

# ***Qiblah* and *Qabbalah*<sup>\*</sup> : Comparativizing<sup>†</sup> Jewish Provenance of Contemporary American Literary Theory from a Pakistani Perspective**

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## **Abstract**

Back in 1970's, Harold Bloom, a Jewish American literary critic, announced the advent of a new critical paradigm on the American literary scene that was to replace the earlier Christian-Aristotelian and Christian-Platonic paradigms. Bloom called this new paradigm the 'Kabbalistic model'. Moving along the fault-lines of the Kabbalistic grounds upon which the edifice of the contemporary American literary theory was to rest, with a view to explore and possibly penetrate the fissures, this paper suggests the possibility of comparativizing a 'poetics of tradition', metonymized here through the sign of *qiblah*. Despite seeming to share a certain semantic field by virtue of a possible etymological affinity in the senses of 'reception' and 'tradition', it may well be taken as a historically attested opinion that the two terms seek to generate quite divergent critical paradigms. As compared to *qabbalah*, a paradigm that has given rise to a whole range of de-centered critical approaches (a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' as against a 'hermeneutics of faith', to use Paul Ricoeur's terms), *qiblah* terminologically designates a centre and a direction that has the function of regulating all the spiritual and cognitive practices of its adherents.

Back in 1960's, even before Bloom made an open acknowledgement of the Jewish provenance of the coming American literary theory, a senior Pakistani critic, while demonstrating his awareness of the imprints the new American critical trends were inevitably to make on the sub-continental

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<sup>\*</sup> The already present assonance and consonance in the two terms has drawn me into adding alliteration to further approximate the terms at least on phonetic grounds. Hence, my spelling the Jewish mystical tradition with a *q*, an accepted but a relatively less frequently used letter than *k* in the writings of Jewish theorists at present.

<sup>†</sup> I use 'comparativize' rather than 'compare' not only to bring out the systemic character of the similarities and differences being discussed in the paper but also to *push through* the insulated moulds in which objects of comparison are usually kept. Note that the verbal suffix (-ize) suggests deliberate action.

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criticism, advised a young aspiring Indian critic to be ‘cognizant of these new trends’. Muhammad Hasan Askari warned Shamsur Rahman Farooqui of the impossibility of taking any ‘right step’ in the emergent critical scenario ‘without an appropriate understanding of *tasawwuf*’. Taking Askari’s advice, the paper seeks to elaborate the perspective of a ‘poetics of tradition’ from a comparative viewpoint. From a Pakistani perspective, the need for such a comparativizing move arises out not only from the possibility of a more expanded understanding of the Anglo-American revisions of the notion of tradition, but also, and rather more urgently, from the necessity of rethinking an almost unconditional allegiance even the Urdu critics at times seem to swear to the plethora of various critical ‘isms’ that are incessantly ejaculating out of the paradigm of de-centeredness.

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## I

The Fools from among the people will say: What hath turned them from the Qibla to which they were used?’ Say: to God belong both East and West: He guideth whom He will to a Way that is straight. Thus have we made of you an *Ummat* justly balanced, that ye might be witnesses over the nations....

*Al Qur’an*, 2: 142-143

As a preamble, let me suggest that my call for comprativizing the predominant critical paradigms in the contemporary American literary setting may have been through a relatively straightforward and simple argument, had it not been for the fact that the argument has to wade through the symptoms of a history of repression in western criticism. Such repression has actively operated in the determination of what is generally named as ‘tradition’. Barbara Johnson acknowledges that

[B]y rereading the texts of writers and philosophers that have made any difference to Western history, it might be possible to become aware of the repressions, the elisions, the contradictions and the linguistic slippages that have functioned unnoticed and that undercut the certainties those texts have been read as upholding.<sup>1</sup>

One could perhaps use the comment to conveniently characterize the critical treatment meted out to works like Asin Palacios’ *Islam and the Divine Comedy* at a time when the likes of T.S. Eliot were posing full confidence in the Christian Thomist synthesis as the motivating force

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Johnson, ‘The Surprise of Otherness: A Note on the Wartime Writings of Paul de Man’, in *Literary Theory Today*, Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan, (eds.), (Oxford: Polity Press, 1990), p.21.

behind one of the most celebrated poems in modern western history. But Johnson's comment rather is in connection with Paul de Man's participation through his wartime writings in the repression of the Jewish influence on western literature and intellectual culture. De Man, ironically, could be taken as a significant contributor to the return of this repressed. To recall Schlegel's irony of irony, de Man's repressive gestures themselves remained repressed throughout his illustrious career as an avant-garde theorist and only returned after his death in 1980's.

Through the critical contributions of Freud, Lacan, Derrida, Bloom, Hartman and many others, one would feel that the Jewish repressed has made a powerful and a rather overwhelming return not only to the western critical scene, but swept away even the so-called eastern poetics as well. Although the Jewish critical return looks to adhere as much to a familiar Eurocentricity that Matthew Arnold would propose for critical enterprise (Harold Bloom insists that Kabbalah, after which he names the postmodern critical paradigm, is an 'Occidental method'),<sup>2</sup> most of even our Urdu critics and academics seem to have taken an oath of allegiance at the hands of western critical developments to regulate their own critical practice. Criticism courses in Urdu departments usually begin with Aristotle and come down to various abstruse postmodernisms, with all the noble efforts at translation directed towards the treatises from Eliot to Showalter. Critical histories in Urdu inform us that any systematic criticism in Arabic and Persian is only subsequent, and by implications subservient, to the translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* into these languages, most often without critically problematizing the phenomenon, even if the case is really so.

East or West, there seems to be a disconcertingly concerted effort, albeit rather non-deliberate in the former case, at undermining the possibility of any Islamic contribution to formation and development of literary thought. The unilaterally porous divide between eastern and western critical discourses in this case perhaps allows only a one-sided seeping of the influence, instead of a bilateral informing of the critical discourses. Such repression is not without a history that, in all its classical, modern and postmodern variations, has been recorded here and there by the western scholars themselves. J.M. Cocking, for instance, writing about the uneasy relationship between the medieval European scholars and the Muslims, notes:

...those Europeans who knew the Arabs through living with them in Spain or reading them in Latin translation realized

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<sup>2</sup> Harold Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (NY: Continuum, 1975), p.53. (Henceforth referred to as *K & C*).

that the Arab way of life and intellectual achievements could offer a great deal from which the West could profit. But also... the Muslim religion was danger, and in the intellectually sophisticated forms provided by its philosophers was a formidable rival to its present religion whose dogmas were perhaps at that stage less cogently defended.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Gerald MacLean makes a case against considering the Renaissance solely and purely as a western phenomenon and interrogates 'what all too often seem to be settled certainties, such as the clear border demarcating East from West, the inevitability of conflict between Islam and Christianity, and the regeneration of European civilization nourished entirely by taproots in classical Greece and imperial Rome'.<sup>4</sup> More recently, in the wake of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Ian Almond has examined the representation of Islam in nine major postmodern thinkers from Foucault to Baudrillard, how their recourse to Islam is more 'a means of obtaining some kind of critical distance from one's own society' rather than any serious attempt at understanding Islam *en soi*. The western writers, according to Almond, cannot avoid 'the ultimate re-Westernization' of the Islamic contexts they use for their own purposes of critiquing western modernity. Almond calls this repression on the part of western intellectuals as their 'epistemological finitude'. The final comment of the book, though, ironically characterizes writers such as Almond himself who take up the task of 'delineating and demonstrating this situation of epistemological finitude' that they themselves 'so visibly fail to escape it in their own work'.<sup>5</sup>

To propose an attempt at somewhat undoing the effects of such ongoing repression, at bringing in a concept of tradition regulated by a critical paradigm other than those dominating the contemporary western (and eastern) literary thought, through an American connection calls for an explanation. In the case of the return of the Jewish repressed the American academia has played a vital role, and perhaps one might expect similar dialogical and intellectual openings in the case of Islam as well. What Harold Bloom calls the Kabbalistic paradigm in western literary criticism may not have originated in America, and also the

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<sup>3</sup> J.M. Cocking, *Imagination, A Study in the History of Ideas* (NY: Routledge, 1991), p.149.

<sup>4</sup> Gerald Maclean (ed.), *Re-Orienting the Renaissance*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p.1.

<sup>5</sup> Ian Almond, *The New Orientalists, Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), pp.2, 203.

thinkers Bloom names as having contributed to its development and formulation are not all Jews. It is '[O]ut of an amalgam of Nietzsche, Marx, Heidegger, Freud, and the linguists', Bloom tells us, that 'another paradigm is now coming from France, moving upon us like that apocalyptic crimson man of Edom that Blake both celebrated and feared'.<sup>6</sup> But it was left to the American theorists like Bloom and Hartman to explore the Jewish provenance of some of the most significant critical developments in the continent in the twentieth century. American culture, to use an expression of the editors of *Deconstruction in America*, is 'over-receptive': '...there has long seemed something puzzling, even disturbing, in the relation of American culture to European culture. When not closed into willful provincial isolation, the United States has appeared over-receptive ... the "greatest" and most "difficult" European writers have often had, even before in their homelands, their "first vogue" in America'....<sup>7</sup>

It is through such a culture of 'reception' that the comparatist feels a certain encouragement for his task. Kabbalah, that literally means 'tradition' in the particular sense of 'reception', as Bloom informs us, can bring to the mind the possibility of a comparative engagement with another understanding of 'tradition', metonymized here through the sign of *Qiblah*, that also in its linguistic roots shares the meaning of 'reception'. Such comparative possibility, if engaged in a sustained manner I believe, can potentially offer nothing less than a revised understanding, a reinterpretation, of history, proposed already by none other than Emerson himself, one of the seminal figures in the American intellectual culture. Emerson tells us in one of his journal entries that along with Aristophanes and Rabelais, a good scholar will even find Hafiz, the Persian poet, 'full of American history'.<sup>8</sup>

The signs of an intellectual culture of reception that may seem ready to extend beyond Eurocentricity are visible not only in the mushrooming of comparative literature departments in the US, although not without their own rhetoric of the academic crisis looming in the face

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<sup>6</sup> Harold Bloom, *op.cit.*, p.87.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Arac, Wlad Godzich, Wallace Martin (eds.), *The Yale Critics: Deconstruction in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p.X.

<sup>8</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journal and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, 10: 35. Quoted here from Franklin D. Lewis, *Rūmī, Past and Present, East and West, The Life, Teachings and Poetry of Jalal al-Din Rūmī* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), p.570.

of literary studies,<sup>9</sup> but also through the entries on, for instance, Arabic literary theory and criticism, along with Chinese and African criticisms in volumes like *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*. But what is often offered to such a reception still remains problematic, and I feel should thoroughly be reproblemized in a more elaborate context, especially when one encounters such stereotypical representations of Islam's approach to literature as that in *The Johns Hopkins Guide*. Without going into any critical reasons for such a phenomenon, which has not been in the very first instance even satisfactorily represented, the *Guide* only takes as 'puzzling' the issue 'how literature not only survived the attacks of the Koran and Prophet Muhammad but also flourished and attained a status even higher than it had prior to Islam'.<sup>10</sup> One could only hope that such a 'puzzling', that in the case of the relation of the American culture to the European culture results in 'over-reception', paves way at least for some further investigation into how the proposed comparativizing here in our case may be critically legitimized.

## II

The Jews say: 'The Christians have naught (to stand) upon;  
And the Christians say: 'The Jews have naught (to stand)  
upon.' Yet they (profess to) study the (same) Book.

*Al Qur'an*, 1: 113

Since our task is to propose a comparativizing of a contemporary critical paradigm that deals with rhetoric and figuration (Bloom tells us that Kabbalah is indeed a theory of rhetoric and figuration),<sup>11</sup> let us begin (again), and rather *belatedly* (Bloom also thinks that 'Kabbalah is essentially a *vision of belatedness*'),<sup>12</sup> in a figurative and rhetorical way. Such a manner of a belated, figurative and rhetorical beginning I am adopting out of acknowledgement and consideration for a certain Lyotardian 'renunciation of terror', by observing and respecting the principle 'that any consensus on the rules defining a game and the

<sup>9</sup> For a possible treatment of such crisis through comparativizing the literary tradition of Islam, see my essay '*Aymanī Bugzâr-o-Jâye Khawf Bâsh: Addressing Disciplinary Crisis in Comparative Literature the Sūfī Way*', *Tamkang Review*, 40:2 (June 2010), pp.151-75.

<sup>10</sup> Walid Hamarneh, 'Arabic Theory and Criticism', in Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth (eds.), *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p.30.

<sup>11</sup> Harold Bloom, *op.cit.*, p.18.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.17.

‘moves’ playable within it *must* be... agreed on by its present players’.<sup>13</sup> The trope is used here with a hope to elaborate how its significance depends upon the sense of ‘tradition’ that works behind it.

The figure is that of a tree that, in our first case of which we are here seeking a return, represents a certain view of tradition by being firmly rooted, having ‘its branches (reaching) to the heavens’, bringing forth ‘its fruits all the times...’<sup>14</sup> We will momentarily delay our discussion of the parable in comparison with the following variations upon it.

I figurize my second case here by quoting from A.O.J. Cockshut’s comment on John Henry Newman’s *The Development of Christian Doctrine*. “‘Development’ for Newman”, Cockshut thinks, ‘meant the gradual understanding of all the implications and corollaries of a fundamental principle. *But he stressed that this process could involve very great changes in the appearance of things just as a root or seed does not look in the least like the full-grown tree or flower*’ (my emphasis).<sup>15</sup> Regardless of the controversies around the consistency of Newman’s own thought, or even of the possibly debatable propriety of Cockshut’s understanding of Newman’s particular case, I feel drawn to this comment primarily because it looks to capture T.S. Eliot’s understanding of ‘tradition’ that offered a paradigm often remembered and rejected as Greco-Christian by the later critics who sought to replace it through its Kabbalistic counterpart. In what ways T.S. Eliot’s own poetry and critical take on poetry resembled those of the ones like Dante, Shakespeare and others who constitute Eliot’s own version of tradition, and how it differed from those whom he threw out of it (as the Romantics) still remains, and with the passage of time, is increasingly becoming a debatable issue.<sup>16</sup> If classical and medieval antiquity offers the initiation of a ‘tradition’ in its embryonic form, Eliot’s own work as he would propose, is a flowering of the same tradition that ‘does not in

<sup>13</sup> Jean – Francois Lyotard, ‘The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge’, in Lawrence E. Cahoone, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (Malden: Blackwell, 1996), p.504.

<sup>14</sup> *Al- Qur’an*, 14:24.

<sup>15</sup> A.O.J. Cockshut, ‘Victorian Thought’, in Arthur Pollard (ed.), *The Victorians* (London: Penguin, 1969, 1987), p.9.

<sup>16</sup> For Eliot’s ‘complicity’ with those to whom he shows a sustained aversion see Edward Lobb, *T.S. Eliot and the Romantic Critical Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1981); Steven Helmling, ‘Emersonian Eliot’, *The Swanee Review*, Winter 1994; Ronald Bush, ‘T.S. Eliot: Singing the Emerson Blues’, in Joel Porte (ed.), *Prospects and Retrospects* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982).

the least *look* like the full-grown tree or flower'. It may be now quite obvious that Eliot's criticism, which he himself called his 'poetry workshop', is a sustained effort at reinterpreting (indeed for some as distorting) history in a way so as to make room for himself as a 'mainstream writer'. In order to accommodate an 'individual talent', the whole tradition has to reshape and alter itself. It is significant to note that Eliot does not use any natural metaphor himself, like the tree or the seed, to characterize the organicity of tradition. Probably because of his *belated* appearance in an age that had to have metaphors and analogies *developed* upon the older traditional figures, he displayed fondness for more 'scientific', more cultural formulations (like that of the notorious 'platinum foil analogy' in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*) that, he might have felt would more conveniently accommodate his own understanding of tradition. But to extend the biological analogy, as the seed is always supposed to remain hidden, how is one ever supposed to recognize that this particular tree comes out of the same seed that was planted? If the new development is a branch, shouldn't it have any visible, formal, genetic resemblance to the other parts of the tree?

Our third case pertains to an inversion and deconstruction of the Greco-Christian literary paradigm thought to be championed by Eliot. The *Sefirot*, the divine emanations by which all reality is structured, 'the central notion of Kabbalah' and the 'the working-model for a theory of poetic influence', Bloom tells us, are depicted as a 'tree of emanation' and '[T]his tree grows downward, as any influence must'.<sup>17</sup>

A comparative discussion of the variations upon the figure in the three paradigms of tradition mentioned above is instructive not only for an understanding of the idea of 'tradition' itself, but also for suggesting the probable reasons for the alleged uprooting and destabilizing of the so-called Greco-Christian critical paradigm in the postmodern times (I am saying 'alleged' because I feel that a case for a complicity and continuity between what we call the modern and the postmodern always remains open to be established): to use the Qur'anic parable, like the tree 'torn up by the root from the surface of the earth, it has no stability' (14:26). Firstly, as already pointed out in discussing Eliot's case, to conceive tradition as the growth of a tree from the seed, which at some historical moments may not even *apparently* resemble in the least the initial phases, and hence its inception from the same seed can always be suspect, can be contrasted to the idea of tradition as an *already* fully grown tree, even in its initial phases, and any historical development may only be taken, at the most, as a *branching out*, that has to resemble

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<sup>17</sup> Harold Bloom, *op.cit.*, p.29.



somehow, even apparently, to the rest of the organism. Muhammad Hasan Askari tells us through Rene Guenon that *kalimah al-tayyebah* (literally, the ‘goodly word’ and terminologically the unflinching and uncompromising belief in the oneness of God), that has been figurized in the Qur’an as the tree firmly rooted, extending its branches to heavens, is the true source of tradition. Secondly, (and rather *historically* for the sake of not taking the risk of extending the analogy to the point of breaking up), the idea that the admixture of Greece and Jerusalem has ultimately led to the demise of the Christian framework in Western thought, an opinion maintained by different major thinkers including Heidegger and, through his own deconstructive puncturing, by Derrida as well,<sup>18</sup> is attested by tracing the ‘seed analogy’ back to Plato. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato tells us that the dialecticians provide ‘an eternal existence for their seed (the good discourse)’ by sowing them in the ‘congenial soul’ and ‘cause the growth of fresh words’.<sup>19</sup> It is, after all, not without some historical justification that the Archdeacon of Westminster could appreciate the contribution Plato made to the ‘adornment or the elucidation of the Christian religion’ and felt that the Christian religion lacks Greek logic which is the reason ‘why it is often felt that Plato must have something to contribute to the Palestinian-bred Christian religion’.<sup>20</sup>

It is precisely the heavy reliance of the Christian tradition of criticism upon the Greek thought that Susan A. Handelman sees as the differentiating factor between the Christian and the Jewish critical and hermeneutic traditions, and as a corollary, the cause of supplanting of the former through the latter in the postmodern period. ‘[T]he Christian tradition’, Handelman notes, ‘whose philosophical roots... became deeply embedded in Greek thought... ultimately calls for transcendence of the word and language altogether.’

The central doctrine of the Church—Incarnation—celebrates not the exaltation of the word, but its transformation from the linguistic order into the material realm, its conversion onto the flesh. For the Rabbis,

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<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Derrida’s noteworthy avoidance of including the Jewish and the Islamic mystical traditions in his deconstruction of the Greco-Christian negative theology, see my essay ‘The Violence of Literary Media(tion): Refracting Sufi Thought through American Criticism’, *Me’yar*, 1:2 (July-December 2009), pp.35-58.

<sup>19</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. W.C. Hembold and W.G. Rabinowitz (NY: Macmillan, 1956), p.71.

<sup>20</sup> Adam Fox, *Plato and the Christians* (NY: Philosophical Library, 1957), pp.11-26.

however, the primary reality was linguistic...'.<sup>21</sup> What is sometimes called 'the linguistic turn' in criticism can be another way of talking about the replacement of the Greco-Christian by a Jewish critical paradigm.

Handelman acknowledges that '[C]riticism has always... been waging some religious war or other' and the modern science of interpretation has some deep theological roots.<sup>22</sup>

In case of Western criticism, the war was between the Christian (with its Greek associations) and the Jewish critical paradigms, which finally came to America mainly through the so-called Yale critics. Although the works of Freud, Lacan and Derrida had a noticeable Jewish link through their treatment of language, it is the American critics like Harold Bloom who can be accredited with 'a full systematic theoretical self-realization' of the Jewish provenance of the postmodern criticism. It is Bloom who elaborates that '[M]ore audaciously than any developments in recent French criticism, Kabbalah is a theory of writing... Kabbalah speaks of writing before writing (Derrida's trace)...'.<sup>23</sup> It is through an application of the intricate 'intellectual' categories of Kabbalah (Bloom tells us that rather than being a way of union with God, Kabbalah is 'more a mode of intellectual speculation') gives us a theory of meaning already operative as the postmodern critical vogue at the time when Bloom was making these implicit theological connections: 'The great lesson that Kabbalah can teach contemporary interpretation is that meaning in belated texts is always wandering meaning, even as the belated Jews were a wandering people. Meaning wanders, like human tribulation, or like error, from text to text, and within a text, from figure to figure'.<sup>24</sup> Since for Bloom Kabbalah is, just like poetry, an 'apotropaic litany', a religious utterance turned away from literality, hence it is 'already poetry'. Kabbalah as an inexhaustible figurative interpretation of the Scripture is a theory of figuration, and hence related to poetry in its tropological tendencies:

'Every poetic trope is an exile from literal meaning, but the only home coming would be the death of figuration, or the triumph of literal meaning... the trope defends against literal

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<sup>21</sup> Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses, The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), p.4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>23</sup> Harold Bloom, *op.cit.*, p.52.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.82.

meaning in the same way that psychic defenses trope against death... literal meaning is seen as kind of death'.<sup>25</sup>

It is by using these Kabbalistic categories that Bloom comes up with his theory of literary revisionism, his *revisionist ratios*, that provide an inverted picture of Eliot's view of tradition. Handelman notes:

Bloom considers Eliot's idea of tradition—as a simultaneous order through which one attains freedom through sacramental communion and self-immolation—a 'fiction', a 'noble idealization, and a lie against time that will go the way of every noble idealization.' Bloomian tradition, in contrast, is an agony of conflict, dialectical struggle, a family history of struggles with 'inversion, incest, sado-masochistic parody...'. Tradition is the anxiety of influence, a passing down, surrender, and betrayal. And Bloom says he would rather model it after the mishnah, the Jewish oral tradition, than the mind of Europe from Homer.<sup>26</sup>

### III

... [N]ow shall We turn thee to a Qibla that shall please thee.

*Al Qur'an*, 2: 144

When I graduated in English from Karachi University back in late 90's, our criticism courses used to stop short of 'the linguistic turn', restricting themselves either to T.S. Eliot, who championed the Greco-Christian paradigm in literary criticism, or F.R. Leavis, who shied away from ever exposing his theoretical standards. Even at that time, having still not being exposed to the so called *theoretical* developments, Eliot's at times tangential (as that tantalizing halt of *Tradition and the Individual Talent* 'at the frontier of metaphysics and mysticism'), and on other occasions explicit remarks (as in *Religion and Literature*) suggested strongly to me the religious provenance of not only the Christian but even the 'liberal' humanist critical paradigm (after all, Eliot's appraisal of *Hamlet* looks steeped in the Aristotelian categories) prevalent in modern literary criticism. The later over-turning and de-centering of this critical paradigm through the mid-century critical developments evinced that despite Arnold's futile and untenable appeals to literary criticism to 'steadily refuse to lend itself to any... ulterior, political, practical considerations,' his prediction that 'what now passes with us for religion... will be replaced by poetry' came true as literature became the

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.89-90.

<sup>26</sup> Susan A. Handelman, *op.cit.*, p.188.

battlefield for 'waging religious wars', to use the earlier quoted words of Handelman.

My personal exposure to the so called postmodern/post-structuralist literary theory was a rather belated one, at a time when in America the deconstructive trends in criticism were already thought to have ridden their crest, and were giving way to various cultural theories like postcolonialism and new historicism and various other interdisciplinary literary critiques. There were critical quarters who had already started to show their willingness to consider some of the most potent critical developments since 1960's in America and in the Continent as not an end in themselves but, in the words of Richard Kearney, as 'a healthy dispossession, as a *via negative*... and a point of departure for *something else*' (my italics).

One must give credit to Mathew Arnold's visionary insight in *Dover Beach* for charting a scenario of 'a darkling plain' where blind armies are fighting by night, so prophetic of the post-Kabbalistic literary academic scenario in America. It may be worth noticing that in America and in the Continent, the rhetoric of an academic crisis plaguing the discipline of literature coincides in time more or less with the Kabbalistic (Frueidman, Lacanian, Derridan, Bloomian, etc.) dethroning of the earlier Christian or liberal humanist paradigm in literary studies. We see Rene Welleck (who ironically was himself perhaps the first one to introduce the term to the contemporary vogue) accusing such 'Kabbalistic' developments in *theory* of 'destroying literary studies' considering Derrida's theory of writing 'preposterous', his writing style devoid of any aesthetic experience, refusing to consider Derrida's work as either literary criticism or even good philosophy. Bloom he considers as being 'obsessed with the burden of the past, calling his revisionist ratios as 'Fancy terms'.<sup>27</sup> In the 'post-Kabbalistic' period in literary studies, the departure to 'something else' that Kearney refers to, resulted in a multitude of interdisciplinary critical approaches that did not seem to be regulated by any academic consensus or rationale. As a result we have a crisis scenario charted by Paul de Man in *Blindness and Insight*: 'What seems crisis-like is, among outer signs, the sense of urgency, the impatient competitiveness with which the various disciplines vie for leadership'.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Rene Welleck, 'Destroying Literary Studies', in *Theory's Empire* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp.41-51.

<sup>28</sup> Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1971, 1983), p.5.

Perhaps luckily for me, my short-period job in America also was to attempt an intensive study of western theories of imagination in relation to ‘something else’, in my case, with comparative reference to Rūmī’s poetic phenomenon. The reception of Rūmī in America at that time (even if primarily through translation) was warm, and in the contemporary (post-Kabbalistic) academic confusion I could sense an opportunity and a need to give this ‘reception’ a sense of ‘tradition’ (although when I came back to Pakistan, somewhat laced and braced with the contemporary theoretical jargon, I felt a more urgent need to do the same here!). It was not that the Jewish provenance of the postmodern critical theory till my exposure to it lay hidden. Bloom’s explicit connections between the contributions of the twentieth century avant-garde theorists and the Jewish thought had been established as early as 1975. Susan Handelman’s *Slayers of Moses, The Emergence of Rabbinical Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* was published in 1982, and perhaps relying upon such works, as Ian Almond points out, Habermas was already associating Derrida with Jewish mysticism and accusing Derrida’s neo-Kabbalistic hermeneutics of concealing ‘an anarchist wish to explode the continuum of history’.<sup>29</sup> Linking Derrida’s *differance* to the God of negative theology was already quite a common practice. But unfortunately till that time I remained unaware (I am most willingly ready to attribute my unawareness to my own lethargic research habits and would be grateful to anyone who could lead me to such studies) of any such works that would read the post-Kabbalistic literary tendencies in relation to Islamic theories that worked behind the immense literary tradition of *tasawwuf* (more generally known to the Western world as ‘Sufism’). Works that came out later, like Ian Almond’s *Sufism and Deconstruction* were to me also problematic in the sense that they continued the western conventions of relating God (in Islam’s case Allah) to *differance* and *écriture* (Derrida’s theory of writing, a comparison Derrida himself has not approved), exploring apparent similarities without fully putting the compared into its own proper theoretical background attributing also to *tasawwuf* a similar sort of ‘de-centering’ occasioned by Kabbalistic criticism.

For the unavailability of such comparative sources, my view of contemporary theory was, to me at least, somewhat ‘original’. Reading theory in comparison with Rūmī, whose magnum opus has been related

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<sup>29</sup> J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Boston: MIT Press, 1987), p.182. Quoted here from Ian Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction, A Comparative Study of Derrida and Ibn Arabi* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.66.

to the Qur'an, I was made to read the Jewish contribution to theory in the light of some Jewish tendencies mentioned in the Qur'an and, comparatively speaking, how those theoretical concepts were reflected through the works of Rūmī. That is why, despite some passages in *Fih ma Fih* that came tantalizingly close to offer comparative similarities in formulations, Derrida's *differānce* to me appeared more as a Jewish attitude towards death (recall Bloom's comments in *Kabbalah and Criticism*: 'Every poetic trope is an exile from literal meaning, but the only homecoming would be the death of figuration and so the death of poetry... the trope defends against literal meaning in the same way that psychic defenses trope against death... and so literal meaning is thus seen as a kind of death, even as death itself seems the most literal kind of meaning').<sup>30</sup> Influenced as I was (and perhaps am still struggling to come out of that), like perhaps many other students of literature around me, by the contemporary modes of western (Kabbalistic) thought, 'isn't it my own death', I thought to my self, 'that always keeps deferring and differing in my own mind?' (recall Freud's idea that the death we know is actually the death of the other, we don't live out our own death to know it). That is the *human* experience, at least of the human as it is in the contemporary period.

The Qur'an attributes this attitude of 'fleeing away' from death to the Jews: 'Say: O ye that stand on Judaism! If ye think that ye are friends to God, to the exclusion of (other) men, then express your desire for Death, if ye are truthful!... Say: 'The Death from which ye flee will truly overtake you: then will ye be sent back to the Knower of things secret and open: and He will tell you (the truth of) the things that ye did' (62: 6, 8). The Qur'an further associates death with certainty, the absence of which has been the hallmark of the postmodern critical and cultural ethos: 'And serve thy Lord until there come unto thee the Hour that is certain (death)' (15: 99).

The concept of *differānce*, even whose 'conceptuality' Derrida would probably deny, with its problematization of the question of identity and difference, its blurring of boundaries, appears to me as the defining formulation of the Kabbalistic and post-Kabbalistic critical ethos. 'The abolition of aesthetics, the blurring of the distinction between poetry and critical prose, the rejection of the very ideal of correct interpretation in favour of misreading', all the attributes Rene Welleck calls the 'symptoms of a profound *malaise*' can be argued to be motivated by this formulation that puts certainty into perpetual abeyance.

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<sup>30</sup> Harold Bloom, *op.cit.*, pp.89-90.

Rūmī offered to me a poetics that was regulated by an epistemology of certainty and faith, *ilm al-adyân*, as Rūmī called it, ‘the knowledge of religions, or to borrow Paul Ricoeur’s terms slightly out of context, a certain ‘hermeneutics of faith’ that could be compared with the postmodernists ‘hermeneutics of suspicion.’ This epistemology revolves around the hadith *mūtū qabl an tamūtū* (die before you die). Death in Rūmī’s terms is *ât* (that is to come) and what is required is to take the ‘coming’ as already ‘come’, to sieze the incessant deferential flux: ‘Everything that is coming will come: deem it (to have come) here right and now’.<sup>31</sup>

After the hey day of textual criticism, culminating in deconstruction through practical and new criticisms, there came on the American academic scene the cultural theory, what may be called contextual criticism, in the sense of putting literary discourse into endless contexts from social and political to gay and lesbian. One must realize that these contextual approaches in the West have emerged as a result of the loss of the ‘text’ itself, ‘the Book’, as a result of the loss of a ‘center’ that can regulate the play of meaning. As the arch-deconstructionist Jacque Derrida sees it, these contexts are only going to lead to other contexts; playing around with the imagination without approaching anything one could call a ‘text’ or ‘the Book’: ‘there are only contexts’, Derrida writes, ‘without any center of any absolute anchoring’.<sup>32</sup>

‘Anchor-lessness’ is exactly the metaphor Rūmī himself uses to denounce all such approaches to his own poetry that emerge from the aesthetics of ‘de-centering’ as insufficient, actually harmful as long as they originate from self-consciousness, instead of originating from *qalb* as the simultaneous origin of faith, imagination and ‘*aql* (reason). Rūmī considers it a mark of wickedness to be ‘anchorless’ and compares the wicked man to an ‘anchorless ship’: ‘The wicked man is an anchorless ship, for he finds no precaution (means of defense) against the perverse (contrary) wind’.<sup>33</sup> Such people who, ‘without any center of absolute anchoring’ (to use Derrida’s phrase), are swept away by every wind (*hawâ*, which also signifies desire), Rūmī calls *saḡīh* (a fool), a word the Qur’ân uses for those who turn away from the center determined and established by the tradition (*dīn*), either by denying altogether the

<sup>31</sup> Jalal al-Din Rūmī, *The Mathnawī*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (Karachi: Darul-Ishaat, 2003), VI/765.

<sup>32</sup> Jacque Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) p.320.

<sup>33</sup> Jalal al-Din Rūmī, *op.cit.*, III/4310.

existence of any center, or by locating that center anywhere other than where the tradition locates it:

The Fools among the people will say: 'What hath turned them from the *Qiblah* to which they were used'? Say: to God belong East and West: He guideth whom he will to a Way that is straight.<sup>34</sup>

And who turns away from the religion of Abraham but such as debase their souls with folly? (2: 130).

Such fools, Rūmī says, are swept away by every wind: 'The foolish are swept away by every gust of desire/because they have no weight (ballast) of (intellectual) faculties'.<sup>35</sup> Rūmī's metaphor of 'being swept away by the wind' can again be traced back to the Qur'ân. The Qur'ân uses this metaphor for those who consider divinity as a matter of partnership, the *mushrikîn*: '...if anyone assigns partners to God, he is as if he had fallen from heaven and been snatched up by birds, or the wind had swooped (like a bird on its prey) and thrown him into a far distant place' (22:31).

Rūmī does not only diagnose the problem of 'de-centering' or 'anchor-lessness', he also prescribes a solution to get it fixed. The 'anchor' for Rūmī is the '*aql*' (reason; Nicholson translates it as 'intelligence' here). But this '*aql*' is not to be had from philosophical reasoning, rather is the '*aql*' of the *auliâ*, the friends of Allah, the

<sup>34</sup> The *Qur'an*, 2:142, trans. Abdullah Yousuf Ali, 2<sup>nd</sup> (ed.), 1977. In his commentary Yousuf Ali writes: '*Qibla*=the direction to which Muslim turn in prayer. Islam lays great stress on social prayer in order to emphasize our universal Brotherhood and mutual co-operation. For such prayer, order, punctuality, precision, symbolical postures, and a common direction are essential, so that the Imam (leader) and all his congregation may face one way and offer their supplications to God. In the early days, before they were organized as a people, they followed as a symbol for their Qiblah the sacred city of Jerusalem, sacred both to the Jews and the Christians, the people of the Book. This symbolized their allegiance to the continuity of God's revelation. When, despised and persecuted, they were turned out of Mecca and arrived in Medina, Mustafa under Divine direction began to organize his people as an *Ummat*, an independent people, with laws and rituals of their own. At that stage the Ka'ba was established as a Qibla, thus going back to the earliest center, with which the name of Abraham was connected, and traditionally also the name of Adam. Jerusalem still remained (and remains) sacred in the eyes of Islam on account of its past, but Islam is a progressive religion, and its new symbolism enabled it to shake off the tradition of a dead past and usher in the era of untrammelled freedom dear to the spirit of Arabia. The change took place about 16 ½ months after Hijrat.

<sup>35</sup> Jalal al-Din Rūmī, *The Mathnawi*, III/4310.



‘insiders’ of the tradition of *dīn*, that originates not in self-consciousness but in *qalb* or the heart: ‘To the intelligent man the anchor of intelligence is security/beg (such) an anchor from the intelligent. Since he (the Sage) has borne away/the succours (supplies) of intelligence from the pearl-treasury of that sea of Bounty’.<sup>36</sup>

Participating in a tradition of *Qiblah*, Rūmī and those who came after him demonstrate a very different relation to their predecessors than the one shown through the understanding of tradition in the Kabbalistic paradigm. For Bloom every belated poet stands in an oedipal relationship to his predecessors, invoking an anxiety of influence that forces him to ‘misread’ the earlier poet, as in the desire of a child to eliminate the father (hence Handelman’s title to her reading of the Jewish theorists: *The Slayers of Moses*). Rūmī is gratified in being belated: ‘Thanks to Him (God), then, that He caused us to appear (be born) in the world after those of old’.<sup>37</sup> Instead of showing any signs of anxiety, Rūmī celebrates the influence of his predecessors: ‘Attar was the spirit, and Sanai his two eyes/We have come after Sanai and Attar’. In relatively more recent history, the Indian Sufi poet Ilahi Bakhsh Kandhalvi, who is thought among the Sufis of the subcontinent to have completed the last unfinished tale of Rūmī’s *Mathnawi*, sees himself in a relation of a total annihilation to Rūmī: ‘You came within me and took me all along/O you the Lion of the Lord/you ate me all up’.

I am alive to the possible objection here against presenting *Qiblah* as an alternate paradigm of critical tradition to Kabbalah that this all seems to be amounting to a revitalization of the Christian paradigm again with Eliot seeing the belated poet in a relation to a continual self-surrender to the ones who go before him. But one should notice that Bloom does not call Eliot’s idea ‘wrong’ but rather accuses him of presenting a ‘fiction’, a ‘a noble idealization, and a lie against time’. One should also remember that for any thing to be deconstructed, it has to have those fissures, those gaps and contradictions that allow the deconstructionist to penetrate and show that the text stands against itself. To escape the deconstructionist virus the claimant must demonstrate the transparency and immunity of his claim. Henry Staten has aptly captured the deconstructive project:

[N]o one is questioning whether reality exists... the question is whether a discourse that brings into play the concept ‘objective reality’ actually succeeds in enlisting the force of something which cannot be spoken, whether this use is

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4312.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 1/3117.

absolutely transparent to its signified, and so quite independent of the rhetorical backgrounds within which it has an unquestioned force, and being thus independent then capable of exerting a similar force within new contexts; or whether in these contexts its application is none too clear and perhaps quite questionable.<sup>38</sup>

Eliot's own anxious relationship with his predecessors, such as demonstrated by his ironic inversion of Chaucer in the beginning of the *Wasteland*, his considering Emerson as 'an encumbrance', his earlier stance on Milton before his later recantations, his dubious and ambivalent stance towards the Romantics, all seem to belie his own idea of tradition and attest Bloom's take on Eliot's view of tradition as 'a lie against time'. Eliot himself thought that the modern poet can be classical only in tendency and must write in a difficult, diffused and indirect manner (recall the seed analogy of tradition!).

Let us take a comparative look at a relatively more recent case from modern times in the development of the tradition coming down to us from Rūmī. Iqbal, probably because of his intense exposure to western literary tradition before his final submission to Rūmī (and in that Iqbal can become a paradigmatic figure for contemporary Urdu poets and critics) is, like Bloom's Romantics, *consciously belated: wo mehfīl ūth gayee jis dam to mujh tek daur-e-jam aya* ('the cup came to me when the gathering was over'). Does the consciousness of this belatedness create any anxiety of influence in Iqbal? It may be plausibly argued that Iqbal modeled his *Javid Nameh* on Dante's *Commedia* (suspend the question on what Dante attempted to model *his* poem on!). A comparative comment on the treatment of the two poets of their respective guides may be instructive and revealing.

In Dante's case, a case that Eliot would treat as paradigmatic for his own view of tradition (as Dante for Eliot was writing a truly Christian poem), what is usually called 'the problem of Virgil' has been a matter of puzzling critical debates. Why would Dante, writing a Christian poem, seek a pagan guide whom he would ultimately throw to hell?

There have been calls to consider Dante's Virgil not as a historical figure, but an allegorical one. Robert Hollander rejects this view through textual evidences and suggests the presence of the historical Virgil in the poem. Instead, Hollander while considering Dante's relationship with his guide calls Virgil as 'a light that failed':

The picture of Dante's Virgil which emerges from these and other considerations of his presence, both as character and as

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.157-8.

author, in the text of Dante's poem is one of a poet-*vates*, but of failed prophet. Dante's Virgil seems to me to have been considered a failure both in his tragic *Aeneid* (and surely Dante so considered the «genre» of the *Aeneid*, no matter how few of us recognize this important judgment), with its uncertain view of the future of the empire, a view that is countered by Dante's imperial *Comedy*, as well as in the fourth *Eclogue*, a closed book to its own author, if it illumined Statius to the truth:

You did as one who goes in darkness,  
bearing the light behind him, not profiting himself,  
but making those who follow after wise.  
(*Purg.* XXII, 67-69)

In that sense, then, for Dante, Virgil is a light that failed. Dante's Christian Statius is, in my understanding, a fabrication, his conversion invented by Dante, entirely on his own authority, in order to allow us to infer that he himself had become again a Christian (having lapsed «nel mezzo del cammin»?) by agency of Virgil's text. And such a fabrication, along with the presences in the text of three other saved pagans (Cato, Trajan, Ripheus), serves more to blame Virgil than to praise him.

The author of the *Aeneid* may have done more than anyone else to help create the *Comedy*. Yet having done so does not gain him heaven — or Dante's unconditional affection. The return of Virgil to Limbo, the necessity that puts an increasing burden of sadness on both character and reader as we move up the mount of Purgatory, will not be described in Dante's text....<sup>39</sup>

Unlike Dante's Virgil, Rūmī does not appear for Iqbal only in *Javed Nameh*. He is there almost everywhere in the phase of Iqbal's poetry that started after the development of Iqbal's relationship with him. In *Bâl-e-Jibrîl* Rūmī appears as *pîr* (the spiritual guide) and in *Ramûz-e-Bîkhudî* as *murshid-e-roshan zamîr* (the guide with an illumined conscience). Iqbal, unlike Dante who Hollander suggests uses Virgil as indeed only as a 'poet *vates*' but a 'failed prophet' (that is only as an 'artistic' inspiration and device) does not *use* Rūmī simply as an artistic or a poetic device. Rather he shares with Rūmī a traditional gesture of

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[http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian\\_Studies/LD/numbers/04/hollander.html](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/LD/numbers/04/hollander.html) (visited 28 September, 2010).

considering art as something secondary to religion: *Shâirî zîn mathnawî maqsūd nîst* ('poetry is not the purpose of this mathnawî'). This reminds one of Rûmî's own attitude towards poetry in relation to 'another art' that he claims to possess: *sh'ir cheh bâshad bare man tâ keh azân lâf zanam/Hast marâ fann-e-digar ghair-e-fanûn-e-shuarâ* ('what is poetry to me so that I brag about it/I have another art, other than the art of the poets').

#### IV

A lot remains to be said and to be done. This brief attempt is to initiate a discussion that remains somewhat buried down under the burden of historical repression. In America or in Pakistan (and let me generalize it to other parts of the world where literature is a part of the academy), the issue of literature's place in society and in human life, and especially its relationship with religion has become a problematic question. In the western world sometimes poetry has been sought to replace religion (Arnold), sometimes it becomes 'spilt religion' (Hulme) and finally it has now come down to a consideration of religion as spilt poetry (Bloom). We have previously referred through de Man to the problem of the emergence of contextual approaches and their struggle against each other as creating a crisis-like situation in the academy. It is perhaps time to rethink the role of literature in society and in individual lives by comparativizing traditions that present a different view of that role, that, according to Hillis Miller, is always in danger of being misplaced and exaggerated when it is determined through an anxiety to make literature count.<sup>40</sup> Apart from the attempt to revive interest in Persian, Arabic and even in Urdu (that amounts to nothing less than a cultural readjustment), a huge effort is needed to translate works like Amir Khusrau's *Dibâcheh Ghurra al-Kamâl* and to develop anthologies of critical comments spread out like bezels of wisdom in other Sufi and religious texts in the Islamic tradition.

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<sup>40</sup> J. Hillis Miller, 'The Function of Literary Theory at the Present Time', in Ralph Cohen (ed.), *The Future of Literary Theory* (NY: Routledge, 1989), p.105.