

THE FASHIONING OF A BAHÁ'Í HISTORICAL NOVEL

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The novel as an enduring form of artistic expression and popular entertainment had its start in the East with *The Tales of Genji* in the tenth century A.D., and six hundred years later in the West with the publication, *Don Quixote*. The first historical novel appeared over two centuries later, in 1814, with Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley*.

Within the Bahá'í Faith, fiction writing is a newly developing field in which beliefs, doctrine and history can be appealingly presented to the non-Bahá'í public and through which the believers themselves can glean more about their religion in an entertaining way. Currently there are seven novels in English written by Bahá'ís portraying their Faith: *All's Dream*, *From Discontent: The Biography of a Mystic*; *The Touchstone of Sincerity*; *A Sudden Music*; two which can be categorized as historical fiction, *Fire and Blood* and *From Behind the Veil*, and the most recent, a young adult novel, *Nothing in Common*. Along this path of burgeoning tradition, then, I have set my feet in writing *The Persian*.¹

It all began over a decade ago with a single character: Robert Grayson. I knew him, I had experienced his feelings, and was privy to his thoughts and motivations. Other characters, too, soon emerged although their names were to undergo a series of changes. The heroine, for example, had begun as Elizabeth Randsorn, became Leslie Anders, then finally with a little help from Merriam-Webster, emerged as Meredith Emery. Her nickname 'Meri', fitted in well with the late Victorian Era in which the novel is set. Emery, interestingly enough, is a German derivation of 'Amerigo', the source of the name America. This is significant to the story, since Meredith is the only character in the nearly 650 pages who is American.

During one revision, even the name "Grayson" was discarded for a more solid British surname, until someone² observed that "gray," being neither black nor white, was indicative of the protagonist's ambivalence towards the spiritual matters that were destined to lead him to scholastic renown. Robert's 'grayness' is illustrated in a debate he inadvertently gets into at his father's club:

"My, you are sympathetic!"

"Don't misunderstand me," (Grayson hastened to say), "There are just as many ill-mannered, lying and deceiving among the people of Persia as there are among the British. One avoids them in Persia as one avoids them here. But by and large, the Persians are a most clever and resourceful people. Their love of life is so refreshing to see. You can't help but join them in their celebrations and their sorrows."

¹ *The Persian* is an unpublished novel, therefore the numeration used in the references relates to the chapter and scene in which the passage appears. The author has not employed diacritical markings for the Persian/Arabic transliterations, nor have the personal pronouns relating to the Bahá'í Central Figures been capitalized, since the novel was written for the non-Bahá'í public. The title was suggested by Robert Parry to whom I owe a debt of gratitude.

² I am grateful to Michael Higgins for reading a draft of the novel and making this and other perceptive observations and suggestions.

"They have certainly captured your heart, Robert!"

"And these Babis?" McGovern asked, sitting down to be at eye level with his protégé. "Have they also captured your soul?"³

The room fell silent at the directness of the question. Even Robert found himself unnerved for an instant. He said nothing, only sat staring into the depths of the man's brooding eyes.

"It would appear so," one of the others commented, recalling to the man's minds Grayson's account of his meetings with Bábí leaders. The descriptions of them were decisively marked with admiration.

"Robert, what have you to say?" McGovern prompted. . . .

"Some speculate you have apostatized," Patterson [said].

"Obviously he has," snorted a banker in a nearby chair as he got up to replenish the whiskey in his empty glass.

Robert [rejoined]: "Simply because I feel the teachings of the Bab and Baha are what is needed for Persia does not imply that I see them as the solution for the world, or even for myself. It is simply a well-founded theology---"

"Ideology," Seeley corrected sternly.

With a side-long glance at the clergyman, Grayson went on, "---One that I feel deserves to be set down as scientifically as possible so that the public - people like yourselves - can decide its merits."

"Yet," McGovern asserted, "you're not at all dispassionate about it. How can you imagine you are being objective?"

The thunderbolt had struck again.

The vicar joined the attack. "Where, exactly, are your sentiments in this matter? In the Book of Revelation the Lord has said that if one is neither hot nor cold he will be spewed from His mouth. Take heed, Robert. Take heed!" (*Persian*: XXXV:xi)

The family name of Grayson, therefore, will stay.

Arteta Jaffe, a contemporary of Carl Jung, observed that: "Man, with his symbol-making propensity, unconsciously transforms objects or forms into symbols (thereby endowing them with great psychological importance) and expresses them in both his religion and his visual art" (*Man and His Symbols* 232). This can be extended to include the written word, if we define a symbol as Merriam-Webster does, as "something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance. . . ."

Quadriano writes: "The recognition of symbolic content has been important in the creation and appreciation of art, poetry and music since the 19th century. . . ." (qtd in *Encyclopedia of Psychology* 4:319). Symbolism is the very essence of poetry, making it evocative. The words become pictures that call forth an emotional response. Literature, too, employs symbolism, albeit in a much broader form. Often these

³ McGovern is in fact referring to the Bahá'ís, for even as late as the first decade of the 1900's the Bahá'ís were still confused with the Bábís. In scholarly circles (refer to the works of E.G. Browne), the Bahá'ís were seen as an offshoot of the Bábí Religion, with the followers of Mirzá Yabýá Subh-i-Azál, being an opposing branch. Both were lumped under the Bábí appellation.

metaphoric representations are "accidental resemblances" - those unconscious inventions of a writer which readers and scholars of literature alike delight in bringing to light.

As seen in the above excerpt, Robert Grayson strongly identifies with Persia. It wasn't my intention to make that country a symbol of the richer, deeper meanings in life; it turned out that way. And this significance prevails throughout the novel. In the first chapter, in a conversation between Grayson and Kamāl Mirzā, the Persian prince asks the Englishman what his interest in Persia is. Grayson replies:

"The country has an impressive history, the people are clever and imaginative, to which their art and literature bear eloquent testimony."

"But surely you can say the same of Arabia, Turkey and India whose languages you've also studied."

"No. None match the greatness and splendor of Ancient Persis. Who is there to rival Rumi, Hafiz and Sa'di?"

"Ah! Then it's something mystical, not logical. Nor concrete." (*Persian* I:iii)

In a letter to a friend in England, Grayson makes a direct link:

"Is it too difficult to believe I am returning after only nine months? Terry, old boy, you know my great love for this country. Indeed, it is very difficult to say good-bye to this land that has given me so much. (And how I was looking forward to seeing Tabriz, Zanjan . . . !) Yet viewing the situation pragmatically, I cannot but realize that my future here is limited. At college I feel I can do much more to help improve the way our countrymen view Persia. For it is one of my greatest goals to help Iran and its peoples in anyway I can.

"Then there are the Babis. They are the promise of the revival of the glory of ancient Persis. Their teachings are the key---a religious doctrine of such power that only that of Christ can possibly compare. . . ." (*Persian* XX:1)

To the end there is a powerful bond between Grayson and Persia. In the last chapter Meredith tells Grayson's closest colleague:

"[Robert] had grown a beard and looked almost native. His love for Persia never waned. In spite of his success and many years at the college, he never failed to identify with the land and its people. Perhaps you would say in light of your belief in reincarnation, that he had once been a Persian in some previous life. You should have seen him. Within weeks of our arrival there, he was a completely different person."

Hart smiled at the image. "Yes, he was that way, wasn't he? I had forgotten. . . ." (*Persian* XI:VI:xi)

Sometimes symbolism is used intentionally by an author. This is true in my case with the characters of Terrence Thurston and David Hart. I intended from the beginning that they were to be more than just movers of plot.

Terrence Thurston is Grayson's best friend in London. The two have interests in medicine and the middle east in common. Thurston is the personification of all the good in Grayson; he is Grayson's spiritual side. I portray this in a scene where he encourages Grayson to pursue his investigation into Bahá'u'lláh's claims:

[Grayson] looked up, absently gauging the clouds and eventually returning his eyes to Thurston. "I don't know, Terry. I have things that must get finished. I haven't time to bother with this tiresome issue. . . ."

Thurston's fine features became grave. "At least follow through for Meredith's sake if for no other reason. It isn't fair to her not to know precisely where you stand. Prove her wrong or prove her right, Rob, but don't leave the matter in mid-air. . . ."

"I suppose you are right, of course." Grayson's gaze strayed again.

"But where does one begin?"

"Start by defining the term 'manifestation.' And in all fairness you must use Meredith's meaning of the word, for it is that concept which you want to disprove."

Grayson sank back, turning the word over in his mind. "All right. To my understanding a manifestation is a man endowed by God with innate knowledge. Through this knowledge he is able to foretell the future, and instruct mankind in the ways pleasing to God. These 'instructions' are written down and eventually come to effectuate positive and dynamic change in the world. How do I apply these to Bahá'u'lláh? We know how Christ's message has shaped the world. But Baha. . . ."

"You've read his writings. Do they reflect innate knowledge? Supposedly fulfillment of a prophecy Bahá'u'lláh gave in a letter, was proof enough for Mirzá Abú'l-Faiz. It must have been a powerful confirmation for him because he forsook his career, his reputation, all that had gone before to follow Bahá. That man's life has been changed."

"For the better?" Grayson looked skeptically at his friend. . . . His head sank; he was thinking again. "No," he said, "I want to begin with the Báb. I want to prove that Baha could not be *Mán-Yuzhiruhu'lláh*."

Thurston cringed inside, but he responded evenly, "All right, then. You have a starting point. But beware that it is done with an open mind.

That is all I ask--for Meri's sake." (*Persian* XLIII:1)⁴

David Hart, at Oxford, on the other hand, represents Grayson's material side. This is clear in the following scene where he is instrumental in hurrying Grayson from his task:

Grayson greeted his colleague, then put his head back into the book.

Hart threw himself into the most comfortable chair, looking the epitome of relaxation.

"Going great guns at something, I see. Our project, I hope."

⁴ Since Woman is sometimes used to signify Man's soul (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Questions* 123, 126), an illuminating exercise would be to replace 'Meri,' 'Meredith and 'her' in this passage with 'your soul.'

Another interesting interaction between these symbols occurs when, after traveling to Paris to meet Mirzá Abú'l-Faizl, Thurston initially confides his new spiritual insights, not to Grayson, but to Grayson's soul-symbol, Meredith (*Persian* XLIII:1v).

"Unfortunately not. Some Babi research."

"This has got to be absurd," said the historian, sinking deeper into the chair. "I thought you were done once and for all with that worthless business."

"I was, but . . . I am doing this for a friend."

"You are impossible sometimes. What more can be said? It must be something very important, very important indeed to keep you sequestered on a day like today. I thought you'd be eager for a row, though cricket is rather what I fancy." His eyebrows went up inquiringly.

The orientalist glanced at the book which lay open before him. He turned a page, and then another, then stopped. It had been a perplexing study, and still nothing was clear. How could Meri so readily accept those childish notions of 'the will of God'? How on earth could any kind of solid scholastic enterprise be based upon that! At this moment he wished he could have the ease and luxury of such a comfortable existence. Exhausted from research that didn't particularly excite him, he felt the strong pull of the River of Temptation. He looked across at his colleague so relaxed. "Give me a minute to change." (*Persian* XII.III.ii)

It is reasonable, then, that at nearly the same time as Grayson first receives a hint of the new revelation while on a good-will mission to the *Siyāh Chādi* in Thiran, Thurston, his spiritual representation, is sitting through negative words about some false prophet called the Bāb at a gathering of Persian men in London (*Persian* V.ix; VI.i). This association is further reinforced in the novel, when years later during 'Abdu'l-Bahās ministry, Grayson and his spirit-symbol, again in Persia and England, respectively, independently declare their belief in Bahā'u'llāh. (*Persian* XLV.x; XLVI.x.ii)⁵

In contrast, David Hart becomes master of the college, and with apparent effortlessness, arrives at the pinnacle of academic esteem for which Grayson has all along been striving. Before Grayson acknowledges Bahā'u'llāh's station even to himself, subtle distancing has already begun between these two old friends.

Much to my surprise, I discovered that this representation of Grayson's dual nature also appears in the characters of the two women he must decide between:

"Tell me, Robert, what you really think of Helen? I realize I am her father, but you can be frank with me." When the don wasn't immediately forthcoming with a reply, (Joseph) Townshend added: "It appears to me that you are rather fond of her."

Grayson's eyes strayed for an instant, but when he returned them to his host there was no loss of confidence behind them. "Yes, I admit that I find her a handsome woman. And she is remarkably conversant in eastern topics."

⁵ Here again we see the important role Persia plays in Grayson's life: this land "of his heart and soul" (*Persian* XXI.vi), is not only where his spiritual conception takes place, but after a gestation period marked by conflict and apathy, Grayson is spiritually born there, too.

"She is also sensible," Townshend asserted, "and quite capable in anything she attempts. She has a definite strength of character. But then you probably know this already. She goes after what she wants. . . . And she is a fighter, Grayson, when it comes to the position of her family. Knowing Helen's personality, I can say with near certainty that you would have well-behaved children and a household overflowing with unerring stability. She is a damned efficient manager. Cleanliness and propriety are her backbone. But then, that is apparent. Now, tell me how this Miss Emery can possibly compare." (*Persian XXXVII:1*)

The next morning on the train back to Oxford:

. . . Grayson returned to those thoughts that had plagued him over the last seven hours: his dialogue with Joseph Townshend. . . .

What he had left unsaid was that Meredith had some very definite points in her favor. . . .

[She] was bright and clever, and assertive in ways Helen would never think to be. Her views of life and the world were broad. Her sympathy for the Persians extended beyond the everyday social conventions.

He thought of her unselfish hours with Sadig. It was by no means decorum. She [tutored him] because of her human concern for the young man. She was intelligent and well-read. She was even gifted. Grayson had never known any student as quick and thorough to learn languages as she. Her Farsi was outstanding; and her Arabic was moving along remarkably well.

But more importantly, she challenged him, offered him new ways of perceiving matters. She was no 'yes darling, whatever you say' girl.

Townshend spoke of strength. There was no question that Meredith's bordered on the courageous and the bold. Grayson shuddered to think that had it not been for her courage, he might well be at this very moment in some appalling circumstance somewhere. (*Persian XXXVII:11*)

Clearly, Helen Townshend personifies the solid material qualities, whereas Meredith Emery symbolizes the spiritual. Grayson himself admits as much to Meredith when she announces to him her acceptance of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation:

As they walked on [Grayson] was not thinking of her. Her statement of faith had taken him back in time, back to his first sojourn in Persia, back to Heshmat the gardener, to his visitation to the House of the Báb, and those subtle feelings he had all but lost. She had felt them, too. But unlike himself, she had responded.

"I was just now thinking," he replied, "of the excursion to the Near East. Out of all the three women, you were the most...remarkable. Mrs. Gilman proved to be nothing less than a frightful abomination. Miss Townshend. . . . Miss Townshend was all one would expect from a well-bred Englishwoman—dependable, stalwart, courageous. But you, you were all that and more. For you had spirit, and a depth of compassion and understanding that she could never have." He stopped

and looked into the azure of her darkened eyes. "I wish you could realize how ridiculous all this is and accept to continue your work for me. You are an efficient and precise helper. I've never had any complaints with your work--"

"No," she responded, agonizing over the circumstances. She wanted so much to carry on with the work, but knew it wasn't right to aid a project that she felt was unworthy of pursuit.

"Oh well," Grayson said, abruptly, not looking at her again, "it is all the better. Historiography is an exact science. One must be detached to view the facts clearly." He nodded, turning his eyes to the solitary boat on the river. (*Persian* XXXV:xii)

Unlike David Hart who remains on stage throughout, Helen Townsend fades into the backdrop immediately after Grayson realizes his attachment to Meredith.

Because *The Persian* is an historical novel, the characters relate in varying degrees to the dismissal of the Persian Minister to London, Malkam Khan; to Effie's newly erected creation for the World Exposition of 1889 in Paris, and the Shah's trip to London immediately after; the Tobacco Regie; the rise to power of Siyyid Jamshid-Din-i-Afghani; the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh in 1892; the assassination of the King of Persia four years later; the subsequent martyrdom of Varqá and Rúhulláh; and finally to the 1903 upheavals in Isfáhán and Yazd.

More than a mere tale of history and romance, however, *The Persian* is an allegory of the eternal struggle between the Intellect and the Spirit.

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