹

What is especially important here is the cultural context that led de Man and other deconstructionists to define the impediments to speech and abstract communication and even to believe in them. It is a consistent and interdependent context that explains the inevitable (not to say logical) tendency to deconstruction in Western culture, a fact that has motivated a prominent non-deconstructionist critic such as George Steiner to admit that deconstructionist theses are beyond refutation. Steiner’s suggestion for transcending deconstruction is to assimilate what he calls the ambiguity of existence, an element that is essential to literary creativity whereby characters remain alive even after the death of their author. Steiner’s other suggestion is that we read as if the text in question yields meaning.⁷⁰ Of course these suggestions turn out to accept deconstruction instead of going beyond it. Like the ideas offered by critics such as Abrams and Todorov, they draw attention to the presence of meaning and acknowledge its

absence in the same breath, a type of contradiction that always calls for deconstruction.

Deconstructionists hardly need any of their opponents to remind them that their direction harbors a latent, radical metaphysics.⁷¹ They are keenly aware of their problems; hence, they themselves are perhaps the best place to go for an understanding of the contextual developments leading to their type of thinking and procedure. A self-diagnosis by J. Hillis Miller on his intellectual link to Derrida is so significant in this regard that it should be quoted in full:

I've thought about why someone (with my Protestant background) like that American would have been attracted by, let's say, Derrida. I think I have an answer. There is a similarity between a certain aspect of American Protestantism, or even Protestantism generally, and the Jewish tradition, or the Jewish, intellectual European tradition, which has a suspicion of icons, signs, of graven images, and a suspicion that things may not be for the best in the 'best of all worlds,' a kind of instinctive darkness of view, and a kind of conflict that I have in myself between a commitment to truth, the search for truth as the highest value, and moral values on the other. They may be in conflict. That is to say, you might reach a point where truth was challenging or dangerous to values.⁷²

It would be difficult to find a testimony more emphatically direct than this to the inherent prejudice of Western critical methods. To elaborate on it a little one could recall the old Jewish Spinozian connection and the development of sacred into literary criticism. It is with this connection that I would like to bring these remarks to a conclusion.

In *Writing and Difference*, Derrida contemplates the work of the Jewish/French poet Edmond Jabés, and finds that a distinctive Jewish view regarding truth, interpretation, and meaning characterizes this poet's work. This view emphasizes an atheistic perspective which does not seek truth or origins as it engages in the poetic interpretation of the world. It issues from a common experience of Jewish Diaspora and continuous journeying from one place to the other with no hope of return, without, that is, a dream of meaning, truth or any metaphysical structure that provides comfort. The French Jewish philosopher Emanuel Levinas places this ongoing one-way journey in contrast to the Greek cyclical journey: "In contrast to Ulysses going back home, we would like to place the story of Abraham leaving his country to an unknown country forever."⁷³

In a study that contextualizes deconstruction within the Hebrew tradition, Susan Handelman argues that the idea of the death of God in contemporary Western thought can be traced back to the Jewish concept of godhead. In the Jewish concept God appears other, distant and absent in Jewish lore,⁷⁴ in contrast to Greek gods who are always present. The Jewish concept thus became an important factor in the deconstruction of Christian religiosity, “and in the long run instated a different god: the book. According to one commentator on Jabés, the long period between the Diaspora and the return of the Messiah witnessed the transformation of the ‘people of God’ into the ‘people of the book’”.⁷⁵ Levinas, however, who “deconstructed” theology from a Jewish point of view, chose to articulate the centrality of the book in the Jewish secular conception with an expression drawn from the Talmudic Midrashian tradition: “You should love the Torah more than you love God.”⁷⁶ A more poetic articulation of the same position can be found in Jabés: “So, with God dead, I found my Jewishness confirmed in the book ... Because being Jewish means exiling yourself in the word and, at the same time, weeping for your exile. The return to the book is a return to forgotten sites.”⁷⁷

There is nothing outside the text, goes one Derridean conclusion,⁷⁸ and in Jabés this conclusion finds its home: “We are not free. We are nailed alive to the signs of the book. Could it be that our freedom lies in the word’s vain try to cut loose from the word?”⁷⁹ Critics working outside this home of cultural meaning are unlikely to be aware of what is inside. They will be transferring the words to a different context where they won’t quite fit. They will revel in the discovery of textuality, endless meanings, and other post-structural concepts, unable to see the full significance of what they are using. They will be nailed to the signs of a book they never read, denying that structuralism or deconstruction has any philosophical meaning or cultural specificity that limits or qualifies its free circulation.

Ultimately, the remarks I have made above regarding the cultural contextuality of Western critical methods may amount to no more than a gloss on one of the two positions articulated in an earlier century by Arab grammarian Abū Saʿīd al-Sīrāfī in the debate concerning the attitude Muslims should adopt towards Greek logic. Western critical methods, like Greek logic and like critical methods used anywhere, enjoy a considerable degree of universality. Yet there will always remain another con-

siderable degree in them that is culture-specific, which is home-bound, which cannot be transferred. It is this latter quality which makes it imperative for people not sharing the Western cultural context to thoroughly revise such methods before using them, if they have to – if, that is, they can't be more original than that.

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