

Methodology

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The Modes and Intentions of Biography

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Abstract

This paper explores a range of modes, intentions and problems of Baha'i biography, in order to offer some initial observations on the ways in which biographical literatures frame understandings of the individual in the context of community. It distinguishes between documentary, hagiological and critical modes of biography as these have emerged in the diverse literature of the world's religious traditions, as well as in the secular literature of the modern period. It suggests that much Baha'i biography has continued the traditions of remembrance and exempla, although more critical works have also begun to appear. The quest to write 'spiritual biographies' that explore a subject's inner life and journey remains difficult, due mostly to limitations on sources, since few subjects give adequate exposure to their inner thoughts. Rather than privilege one tradition above any other, Baha'i biographies have to date drawn on the skills of the craft elaborated across generations, religions and cultures, while beginning to draw also on Baha'i scripture for inspiration productive of new insights into how lived lives can be depicted in literature.

Keywords

Baha'i
biography and
religion
documentary
biography
hagiography
exemplum and
anti-exemplum
critical biography

This paper seeks to explore some of the 'moral implications' for writing biography from a Baha'i perspective.¹ It proceeds by searching out the modes, intentions and problems of Baha'i biography in order to ground its theoretical observations empirically and to point to some issues of method associated with biographical practice. A related purpose is to offer some initial observations on the ways in which biographical literatures frame understandings of the individual in the context of community.

Biography, as distinguished from all other texts, places the life experience of an individual (or individuals) at the centre of investigation. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes a biography as a 'narrative which seeks, consciously and artistically, to record the actions and recreate the personality of an individual life ...'² Other works such as histories and other types of commentary may well consider the same person or people, but without placing them at the centre of the investigation. There are, for instance, descriptions of Horace Holley in Gayle Morrison's study of Louis Gregory,³ but the latter is at the centre of focus. Similarly, Robert Stockman's survey of the Baha'i Faith in America describes a great number of individuals, without seeking to write a biography of any one of them.⁴ A further distinction can be made between biographies written about oneself (autobiographies) rather than about others. The noblest goal of an autobiography is to examine one's life and to share the results of this examination

1. The author would like to thank Katayoun Hassall, Will C. van den Hoonaard, Jack McLean, and several anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper. W. P. Collins's *Bibliography of English-Language Works on the Babi and Bahā'i Faiths 1844–1985* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1990, 505) has just over two hundred references to 'biography' as a subject and advises the reader to look also under 'history'. This paper, even though examining a comparatively small and recently commenced tradition,

- can only refer in brief to the range of titles available.
2. Quoted in H. H. E. Loofs, 'Biographies in Stone: The Significance of Changing Perceptions of the Buddha Image in Mainland Southeast Asia for the Understanding of the Individual's Place in Some Buddhist Societies', in *Self and Biography: Essays on the Individual and Society in Asia* (ed. Wang Gungwu, Sydney: Sydney University Press for the Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1976), 9.
 3. G. Morrison, *To Move the World: Louis G. Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Unity in America* (Wilmette: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1982).
 4. R. H. Stockman, *The Bahā'ī Faith in America Vol. II: Early Expansion, 1900–1912* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1995).
 5. D. Hofman, *George Townshend* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1983).
 6. J. R. Averill and E. P. Nunley, *Voyages of the Heart: Living an Emotionally Creative Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 12.
 7. Godzich continues: 'The mechanism of *exemplum* is simple: a singular happenstance is related so that it can serve as an instance of a universal principle, which can now be imposed as a moral imperative on the recipient of the story. The universal principle may have been explicitly stated in revelation, but, more often than not, it is enough that it be derived from the

with others. It requires the capacity to observe oneself at a distance. Autobiographies may also be written for other purposes, whether for the instruction of others or simply to record the times one has lived through and the events one has witnessed or participated in.

Not all biographies intend to explore their subject in similar depth. Those that are essentially chronological and descriptive intend to *document* a life 'for the record'. They seek, that is, to preserve or to record information of interest about a person, and they seek remembrance (*tadhkira*) of a subject without exploring the relationship between his or her values and actions, and without placing these actions in some specific historical or sociocultural context. In the case of religious biographies, they offer an assurance that a subject possessed the qualities of the spiritual and the virtues of the holy, but do not necessarily bring the reader any closer to an understanding of the struggles and achievements of their actual existence.

A more complex biographical exercise presents relevant events in some actual context, and examines the progression of the biographical subject through the conditions of their life. It takes the step of seeking the significance of the subject's existence, of extracting the essential from the myriad events and happenings in their life. For example, biographies of George Townshend⁵ and Louis Gregory seek to position their subjects in the context of their times.

Biographic traditions

Traditions of biography and autobiography have evolved in each of the world religions. Devoted at first to depicting the life of the prophet and the lives of the first disciples, they have expanded to include accounts of martyrs, saints and holy men and women. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines this literature as 'Hagiology' – 'literature that treats of the lives and legends of saints'. But this literature in its original form was not as concerned with the details of an individualized life as with the generalized moral story that it could be called on to tell. Such idealized biographies of saints that were the focus of medieval hagiographies, explain Averill and Nunley:

... were little concerned with the idiosyncrasies of individual lives. Their purpose was to further Christian ideals, and medieval biographers felt free to borrow anecdotes from one saint's life to embellish the life of another. To the extent that differences among people were accorded significance, such differences were based on pre-established regional, class, and gender expectations. A person was born into a certain social station (a nobleman, say, or a serf), and that station determined the meaning of his or her life.⁶

The 'exemplary' purpose of such texts has recently been elaborated by studies of the 'broad injunctions' found in Christian texts, in contrast to the 'specific regulations' found in Judaism:

Inevitably, there arose a need to identify models of proper, and improper, behaviour to compensate for the excessive laconism of the New Testament on this topic. Lives of saints were written and accounts of the lives of famous pagans were scrutinized to extract from them the models that would guarantee the moral uplifting of righteous Christians. We know these models under the name of *exempla*, narratives of others' lives, or of events in others' lives, admitting of a moral lesson.⁷

The Buddhist tradition offers a slightly different approach to biography, which yields a somewhat similar result. According to Gungwu, the practice of biography was inhibited by the attempt to limit the 'aggrandizement of the self' through placing little emphasis on 'any individual self' at any particular point or place in time: 'Self was knowable but specific selves were not worth knowing except where they might show a capacity to merge with the universal, with the infinite and the eternal. There was, therefore, no meaningful biography except where it might demonstrate how a few extraordinary men conquered their selves.'⁸

China's Confucian tradition elaborated *Shih Chi*, biographies exemplifying a 'Confucian moralism whose ultimate aim was to guide the conduct of statecraft'.⁹ In Japan such literary figures as Mori Ógai developed a 'typology of virtue' to describe a vast corpus of biographical literature.¹⁰ A similar hagiographic intention also informs Islamic biography. Biographies of the Prophet Muhammad were given the name *sira*, and the tradition of *rijāl* in Shi'a Islam focused on the study of the lives of the transmitters of the traditions of Islam.¹¹ Eventually clergy and caliphs, saints and missionaries, were equally subject to written remembrance. In some parts of the Islamic world these are known as *tarjama*, an Arabic term referring to both biography and autobiography.¹² *Tarjama* marshalled the particulars of the lives of learned men into settled categories:

The components include a genealogy, an account of formal education and Qur'anic memorization, a list of teachers (often including close relatives, which indicates family support for religious learning), the books and subjects studied, and selections from the subject's poetry, aphorisms, or other contributions to learning. Dates are provided whenever possible, since the ability to date events distinguishes the traditionally educated from the unlearned.¹³

As explained by Renard, the significance of the depiction of religious heroes in literature lies in that they 'live and move in a world ordered according to a divine plan', and that they exist 'only to reflect and point out God's signs and presence in creation':

When they conquer they do so by God's leave and power; and even when they lose in time, as rejected prophets or martyrs for justice, they win in eternity. Religious heroes function as custodians of hope against terrible odds, testifying to the virtual certainty of ultimate victory. Their life stories bear witness to the reality of a transcendent dimension in human experience. Most of all, prophets and Friends of God represent the best of religious and cultural ideals in accessible form, perhaps too far away to attain fully but not so far as to discourage an attempt.¹⁴

Religious biography, of course, exists within a larger practice of biography, which in the modern period has become dominated by studies from popular culture – cinema, literature, music and war. In the twentieth century biographical endeavour came to include accounts of previously silenced voices – of 'common' people, of women and of the oppressed and marginalized, who are now 'writing back' to their oppressors. In finding these voices, the practice

exemplum in such a way that it is consistent with the rest of revelation. There occurred thus a subtle shift in authority from revelation itself, though it remains unchallenged, to experience, the past experience of the exemplar. Moreover, since the signifying economy of the *exemplum* follows the rule of logical abduction, in which a law is derived from a singular instance to then be generalized to all instances, past experience, as the law that is derived from it is given the status of universal or general law (the distinction between universal and general is not material in this case).' W. Godzich, 'Figuring out what matters; or, the microphysics of history', in *Making Sense in Life and Literature* (ed. H. U. Gumbrecht, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), vii–xvi.

8. Wang Gungwu, 'Introduction', in Wang (ed.), *Self and Biography*, 2.
9. 'Indeed, the *shiden* project in its entirety may be interpreted as a biographical exploration of the following exemplary traits: self-sacrifice (*kenshin*); martial spirit (*vuahi no awiahin*); forbearance, magnanimity, and generosity (*kekku no michi*); learning (*gakumon*) self-reliance and inner strength (*Zuchi ni tanomu tokoro*); and indifference to material or utilitarian standards (*muyó*).' M. Marcus, *Paragons of the Ordinary: The Biographical Literature*

- of *Mori Ógai* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 1993), 10.
10. *ibid* 178.
 11. A. Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844–1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 35.
 12. D. F. Eickelman, 'Traditional Islamic Learning and Ideas of the Person in the Twentieth Century', in *Middle Eastern Lives: The Practice of Biography and Self-Narrative* (ed. M. S. Kramer, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991) 35–9.
 13. *ibid* 39. An exemplary study of the relationship between religious training and power is found in R. Mottahedeh, *Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985).
 14. J. Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam: Spirituality and the Religious Life of Muslims* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 77.
 15. Increasingly, for instance, critical studies are taking into account psychological dimensions, as part of an exploration of the inner life.
 16. R. B. Schwartz, 'Johnson's Johnson', in *James Boswell's Life of Samuel Johnson: Modern Critical Interpretations* (ed. H. Bloom, New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 74.
 17. A number of these appear in *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* (Wilmette, IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1988). His Tablet of the Holy Mariner (*Bahā'ī*

of autobiography (i.e. writing one's own story) has also burgeoned. With the emergence of secularism in western society, the hagiographic function elaborated within the religious traditions has been modified rather than completely rejected. Modern biographies generally avoid questions of 'ultimate purpose',¹⁵ but proceed in the knowledge that 'each human life recapitulates common human experience'.¹⁶

Biography in the Baha'i writings

There seems little need to defend the practice of either history or biography in Baha'i discourse. The writings of Baha'u'llah are replete with references to history; those of 'Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi similarly draw on past events and persons when referring to present and even future concerns. Baha'u'llah immortalized the lives of those devoted to his cause and he referred to the lives of the past prophets and sages as being lives worthy of emulation. Furthermore, Baha'u'llah described his own experiences in his Tablets.¹⁷ Autobiographical references by him point to the worth of his experience, and allow the reader to compare the records of that experience with those of the lives of previous prophets.¹⁸

'Abdu'l-Baha recalled the lives of kings, rulers and learned in *The Secret of Divine Civilization* and extolled sincere Babi and Baha'i believers in *Memorials of the Faithful*.¹⁹ He suggested that contemplation of the lives of heroic Baha'is in Persia would set an example that others might aspire to follow, once advising that time be taken at the Nineteen Day Feast to:

... recount the high deeds and sacrifices of the lovers of God in Persia, and tell of the martyrs' detachment from the world, and their ecstasy, and of how the believers there stood by one another and gave up everything they had.²⁰

Thus we see that the intention of a work such as *Memorials of the Faithful* is to depict 'ordinary' people who, through their faith, do extraordinary things. Such stories inspire because they show the effect of faith on ordinary people.

Shoghi Effendi valued those who had served the Baha'i cause and referred to them in the most admiring and loving language. He frequently sent epitaphs when notified of the passing of individuals whose efforts to promote the Baha'i cause he cherished, and he instigated an 'In Memoriam' section from the fourth volume of *The Bahā'ī World*, a tradition that continued through the remaining volumes of *The Bahā'ī World* (vols. 4–20).²¹ The brief biographies that appear in official records, however, were never intended to set limits as to the treatment of individual life stories. To the contrary, Shoghi Effendi on several occasions referred to the need for further elaboration, which the pressure of his more compelling responsibilities as Guardian of the Baha'i Faith prevented him from exploring.

One feature that begins to emerge from a reading of Baha'i biographies is the diversity of personalities depicted, and the seeming lack of limitations on culture or social class represented. In what may be an unconscious evolution, the literature has, in the first 150 years of its tradition, produced studies ranging from the twin 'Great Souls' (the Bab and Baha'u'llah) to their followers of stations high and low alike, and even those who worked as servants and slaves.²²

The question as to whether accounts of the prophets are biographies or some other form of literature is left aside in this essay – except to say that any attempt to place them ‘outside’ risks dilution of scrutiny. The biographies of the central figures by Balyuzi combine the approaches of meticulous western scholarship and religious attachment to produce studies that are at once faithful to and somehow detached from their subjects.²³ David S. Ruhe acknowledges the hagiographic element in his biography of Baha’u’llah, *Robe of Light*, and suggests also that a cold objectivity is neither possible nor desirable:

A natural tendency to reflect a feeling for Bahā’u’llāh well beyond hagiography must be moderated through such objectivity as is possible so soon after the lifetime of the Prophet. Nevertheless, the author’s subjective emotional conviction has been sustained by a steadily deepening appreciation of the Great Soul.²⁴

Ruhe points to a shift in perspective that is gaining ground in the ‘post-modern period’. Consisting of many ungathered strands, it is a perspective that questions the certainties of much modern thought, particularly the idea that knowledge can be produced ‘objectively’, and in a way that determines some ‘absolute’ or ‘scientific’ truth. This new perspective is prepared to admit its own boundaries, and to seek validity through disclosure of its own limited capacities to find meanings. Such a perspective finds many parallels that are useful in approaching Baha’i biographical literature.

At this early stage in a new tradition, the lives of the central figures of the Baha’i Faith have been presented anecdotally more than through comprehensive narrative.²⁵ The life story of ‘Abdu’l-Baha has been told in such early studies as Myron Phelps’s *The Life and Teachings of Abbas Effendi* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Son, 1903), and more recently in Balyuzi’s *‘Abdu’l-Bahā: Centre of the Covenant of Bahā’u’llāh* (1971). ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s sister, Bahiyyih Khanum, has only recently become the subject of close biographical observation.²⁶ Shoghi Effendi has been the subject of an initial biography by his widow, Ruhyyih Rabbani,²⁷ and of numerous memoirs by early Baha’is.

Of the more than 50 individuals appointed ‘Hands of the Cause’ by Baha’u’llah and Shoghi Effendi, only a handful have to date been the subject of serious (English-language) biographies. Accounts of Rahmatu’llah Muhajir and Zikrullah Khadem have been written by family members, primarily using personal notebooks and diaries, with later revision and supplementation. Iran Muhajir considers the biography of her husband Rahmatu’llah Muhajir an incomplete record of the life of this man who ‘lived only to serve Bahā’u’llāh and who tried to carry out the instructions of the beloved Guardian to the best of his ability’.²⁸ The life story of Dorothy Baker has been written by her granddaughter, Dorothy Gilstrap,²⁹ that of Leroy Ioas by his insightful daughter A. Chapman.³⁰ Other Hands of the Cause who have been the subject of biographical treatment include Martha Root,³¹ George Townshend,³² Louis Gregory,³³ William Sears,³⁴ and John Esslemont.³⁵ Barron Harper has produced a volume of essays on all Hands of the Cause in *Lights of Fortitude*.³⁶ The majority of other Baha’i biographies focus on the first adherents of the Baha’i Faith in particular countries, and on pioneering activities.³⁷

Prayers, Wilmette: Bahā’ī Publishing Trust, 1991, 220–8) can be regarded as ‘metaphorical autobiography’. David Ruhe has included ‘every crumb of autobiographical material’ by Baha’u’llah in *Robe of Light: The Persian Years of the Supreme Prophet Bahā’u’llāh 1817–1853* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1994).

18. This, for instance, was one of the devices used by the Bab to prove his own prophetic statement; see Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 193–8. Whatever difficulties practitioners of Baha’i history may face, they do not equal those facing anyone who searches, for instance, for the ‘historical Jesus’.
19. ‘Abdu’l-Baha, *The Secret of Divine Civilization* (Wilmette, IL: Bahā’ī Publishing Trust, 1990); ‘Abdu’l-Baha, *Memorials of the Faithful* (Wilmette, IL: Bahā’ī Publishing Trust, 1971). This latter book contains short sketches of the lives of 73 followers of Baha’u’llah, including two women. ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s essays were written in 1915 and published in Persian in Haifa in 1924.
20. ‘Abdu’l-Baha, from a Tablet to an individual Baha’i – translated from the Persian, *Compilation of Compilations* (Mona Vale: Bahā’ī Publications Australia, 1991), vol. 1, 428.
21. *The Bahā’ī World* (vols. 1–12, 1925–54, rpt. Wilmette, IL: Bahā’ī Publishing Trust, 1980; vols. 13–14, Haifa: The Universal House of Justice, 1970–74; vol. 15–20, Haifa: Bahā’ī

- World Centre, 1976–98).
22. See for example, A. Q. Afnan, *Black Pearls: Servants in the Households of the Bāb and Bahā'u'llāh* (Los Angeles: Kalimāt Press, 1988).
 23. H. M. Balyuzi, *Bahā'u'llāh* (London: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1938); *Abdu'l-Bahā: The Centre of the Covenant of Bahā'u'llāh* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1972); *The Bāb: Herald of the Day of Days* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1973); *Bahā'u'llāh: a brief life, followed by an essay on the Manifestation of God entitled The Word Made Flesh* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1974); *Bahā'u'llāh, The King of Glory* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1980).
 24. Ruhe, *Robe of Light: The Persian Years of the Supreme Prophet Bahā'u'llāh 1817–1853* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1994), 180.
 25. Some of these are listed in G. Faizi, *Stories about Baha'i Funds* (New Delhi: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1993).
 26. The life of Bahiyiyh Khanum is currently remembered in numerous histories and in the compilation of letters to and from her, *Bahiyiyh Khānum, The Greatest Holy Leaf: A Compilation from the Bahā'ī Sacred Texts and Writings of the Guardian of the Faith and Bahiyiyh Khānum's Own Letters* (Haifa: Bahā'ī World Centre 1982). J. A. Khan, *Prophet's Daughter: The Life and Legacy of Bahiyiyh Khānum: Outstanding Heroine of the Bahā'ī Faith* (Wilmette, IL: Bahā'ī

Biography as *exemplum*

The traditions of hagiography in both Islamic and Christian literature have undoubtedly and quite understandably influenced much of early Baha'i biographical literature. Elements of *tarjama* (Islamic hagiography) are clearly evident, for instance, in Nabil-i-A'zam's account of the Babis, *The Dawn-Breakers*. So too is Mirza Abu'l-Faḍl's *Short Sketch of the History and Lives of the Leaders of This Religion* reflective of this style.³⁸ Typical of scholarship in both East and West at the time, Abu'l-Faḍl does not detail his sources, but does show that he has considered the evidence of writers who were supportive of his subjects, as well as those who were not, and he supports only those facts he is confident of.

More recent Baha'i literature also draws on the hagiographic and documentary Islamic and Christian traditions. This includes many biographies that appear in the 'In Memoriam' section of volumes of *The Bahā'ī World*. These are mostly based on the recollections of relatives or acquaintances and seldom rely on extensive use of documentary sources. They intend to honour the memory of their subjects and to acknowledge their contribution to the progress of the Baha'i Faith rather than to explore their individual contribution in detail. In fulfilling these functions, they encourage and inspire their readers and locate contemporary Baha'i activities against a background of worthy tradition. Furthermore, they establish a record of the past, which acts as an essential collective memory – a consciousness of the past – that strengthens individuals and communities as they operate in the present.³⁹

Baha'i literature also includes several valuable collections of what might be termed 'biographical essays'. Some of these are by a single author, such as O. Z. Whitehead's *Some Early Bahā'īs of the West, Some Bahā'īs to Remember, and Portraits of Some Bahā'ī Women*;⁴⁰ and Dipchand Khianra's *Immortals*.⁴¹ Multi-authored collections of this genre include *And The Trees Clapped Their Hands*, edited by Claire Vreeland, *Why They Became Bahā'īs*, compiled by Annamarie Honnold, and S. Sundrum's portraits of Malaysian Baha'is in *Mystic Connections*.⁴²

These volumes of biographical essays each cohere around a specific theme. Whitehead's first volume (*Some Early Bahā'īs*) narrates the lives of 23 individuals who met 'Abdu'l-Baha.⁴³ The volume edited by Vreeland includes both biographical and autobiographical accounts of pioneers, while that compiled by Honnold presents 34 autobiographies and 101 biographies of 'first generation Bahā'īs by 1963'. Khianra presents stories of Baha'is from the Indian subcontinent. Numerous essays from among these four sets of biographical essays rely on existing secondary sources and on primary materials offered by subjects' relatives and acquaintances; not one among them suggests any reliance on formally archived materials.⁴⁴

Baha'i biographical and autobiographical literature also includes an increasing number of works privately printed, or otherwise printed in small numbers, by family members or Baha'i communities and institutions.⁴⁵ Some works written in Arabic and Persian have been published in English translation.⁴⁶

For the most part these biographical essays are vehicles for *exempla* – for inspiration and the consolidation of tradition. Such exemplary biographies are not inherently problematic, but they may become so when tension results from differences between a writer's intentions and readers'

expectations, or else through the selective (non-)use of biographical evidence, leading in some instances to 'biographies of denial'.

The life story of Fatimah Zarin Taj Baraghani (also known as Ṭahirih = 'The pure one', and Quratu'l-'Ayn = 'Solace of the eyes'), for instance, is one still to be imagined from within its prism of both eastern and western biographic traditions. Being female, her learning did not satisfy the criteria of *tarjama*, and only her individual brilliance has saved her from being silenced like so many of her sister believers, as lamented in Bahiyyih Nakhjavani's insightful *Asking Questions*:

The pages of Nabil's *Dawn-Breakers* are filled with countless women. They ride beside their husbands and sacrifice their children. They are humiliated, beaten and raped. They are paraded on horseback as the heads of their sons and husbands are held aloft on pikes. They carry stones and build forts; they cut off their hair and use it to bind together the fracturing guns at Nayriz. They were no doubt among those who helped grind the bones of dead horses and who rushed out under cannon fire to gather the new grass to eat at Fort Shaykh Tabarsi. But they have no names and Nabil does not go out of his way to mention them ...⁴⁷

As a martyr for her Faith, her persona as 'heroine' is more familiar than her individuality. An instance of difference between author's intention and reader's expectation on the subject of Ṭahirih occurred in a critic's response to Martha Root's biography, *Tahirih the Pure: Iran's Greatest Woman*.⁴⁸ F. W. Ebner, who received a copy of Miss Root's book at the time of her visit to China in 1938, wrote in the *North-China Daily News*:

Were this book written primarily to show the life and influence of a nineteenth-century Persian woman who suffered martyrdom in her attempt to emancipate women, it would have resulted in a unique contribution to oriental biography. However, the author's interest in her subject, Hadrat-i-Tahirih, Her Highness the Pure One, has been secondary to her interest in the promotion of the Bahā'ī Faith. The review does not take exception to the purpose of the book as conceived by the author. He merely states that the ostensible purpose of the book seems to be of secondary concern.⁴⁹

While Miss Root gathered much of her material first hand, in Iran, her treatment of the life story of Quratu'l-'Ayn emphasized her role as champion of women's emancipation and Babi heroine rather than her individuality. Ebner, on the other hand, was evidently more interested in Ṭahirih's individuality as poetess and religious reformer.⁵⁰

Another instance of tension between biography as *exemplum* and narration of a unique life is related by anthropologist Michael Fischer. During extensive fieldwork in Yazd, Iran, Fischer befriended Nurū'llah Akhtar-Khāvarī, a Baha'i employed to handle international affairs at the Kerakhshan wool-spinning and weaving mill. Akhtar-Khavarī was a courageous advocate of his Faith, who was executed by the Khomeini government in 1980. In re-presenting the story of his life, Fischer recognized that 'two stories' could be told:

The more powerful one is of the exemplary figure, the modern man who had decided to operate in a very conservative society, not to badger or embarrass

Publishing Trust, 2005); M. Momen, 'The family and early life of Tahirih Qurrat al-'Ayn', *Bahā'ī Studies Review* 11 (2003), 35–52.

27. R. Rabbani, *The Priceless Pearl* (London: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1969).
28. I. F. Muhājir, *Dr Muhājir, Hand of the Cause of God, Knight of Bahā'u'llāh* (London: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1992), xvi. This biography takes a straightforward approach to the genre of biography, and many details noted in haste by Dr Muhājir while on his travels appear to have been transferred directly into the book without verification.
29. D. F. Gilstrap, *From Copper to Gold: The Life of Dorothy Baker* (Wilmette, IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1999).
30. A. I. Chapman, *Leroy loas: Hand of the Cause of God* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1998).
31. M. Garis, *Martha Root: Lioness at the Threshold* (Wilmette, IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1983).
32. D. Hofman, *George Townshend* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1983).
33. G. Morrison, *To Move the World: Louis G. Gregory and the Advancements of Racial Unity in America* (Wilmette, IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1982).
34. M. R. Sears, *Bill: A Biography of Hand of the Cause of God William Sears* (Eloy, AZ: Desert Rose Publishing, 2003).
35. M. Momen, *Dr. J. E. Esslemont* (London: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1975).

36. B. Harper, *Lights of Fortitude: Glimpses into the Lives of the Hands of the Cause of God* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1997).
37. See, for example, R. Weinberg, *Ethel Jenner Rosenberg: The Life and Times of England's Outstanding Baha'i Pioneer Worker* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1995). L. Rowden, *Hidden Bounties: Memories of Pioneering on the Magdalen Archipelago* (Ontario: Nine Pines Publishing, 1994).
38. Abu'l-Faḍl [Gulpaygani], *The Baha'i Proofs (Hujaj al-Bahiyih) and A Short Sketch of the History and Lives of the Leaders of This Religion* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1983).
39. Other examples include M. Gooljar, *The Teachers of the Baha'i Faith: The World is One Country and Mankind its Citizens* (New York: Vantage Press, 1986).
40. O. Z. Whitehead, *Some Early Bahā'īs of the West* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1976); *Some Bahā'īs to Remember* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1983); *Portraits of Some Bahā'ī Women* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1996).
41. *Immortals* (New Delhi: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1988) recounts the lives of 16 outstanding Indian Baha'is. Many of these brief biographies draw on the author's personal acquaintance with the subjects, in addition to drawing on previously published sources. Some outstanding Baha'is, such as Isfandiyyār Bakhtiyārī,

it, but to show a new and open mode of behaviour. The challenge here is to show how one operates in such a society: it is almost an ethnographic challenge, the kind of challenge that requires the eye of a novelist for local colour and knowledge of local detail. It is a challenge to describe how a society changes, sometimes moving in reactionary self-destructive directions, but nonetheless irrevocably changes, in ways involving considerable internal conflict. The exemplary individual as well as all other individuals have to make choices, have to negotiate pragmatic as well as moral decisions.

The other narrative that can be told – by far the weaker story, I think – is to turn Akhtar-Khavari into a standard Bahā'ī martyr. It is this that I fear will be his fate. I fear it not only because I will no longer recognize my friend, but also because he was larger than such stereo-typing allows. His personality (like every human being's) was unique: it was also graceful, informed, and forceful, and thus worth preserving.⁵¹

Fischer's understandable concern is that hagiographic treatment of Akhtar-Khavari would have a moulding effect, which would 'disembody' the authentic self. He sees the 'typing' of an individual as 'martyr' as a reduction of the subject, a shrinking of personhood into a brave but futile heroism. He regards the legacy of Nuru'llah Akhtar-Khavari not as 'a dialogue of martyrdom with Shi'ism' but 'the possibility of living in Yazd as if it were the twentieth century, as if one could live without fear of religious fanaticism, as if people could live and let live each by his or her own lights'.⁵² His purpose is not to 'denigrate the suffering or the heroism of Bahā'ī martyrs' but to 'raise for discussion the possibilities for more effective ways of countering the genocidal atrocities of the Khomeini regime'.

A survey of Baha'i biographical literature suggests that Fischer's fear has not been realized. In the first place, despite the many deaths of Babis and Baha'is in the nineteenth century and the continued martyrdom of Baha'is in both pre- and post-revolutionary Iran, these martyrdoms have not necessarily led to biographies of hagiographic intent and 'martyrdom' trope.⁵³ Second, the appearance of such literature, when it does eventually emerge, need not betray the individuality of the subject in the way that Fischer fears. For sacrifice of self is regarded as honourable in the Baha'i tradition as in those of the past, and lives that have been offered with the purest of motives will be remembered among the *exemplary*.

Anti-exemplum

If there exists a 'true path' for human endeavour and the refinement of character, there also exists a path of 'waywardness'. Where one is a path of faithfulness, the other is that of deceit, and one role of biography is to clarify the distinction between the two. Thus the central figures of the Baha'i Faith exalted the character and actions of the praiseworthy and noted the condition of its opponents for the purpose of instructing others in right conduct.

The extent to which accounts can vary in their evaluation of an individual's place in Babi and Baha'i history is illustrated in studies of the life of the Persian activist Jamālu'd-Dīn 'al-Afghānī' (1838/9–1897). Afghani was an Iranian of considerable intellectual and political capacity who wove

deception into every phase of his eventful life. Renowned Persianist Nikkie Keddie suggests that Afghani saw himself as a 'kind of prophet or messiah, destined to reform, reawaken, and reunite the Muslim world and free it from its infidel conquerors'.⁵⁴ While there is no doubt that Afghani knew much about the teachings of the Bab, his association was with Azali Babis – principally Shaykh Aḥmad Rūḥī and Mīrzā Āqā Khān Kirmānī.⁵⁵ Kedourie has suggested that during his last years in Istanbul Afghani associated with 'Persian Bābīs prominent in the dissemination of heterodoxy, and active in subverting the authority of the Persian Government',⁵⁶ and suggests that an anti-Babi article attributed to Afghani in the fifth volume of Butrus al-Bustānī's encyclopaedia *Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif* published in Beirut in 1881 was written by Bustani himself.⁵⁷ Shoghi Effendi, however, is clear in his assessment of Afghani's relationship to the early Baha'is, and describes Afghani as one of those 'enemies who have sedulously sought to extinguish the light of Bahā'u'llāh's Covenant':

The scheming Jamālu'd-Dīn Afghani, whose relentless hostility and powerful influence had been so gravely detrimental to the progress of the Faith in Near Eastern countries, was, after a chequered career filled with vicissitudes, stricken with cancer, and having had a major part of his tongue cut away in an unsuccessful operation perished in misery.⁵⁸

In this passage Shoghi Effendi combines judgement of character ('the scheming Jamālu'd-Dīn') with matters of historical fact relating to his political and physical decline. While few biographies have been written to date about those who occupied themselves in active opposition to the central Baha'i figures and to the Baha'i community itself, the references to their actions in such works as Shoghi Effendi's *God Passes By* suggests that such studies will in time be required in the ongoing search for historical understanding of past events.⁵⁹ Studies of the life of Mason Remey, for instance, will be required to understand the positive contributions made in his earlier life and the circumstances leading to his tragic defection following the passing of Shoghi Effendi, and also to correct the inaccuracies in both fact and interpretation offered in works such as that by Spataro.⁶⁰

Partial biographies

There are many individuals whose lives as Baha'is are only partially uncovered in the biographical literature. These include the famous film actress Carole Lombard, who did not live long after becoming a Baha'i; Queen Marie of Romania, whose allegiance to Baha'i principles is only marginally explored in the otherwise masterful study by Pakula,⁶¹ even if more fully developed by Marcus;⁶² and August Forel, world-renowned Swiss scientist, whose life is partially explored by Vader.⁶³

Roy Wilhelm (1875–1951), the trusted servant of 'Abdu'l-Baha designated a 'herald of Bahā'u'llāh's Covenant' and later a Hand of the Cause by Shoghi Effendi, is known to Baha'is for his service on the Baha'i Temple Unity Board (from 1909) and the North American National Assembly (from its inception in 1922 until 1946, when he retired at the age of 71); and especially for the property in New Jersey which became the East Coast Baha'i community's first summer school. Less well known is the fact that Wilhelm rose

Narayanrao Vakil and Pritam Singh are to an extent already known outside India; accounts of the lives of others, such as Knight of Baha'u'llah to Daman, Ghulām-'Alī Ibrāhīmī Kurlawala, are a significant contribution. As men were considerably freer than women in Indian society, only four women are described in *Immortals*, although several other chapters include mention of work achieved by men in partnership with their wives.

42. C. Vreeland, *And The Trees Clapped Their Hands* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1994); A. Honnold, *Why They Became Bahā'īs* (New Delhi: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1994); S. Sundrum, *Mystic Connections: Stories of Some Early Bahā'īs of Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust of Malaysia, 2003.)
43. The volume also includes the story of Queen Marie of Romania.
44. I make this observation cautiously, for an essay by this writer about Florence and Harold Fitzner that appears in *And The Trees Clapped Their Hands* relied greatly on archived materials, but footnotes to the essay were removed in keeping with the style and format of the volume; other essays in these works may have followed a similar path from research to publication.
45. Some recent examples include H. Falahi-Skuce, *A Radiant Gem: A Biography of Jinab-i Fadil-i Shirazi* (Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing, 2004); B. Fitzpatrick-

- Moore, *My African Heart* (Johannesburg: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1999); T. K. Foroughi (ed.), *My Love is My Stronghold* (New Delhi: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1995); F. Mayberry, *The Great Adventure* (Manotick, Ontario: Nine Pines Publishing, 1994); P. Matchett, *Down Memory Lane: The Autobiography of an Irish Baha'i* (Bangor, Co. Down: privately published, 1999). B. Sims, *In the Light of the Rising Sun: Memoirs of a Baha'i Pioneer to Japan* (Tokyo: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 2002).
46. Haydar Ali, *Stories from The Delight of Hearts: The Memoirs of Hāji Mīrzā Haydar-'Alī* (trans. A. Q. Faizī, Los Angeles: Kalimāt Press, 1980); A. 'Alizād, *Years of Silence: The Bahā'īs in the USSR, 1938–1946: The Memoirs of Asadu'llāh 'Alizād* (trans. B. R. Ma'ani, Oxford: George Ronald, 1999).
47. B. Nakhjavani, *Asking Questions: A Challenge to Fundamentalism* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1990).
48. M. Root, *Tahirih the Pure: Iran's Greatest Woman* (New York: Bahā'ī Publishing Committee, 1938).
49. *North-China Daily News*, 13 September 1938.
50. Ebner: 'A modern biographer might well find in Tahirih all the qualities which build a fascinating story. Miss Root has suggested these – a medieval society in the nineteenth century, the daughter of a Mohammedan priest who has cast aside the
- from being a high-school drop-out to become one of the largest coffee brokers in North America, a story better told in the pages of the *New York Times*.⁶⁴ Perhaps even less well known are the troubled formative years that prepared Wilhelm for a life of service. As recalled by Wilhelm's butler, Walter Blakely:
- Roy was born in Zainsville, Ohio. He went to school; when he got to high school he didn't like it so he ran away. His people found him and brought him back, then he ran again the second time, and he told me he covered his tracks thoroughly. He got a job as a pottery salesman on the road, what they called a 'drummer' in those days, and he used to go all over the US selling pottery, and finally he told me he saved up \$750. It was like \$7,500 now, and a confidence man came and cheated him out of it, which he said was a good thing, because he never got cheated again.
- Roy Wilhelm used to write to the Guardian every day. I used to mail them for him, and he used to get a letter back about once a week. He sent the Guardian an automobile, a brand new Buick, the best ever made. I picked it out, because Roy said 'you pick it out Walter, and pick out all the parts he will need for a number of years, 10 years'.⁶⁵
- Two valuable studies of recent times treat the lives of John Birks 'Dizzie' Gillespie and Bernard Leach.⁶⁶ Leach's Baha'i affiliation is widely known, but his struggles with religious ideas and values are only revealed through the meticulous scholarship of Cooper, an author principally concerned with Leach as potter but aware of the significance of the potter's Baha'i commitments.⁶⁷ While Shipton's study of Gillespie similarly focuses his subject from an artistic rather than religious point of view, his treatment of Gillespie's Baha'i commitments leaves the reader keen to know more.⁶⁸
- The black American philosopher Alain Locke (1886–1954) is another whose activities within the Baha'i community have only recently been assessed, with most biographies focusing on his achievements as philosopher and writer.⁶⁹ The Baha'i literature, conversely, notes Locke's involvement in race amity conferences in the 1920s without examining in any detail his work in philosophy.⁷⁰ Will van den Hoonaard has recently explored the notion of partial biography.⁷¹ In the Australian context, the life of 'Burnam Burnam', who gained fame for his upholding of Aboriginal rights (in 1988 he marked the bicentenary of Australia's 'founding' by claiming the White Cliffs of Dover on behalf of Australia – mocking Captain Cook's act two hundred years earlier claiming the Australian continent on behalf of the British crown) and documentation of Aboriginal culture, as depicted by Norst,⁷² could almost be mistaken as the story of a person other than Harry Penrith (1933?–1997), by which name this individual was known within the Baha'i community from the time of his first association with it in 1956 until his passing.
- Not all biographical subjects were in the public eye, and another source of 'partiality' in accounts is the obscurity of the subject, generally through lack of documentation. Thus Hellaby's account of *Sarah Ann Ridgway* admits after 90 pages exploring the life of the first Baha'i in the north of England that 'We have really very little to go on in trying to find out what kind of a personality Sarah Ann Ridgway was and of what kind of character.

Until she became a Baha'i there is literally no information to be unearthed on the matter...⁷³

Apart from the investigation of lives lived in loyalty to the Covenant of Baha'u'llah, there remains too the issue of lives lived outside it, or in wilful opposition to it. A small number of biographies focus on subjects who were not Baha'is, but whose lives intersected significantly with the Baha'i revelation. These include Edward Granville Browne, the Cambridge orientalist who devoted some three decades to the study of the Babi movement. Balyuzi's study *Edward Granville Browne and the Bahā'ī Faith* does not explore all facets of the scholar's life and work, but focuses, as the title suggests, on his activities and publications in relation to the religion and community of the Bab. More specifically, Balyuzi writes from the perspective of one who has examined Browne's early and later writings and who is puzzled at his increasingly contradictory and oftentimes disapproving conclusions.⁷⁴

Biography, it seems, cannot aspire to full re-presentation of a subject's life. Its function and purpose is, rather, to select and present facets of that life which the biographer finds important. In doing so, biography offers commentary on the significance of that life, and on the uniqueness of that life. In contemporary terms, one commentator has suggested, 'The biographer imposes pattern on experience to declare the comprehensibility of human existence. Learning of other people, we learn of ourselves.'⁷⁵ To aid the task of finding and commenting on meaning, biography makes use of such devices as *metaphor* and *critique*.

Biography as metaphor

St Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*:

Many things ... are done, which seem disallowable to men and yet are approved by thy testimony; and many things again are commended by men, which by thy testimony are condemned. For the appearance of the act is often different from the intention of him that doth it; and the precise circumstances of the time, which are hidden from us, must often vary.⁷⁶

The Christian tradition of biography developed metaphors with which to describe the evolution of the religious life, and against which to compare the specifics of the life of their subject. Vincent Brummer explains a three-stage growth process within the Christian tradition of mysticism, commencing with purification (or purgation), followed by illumination (or enlightenment) and finally ecstasy (or union). In the stage of purification one learns repentance, self-denial and humility.⁷⁷ This first stage is one of self-knowledge, a stage in which the 'spirit of God inflames our will with love. This is a love that is chaste, holy and ardent.'⁷⁸ The third level, union, is not possible in the mortal realm, although enlightened mystics may gain glimpses of it.

If a metaphor such as Brummer's is accepted, the biographical task becomes that of making evident the progress of the spirit as it becomes refined through the tests it encounters and endures in the material world. The stages of search, love, knowledge, unity, contentment, wonderment, poverty and absolute nothingness explored in Baha'u'llah's mystical work *The Seven Valleys* refers to stages that souls traverse in life in varying degrees

veil, one who contrary to custom carried on religious controversies with men and publicly took part in religious conferences. The author has described Tahirih as a "poetess whose work is sought by scholars in every land", yet but two of her poems are translated in an appendix. Oriental scholars of the character of Lord Curzon, Valentine Chirol and Sir Francis Younghusband have written of Tahirih with admiration. Abundant testimony of her remarkable personality and gifts exists. Yet this book cannot satisfy those who want an unbiased interpretation of that personality.' *North-China Daily News*, 13 September 1938.

51. M. M. J. Fischer and M. Abedi, *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990). See chapter 4, 'Social Change and the Mirrors of Tradition: Bahā'īs of Yazd', 247–8. Mr Nuru'llah Akhtar-Khavari was one of seven Iranian Baha'is martyred in Yazd on 8 September 1980, see *The Bahā'ī World*, vol. 18, 1979–1983, 291.
52. *ibid* 249–50.
53. One of the few monographs in English focusing on the theme is M. Labib, *The Seven Martyrs of Hurmuzak* (trans. M. Momen, Oxford: George Ronald, 1981).
54. N. R. Keddie, 'Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "Al-Afghani": A Case of Posthumous Charisma?', in *Philosophers and Kings*:

- Studies in Leadership* (ed. D. A. Rustow, New York: George Braziller, 1970) p. 170.
55. I am grateful to Dr Moojan Momen for pointing out these associations to me: email 20 May 2005.
 56. E. Kedourie, *Afghani and 'Abduh: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1966), 20.
 57. 'All that connects it with Afghani is the last sentence, which says: "This is what the well-known Sayyid Kamal al-Din al-Afghani and others have related concerning them." It may, of course be true that, sceptic as he was, Afghani had little use for the involved and abstruse speculations of the Bāb, but this would not prevent him from collaborating with his followers in a political cause.'
 58. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Committee, 1944), 317.
 59. Biographies of those who opposed the Baha'i central figures include R. Hollinger, 'Ibrahim George Kheiralla and the Bahā'ī Faith in America', in *From Iran East and West, Studies in Babi and Baha'i History*, vol. 2 (ed. J. R. Cole and M. Momen, Los Angeles: Kalimāt Press, 1984), 95–134. Much is known of the life of Mason Remey, a Hand of the Cause who broke the Covenant following the death of Shoghi Effendi, although no scholarly treatment of his life has appeared.
 60. F. C. Spataro, *Charles Mason Remey and the*

of intensity, which relate to varying degrees of capacity. This model has been explored in systematic theologies⁷⁹ but has seldom provided the foundation for biographical study. The literary subject might render the biographer's task easy by depicting his or her spiritual state on paper, but few people are so inclined, and the interpretation of their interior journey on the basis of their exterior one remains extremely difficult. The most accessible biographical subjects are those who themselves engaged in literature. Thus biographer Wendy Heller found Lidia Zamenhof a subject at once tragic and accessible.⁸⁰ Zamenhof was the daughter of Ludwik Zamenhof, a Polish Jew who created the language of Esperanto. She devoted herself to propagation of the Baha'i teachings through the medium of Esperanto language and culture, until her life was terminated by the Nazis of Hitler's Germany. Heller's treatment of Zamenhof's restless life excels in narrating her life journey against the backdrop of pre-war Europe, when Baha'i communities laboured innocently in the context of a mounting maelstrom.

The life cycle

More frequent use has been made of life cycles – the pilgrimage from childhood, to adolescence, to adulthood. This physical progression provides a metaphor for the spiritual journey that gives meaning to the physical: it offers a view on the quest for life – the conquering of self, the overcoming of desire; it seeks to examine the ways in which periods of crisis and test contributed to the subject's growth and development.

Various motifs recur in the depiction of the life cycle of an individual believer in the Faith of Baha'u'llah. These include the process of conversion/confirmation of faith, socialization (becoming familiar with the value system of the community), conversion encounters (acts of teaching the Faith to others), acts or episodes of service (e.g. participation in administration, propagation, scholarship and learning, defence of the Baha'i Faith).

Among the most successful biographies in exploring the life cycle are those by Marzieh Gail. In *Summon Up Remembrance*⁸¹ and *Arches of the Years*⁸² Gail graciously introduces the reader to the world as lived in by her parents, Ali Kuli Khan and Florence Breed, quite possibly the first Persian–American marital alliance and certainly a meeting of culture and learning on both sides. As a child witness to much that she records, Gail gives an account that benefits from her intimate association with her characters, and permits the reader not merely an understanding of the involvement of Khan and Breed in the affairs of the Baha'i community – whether in Persia, Palestine, Turkey, France or the United States – but insights into the influences that shaped the development of their characters, and the forces in the world at large that shaped their destinies.

Gail describes the heroic without creating generic heroes or heroines, and in this she follows Ruhe in instinctively developing another of the 'ungathered strands': the new framework for observation of lived lives does not seek to be prescriptive, does not set up 'personas' modelling or somehow defining a set of 'ideal' behaviours. That modernist effort to standardize our every action, to stifle difference, to create categories which we can clearly label as 'the heroic' teacher or defender of the faith, or the 'stalwart' and tragic martyr or saint, has been dismissed. Here instead is an effort to see subjects in their individuality, to find qualities of humility, of love, of

brilliance, of courage, in their specific locations, rather than in some predefined categories into which our infinitely diverse characters must somehow be put. Instead is the project of finding heroic acts in the ordinary and everyday, of observing the saintly in the common believer, as in the extraordinary person of some other time and place. Here is a biography of *difference*, of identification and examination of that sense of individuality that is to be achieved in the context of community. Here is celebration of the subject's consciousness of individual worth, of being at one with other believers and community rather than of being the same as all other believers.

Reformulating the biographical framework

Most contemporary biography seeks to convey not merely the facts and example of a subject's life, but interpretation and even evaluation of it. Most importantly, this critical approach has been encouraged by the presumption that an author occupies some superior and objective vantage point from which to view, and judge, the subject. 'In the recent past', it has been suggested,

the usefulness of a 'critical biography', one that purports to connect life and work, was thought to consist mainly in giving the work a limiting context ... Today, when the range of critical approaches has widened beyond the narrow verities of formal criticism, we are permitted an ampler view of critical biography. To understand any literary work requires, to begin with, a grasp of its genre and of its historical context. Equally essential is a personal context ... that biography provides to put the subject's work in adequate perspective. The work never provides sufficient information in itself for proper interpretations.⁸³

Exponents of the critical mode of biography suggest its superiority over traditional hagiography, and over mere chronologies and purely descriptive works. It could be argued, however, that extreme practices of both critical biography and hagiography are best avoided, and that the most satisfactory biography emerges from critical examination that constructs and contextualizes more than it merely deconstructs a life story.

The Baha'i writings provide immense insight into the nature of man and the purpose of existence and can assist in formulating the criteria upon which sound biographical enquiry may proceed. They create, on the other hand, a dilemma for the writer of biography. We know that humans are imperfect; the Baha'i teachings also tell us not to dwell on the faults of others. Since we also know that in the discipline of biography the biographer is challenged to reveal the life of the subject, how can such a life be revealed without displaying imperfections, and at the same time avoiding simple hagiography? If we are to reveal our subject – and we know subjects are imperfect – then we will reveal blemishes of character. But if we are true to the facts as we find them, and reveal blemishes of character, then we are exposing the faults of others, and this appears to be contrary to the spirit of the Baha'i teachings.⁸⁴ If, furthermore, we sift the facts to present a partial picture of our subject, dwelling only on those aspects that we think will show our subject in a positive light, we are in danger of distorting the reality of 'things as they are': how might the biographer resolve this dilemma?

Baha'i Faith (New York: Carlton Press, 1987).

61. H. Pakula, *The Last Romantic: A Biography of Queen Marie of Roumania* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1985).
62. D. L. Marcus, *Her Eternal Crown: Queen Marie of Romania and the Baha'i Faith* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2000).
63. J. P. Vader, *For the Good of Mankind: August Forel and the Baha'i Faith* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1984).
64. 9 July 1921, 8:7 – criticizes arbitrary regulations in new tariff bill; 15 March 1925, IX, 18:3 – praises commercial arbitration; 4 January 1936, 14:7 – letter on calendar charges; 21 November 1937, IV, 9:7 – letter on calendar; 21 December 1951, 27:5.
65. Interview with Walter Blakely, 28 August 1984, Burbank, Los Angeles.
66. Mention of Leach brings to mind Leach's lifelong friend Mark Tobey, the Baha'i artist responsible for introducing Leach to the Baha'i Faith. While Tobey's Baha'i affiliation is well documented in work examining his role in modern art, it cannot be said that his life has yet been given full biographical consideration. Recent academic work includes E. R. Kelley, 'Mark Tobey and the Bahai Faith: New Perspectives on the Artist and His Paintings', Ph.D. thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1983. The classic treatments are W. C. Seitz, *Mark Tobey* (New York: The Museum of Modern

- Art, 1962), and W. Schmied, *Mark Tobey* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1966).
67. E. Cooper, *Bernard Leach: Life and Work* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
 68. A. Shipton, *Groovin' High: The Life of Dizzy Gillespie* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
 69. C. Buck, *Alain Locke: Faith and Philosophy* (Los Angeles: Kalimāt Press, 2005). Johnny Washington, *A Journey into the Philosophy of Alain Locke* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994).
 70. Locke, who taught at Howard University, chaired sessions at the first 'race amity' convention in Washington in May 1921 and spoke at subsequent conferences in New York and Philadelphia (*The Bahā'ī World*, vol. 2, 1926–28, 23, 283). His essay 'impressions of Haifa' appeared in *The Bahā'ī Yearbook*, 1925, 81–8, and was repeated in *The Bahā'ī World*, vol. 2, 1926–28, 125–7 and *The Bahā'ī World*, vol. 3, 1928–30, 280–2. An 'In Memoriam' article by Charlotte Linfoot appeared in *The Bahā'ī World*, vol. 13, 1954–63, 894–5.
 71. W. C. van den Hoonard, 'Biographical Zoning and Bahai Biographical Writing: The Case of Rose Henderson', *Baha'i Studies Review* 12 (2004), 50–66.
 72. M. J. Norst, *Burnum Burnum: A Warrior for Peace* (East Roseville: Kangaroo Press, 1999).
 73. M. Hellaby, *Sarah Ann Ridgway* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2003).
- First, I suggest, the intention of Baha'i biography is not to *critique* for critique's sake, but to explore the relationship between a subject's conscious purpose and the fruit of the enactment of that purpose. Baha'i biographies are not stories of selves engaged in rational strategies towards fixed objectives, but voyages of beings through time and space, being tested as they approach stations of spirituality. Baha'i biography, in other words, attempts the depiction of enlightened ontological states, in which life meanings constructed in unique and specific circumstances accord with universal theological foundations; each human being has a specific path to tread, partly preordained, partly self-defined; each has a rational soul and a physical form, and possesses capacities of spirit, intellect and moral capacity which the life journey presents with opportunities to either develop or ignore, through the voluntary application of will. Interactions with the worlds of nature, of culture and of the spirit refine the soul for entry to a future (post-physical) life: such is the journey – should the biographer attempt to depict it.
- Second, since we understand that the highest capacities inherent in the person are to know (to seek knowledge of God), to love and to act, these capacities should emerge in biography, through consideration of an individual's spiritual concerns, mental development, relationships with others and use of will. In writing about the mind of an individual, furthermore, such an approach would be informed by the relationship between the spirit and the intellect as this is explained in the Baha'i writings.
- The juxtaposition of scriptural passages, which at one time stress individual 'nothingness' and at another celebrate individual worth suggests not contradictory elements within the Baha'i writings but the range of levels available for interpreting the worth of the self, and the individual life. Advocacy of self-effacement does not denote lessening of individual value, just as promotion of universal values does not deny the importance of particularity. Stories of the self thus find their importance at different levels. We must decide on some understanding of the self as the combined effects of physical, spiritual and intellectual selves. A mature biographer may feel confident to offer an evaluation of a subject's life; but those who write within a Baha'i perspective will temper their evaluation of the worth of the life of another human being through consciousness of the biographer's own limited access to a suitable plane from which to judge. Baha'u'llah's admonitions to observe the good and to ignore the shortcomings of others discourage the hasty passing of judgement. The more we consider the immensity of the task, however, the less we feel inclined to assume the role of 'judging observer'.
- No biography can fully 'represent' a life story. It can, at best, provide a well-intentioned 're-presentation' of that story. Furthermore, the qualities of such a re-presentation are determined by several factors, including the intentions of the author and the nature of the records disclosed. Biographies are 'source-dependent', in that the extent to which the life of another may be 're-presented' depends much on the quality and quantity of records – written or otherwise – that remain. To textualize lived experience is to theorize it, to place a grid on it. The *tarjama* and hagiography are examples of such grids. They provide conventions and criteria for appraising a subject's acts. Least accessible are 'inner motives', which are rarely exposed,

except perhaps in autobiographical accounts, which are in and of themselves not a guarantee of authenticity.

A well-crafted biography grounded in Baha'i texts would address the nature of the individual person, noting his or her elemental qualities and underlying motivations. It would, furthermore, be informed by past traditions. Existing traditions of biography need not be rejected. To the contrary, the positive functions of each must necessarily be drawn on in the quest for more encompassing approaches to life writing. Certain steps are required, however, to transform brief adulatory and uncritical accounts into more substantial biographies. These seek to position a subject in context and, beyond that, seek to make a judgement, or an evaluation, of the subject's significance. I have suggested also that a biography should examine notions of public and private selves and distinguish between active and passive, or contemplative, facets of individual existence – between the capacity to reflect and the will to act. Such 'spiritual biography' – if it can be so called – must additionally be constructed on the bases of well-considered conceptions of the terms 'person' and 'society'. But all of these biographical objectives are subject to the availability of evidence and literary devices that can use this evidence to 're-present' their subject. The self is always in some relation to an order and biography is text that seeks to represent this relationship.

On the foundation of the arguments laid out in brief above, Baha'i biography is essentially the depiction in literature of moral heroism. Its exponents and readers must, therefore, consider deeply what concept of hero they seek to establish. We are most familiar with the hero/heroine whose exploits are apparent in the physical world and in the 'public' arena, and whose travels and exploits are well documented in the source literature. But the concept of the heroic conveyed in Baha'i scriptures includes heroes and heroines whose arenas for victory are the 'inner life', or the life at home in the family – lives far less accessible to the biographical process. The 'hero', thus, need not be famous, and what is 'heroic' need not be 'public'. Thornton Chase led a significant Baha'i life which examination shows to be one of daily and for the most part anonymous struggle.⁸⁵ An integrating and unifying personality may not be one that takes the lead, stands out, and breaks new ground. Such an integrating personality may make no specific, outstanding contribution and hence not attract individual attention. But such a life is quite an achievement, an outstanding contribution in its own way, worthy of celebration, worthy of examination. In this category we can include such works as Douglas's description of her parents' mixed-race marriage,⁸⁶ and Szepesi's account of life as a migrant.⁸⁷ The life of Thomas Breakwell was short, undocumented, but spiritually potent.⁸⁸

In this essay I have suggested that the contexts in which Baha'i biography is written include each of the existing cultural and religious traditions. The hagiographic traditions of Christianity and Islam have influenced Baha'i biographies toward depictions of subjects as exemplars, as heroes, saints and martyrs. In the 'modern' biography the 'religious' or 'spiritual' orientation of life stories has given way to more secular views of the origins, character and motivation of the 'human spirit'. The modernist tradition has also allowed for representations of 'ordinary' believers, and for critical accounts that value factual accuracy as much as representations of 'ideal' personas.

74. H. M. Balyuzi, *Edward Granville Browne and the Bahā'ī Faith* (London: George Ronald, 1970). Nineteenth- and twentieth-century Iran yielded a number of individuals who were not Baha'is but whose relationships with the Baha'i community await closer investigation. One thinks of the nationalists Malkam Khan and Jamal'u'd-Din 'Al-Afghani'.
75. Patricia Meyer Spacks, 'Gossip', in Bloom (ed.), *James Boswell's Life of Samuel Johnson*, 144.
76. St Augustine, *The Confessions of St Augustine* (London: Collins 1957), 84–5.
77. V. Brummer, *The Model of Love: A Study in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). It is interesting to note that these conditions are expressed in the Baha'i Long Obligatory Prayer.
78. *ibid* 62. 'Chaste love' means, to Brummer, love for the sake of love itself, not for some other interest. He gives the example of a servant who may love his master for the wages he is paid, rather than through any love invoked by the master's personal qualities.
79. See, particularly, J. Savi, *The Eternal Quest For God: An Introduction to the Divine Philosophy of 'Abdu'l-Bahā* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1989); and J. A. McLean, *Dimensions in Spirituality* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1994).
80. W. Heller, *Lidia: The Life of Lidia Zamenhof, Daughter of Esperanto* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1985).
81. M. Gail, *Summon Up Remembrance* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1987).

82. M. Gail, *Arches of the Years* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1991).
83. F. Brady, 'James Boswell: Theory and Practice of Biography', in Bloom (ed.), *James Boswell's Life of Samuel Johnson*, 99–100.
84. I am thinking here also of the seeming impossibility of knowing the 'real' person, as opposed to knowing the 'façade' that a subject presents to the world. In the context of Japanese culture, Takeo Doi, *The Anatomy of Self: The Individual in Japanese Society* (New York: Kodansha, 1986), refers to the *omote* (the 'face', or the front of things) and the *ura* (that which is hidden, for instance, that which remains secret in the mind). The Baha'i writings warn of the error of cultivating a public persona that differs markedly from the 'inner life and private character' which is only known to God; contemporary philosophers speak of 'authenticity' in the construction of identity.
85. R. H. Stockman, *Thornton Chase: First American Bahā'ī* (Wilmette, IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 2002).
86. D. Douglas and B. Douglas, *Marriage, Beyond Black and White: An Interracial Family Portrait* (Wilmette, IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 2002).
87. A. Szepesi, *Dreams, Nightmares and Dreams Again* (New Liskeard, Ontario: White Mountain Publications, 2000).
88. R. Lakshman-Lepain, *The Life of Thomas Breakwell* (London: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1998).

Rather than privilege one of these traditions above any other, however, this paper has suggested that the Baha'i biographical project, in keeping with the facility that underlies Baha'i theological and philosophical pursuits, accommodates a range of biographical devices. This flexibility in approach will allow Baha'i authors to continue to draw on the skills of the craft elaborated across many generations, divergent cultures and traditions, yet draw on the Baha'i scriptures for inspiration productive of new insights into how lived lives can be depicted in literature.

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