

# Table of Contents

- [About this Volume](#)
- "Introduction"
- Orrin N. C. Wang, University of Maryland
- [Essay](#)
- "Wordsworth, Poetry, Romanticism: An Interview with Geoffrey Hartman"
- Marc Redfield, Claremont Graduate University
- [Interview](#)
- "An Interview with Harold Bloom"
- Laura Quinney, Brandeis University
- [Interview](#)

# Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom: Two Interviews

## About This Volume

### About This Volume

This volume of *Romantic Circles Praxis Series* includes an editor's introduction by [Orrin N. C. Wang](#) and interviews by co-editors Marc Redfield, and Laura Quinney of [Geoffrey Hartman](#) and [Harold Bloom](#), respectively.

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## About the Romantic Circles Praxis Series

The **Romantic Circles Praxis Series** is devoted to using computer technologies for the contemporary critical investigation of the languages, cultures, histories, and theories of Romanticism. Tracking the circulation of Romanticism within these interrelated domains of knowledge, **RCPS** recognizes as its conceptual terrain a world where Romanticism has, on the one hand, dissolved as a period and an idea into a plurality of discourses and, on the other, retained a vigorous, recognizable hold on the intellectual and theoretical discussions of today. **RCPS** is committed to mapping out this terrain with the best and most exciting critical writing of contemporary Romanticist scholarship.

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**Geoffrey Hartman** is the author, most recently, of *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle Against Inauthenticity* (2002). Some of his previous books include: *The Unmediated Vision* (1954); *Wordsworth's Poetry* (1964); *Beyond Formalism* (1970); *The Fate of Reading* (1975); *Criticism in the Wilderness* (1980); *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (1987); *The Longest Shadow* (1996); and *The Fateful Question of Culture* (1997).

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# Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom: Two Interviews

## Introduction

Orrin N. C. Wang, University of Maryland

1. The last half-century study of literature and romanticism, and of their relation, is unintelligible without some type of encounter with Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom. From *Shelley's Mythmaking* and *Wordsworth's Poetry* to *The Anxiety of Influence* and *The Fate of Reading* a certain form of romanticism is at once summarized and surpassed. Whether that romanticism is the dominant form in romantic studies today is precisely a question that cannot be answered without a serious reading of both Hartman and Bloom. One might say the same of other attendant questions, such as whether there is such a thing as literature itself, as opposed to culture, history, or religion; and whether there is such a thing as the human, as opposed to the post-human or the Other, or to language or nature or Yahweh. These are big questions, of course; if we know them also to be romantic ones, that is because of Hartman and Bloom.
2. It's obviously also a mistake to list simply critical works of the two from the 1960s and 70s, and to imagine that as the high water mark of their engagement with romanticism, or literature, for that matter. (See also Bloom's comment about the relation between his latest book, *Jesus and Yahweh*, and *The Anxiety of Influence*.) They have both written several careers worth of scholarship since then, and in no way seem to be slowing down their critical production as the first decade of the twenty-first century works toward its conclusion. Hence this present volume of *Romantic Circles Praxis*. Earlier interviews of romanticists in *RCP* have conceived of themselves as cameos; this volume might appropriately use more modernist language and present itself as a set of snapshots of each scholar, catching them less in repose and more in the active process of continuing two storied, foundational careers.
3. If these are snapshots, they capture the two in different settings and modes of inquiry. The interview with Geoffrey Hartman was conducted last August in the lobby of the conference hotel for the 2005 North American Society for the Study of Romanticism that was held in Montreal, Canada. Romanticism is a mainstay of the conversation between Hartman and Marc Redfield, centering on Hartman's life-long shaping of Wordsworth as the paradoxically both radical and measured bearer of modernity. Their discussion also touches upon a wide range of topics that include the necessity of a multi-linguistic approach to literature, the nature of terror, and how Hartman and Bloom read differently. The interview with Harold Bloom occurred in his home in New Haven, Connecticut, shortly after Thanksgiving 2005, with family members of both Bloom and Laura Quinney present. In Bloom's and Quinney's conversation, romanticism is not so much the focus but rather a constant presence, signaled by references to Blake, Wordsworth, Emerson, and Whitman. Mixing the convivial and domestic with the sublime, Bloom keeps his attention fixed on the question of Yahweh, in a way less about what brings comfort than what unsettles, or even dismays.
4. Many thanks are in order for this volume's creation: to my co-editors, Marc Redfield and Laura Quinney, for the keen intelligence and sharp intrepidity that they brought to this project; to Kate Singer, William Flesch, and Lisa Marie Rhody for the technical support that made the interviews possible; to Jeanne Bloom for her gracious hospitality and Daniel and Julian Flesch for their patience during the interview in New Haven; and to Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom for the uncommon generosity and openness, intellectual and otherwise, that they evinced from the beginning to the end of this project.

# Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom

## Two Interviews

### Wordsworth, Poetry, Romanticism: An Interview with Geoffrey Hartman<sup>1</sup>

Marc Redfield, Claremont Graduate University

1. **Marc Redfield:** Geoffrey, thank you for this occasion. I'd like to pick up on the present occasion and suggest that our conversation be centered on Wordsworth and then maybe also on poetry and religion and the present moment or modernity.
2. **Geoffrey Hartman:** Okay.
3. **MR:** Partly following out on your talk at the conference and partly thinking about, let's say, the function of criticism and poetry at the present time. So let me ask you an opening question, which is about Wordsworth. You have written about so many authors and periods and topics, but Wordsworth has always been, particularly since 1964, your special author, if that's fair.
4. **GH:** Actually . . .
5. **MR:** Maybe not.
6. **GH:** Earlier. [Laughs.]
7. **MR:** Earlier, yes. [Both laugh.]
8. **GH:** Earlier, because *The Unmediated Vision* had its first chapter on Wordsworth.
9. **MR:** Okay. And the others were Rilke and Hopkins and Valéry. And you continued to write about these figures, but . . .
10. **GH:** I've continued to write on Hopkins . . . not on Rilke . . . but also on Valéry. I wrote on Rilke later only in view of a comment on Paul Celan. I mean, he figures, but not in a sustained way.
11. **MR:** You've written about the Wordsworthian sense of place that you acquired as a child refugee . . .
12. **GH:** Right.
13. **MR:** . . . in England, and your most recent writing up through today continues to draw strength from Wordsworth and to return to him, so I was wondering if you would be willing to try to sort of say something in an interview format about your own sense of the importance of Wordsworth for us today. I know that's an enormous question, but that might start us in a direction.
14. **GH:** Well, you know, you have to presuppose that poetry is of importance. [Chuckles.] And then, that Wordsworth is of importance. I mean that it is true if there were no Wordsworth, Milton still would be important, Spenser, Shakespeare, and, you know, continental poetry, and so on. Poetry would not go away . . . But having said that, Wordsworth does stand there permanently to my mind, and I think that's a general consensus; we've recognized that there is a divide between the old and the new: symbolism,

old style, new style, however you would describe it. Wordsworth is an innovator and one should talk about exactly why he is the beginning of modern poetry. It doesn't matter if we say modern or modernist. We still don't know the decisive elements that went into that change from an older style of symbolism and writing poetry to the new style—the new style being a new type of visionariness but also a certain intermingling of prosaicness or a diminished fear of the difference between prose and poetry. Should poetry come closer to prose, that might be a strength rather than a weakness. So, I think this development, which may not be the first thing people think about, has something to do with the history of prose, at least in England. Because in England there was previously, before Wordsworth, a considerable division between poetic style and prose style; and Wordsworth, as you know, revolted against a special language for poetry, wanted to do away with "poetic diction."

15. So, one would have to make an excursus into prose and prose rhythms and into the whole question of the transformation of meter, which finally goes into free style or *vers libre*. That is only the technical level. These technical matters are important, even if we cannot make a one-to-one relation between technical and thematic or form and content. But the main thing that makes one think of Wordsworth as originator is the way he handles paranormal or intense, quasi-mystical feelings for the natural world ("the incumbent mystery of sense and soul") as an everyday kind of ecstasy. I don't quite know how to put it and so I usually cite Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. This aspect of Wordsworth was clear enough yet not valued at the beginning, but now we have no great problem with it. Behind it, of course, is a crucial reflection on the depth of everyday life. As well as the role of nature in everyday life as a nourishing environment, and how it affects what we are increasingly calling the ecology of mind. That is, not just the relation between open spaces or rural nature and mental space, but a necessary symbiosis of nature and mind or nature and the imagination. One learns to understand the poet's fear that nature in the future may not sustain a characteristically English culture—will not sustain the imagination it has fostered. And if nature does not sustain the imagination, then the mind will desert nature or the imagination will. The result is fatal to the ecosystem of both nature and mind. There is a growing dependency on increasingly coarser stimuli abetted by urbanization (a process the poet analyses in his 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*), the crowding of people in cities, the hurry, the helter-skelter, the proliferation of news and sensational writing,—matters that, later on, Walter Benjamin also observed and expressed in more direct socioeconomic terms. Benjamin added the insight that modernity did not augment perception and sensation by the addition of new media but the contrary of that, that the media actually impoverish our capacity to feel directly and for "the meanest flower."
16. **MR:** The shock experience . . .
17. **GH:** Yes, Wordsworth emphasizes the shock experience of the City, but as a negative. Even when poets like Baudelaire don't talk about shock, that shock enters their poetry. Wordsworth does talk about it, especially in his description of London in *The Prelude*, but it is interesting that for him the shock came first in youth, from nature itself, and in that context was positive, tonic. And he stays with that, and holds onto that, because the later, urban shock is more intractable, does not contribute to maturation, or else he just doesn't know how to deal with it. Of course, anyone serious about urban studies would say "Wordsworth is *arrièrè*, he gets it backwards; cities can be developed as a wonderful habitat, we just have to get used to, use them as a creative field of stimuli rather than succumbing to trauma and sensory flooding."
18. **MR:** Still, would it be fair to say that you've seen and read in Wordsworth a poet whose particular power speaks to. . . well I was thinking of two things as you were speaking, they are, of course, themes in your writing: the impending ecological disaster, and then secondly the degree of violence which has gotten attached to religion and to expressions of religious fervor in the very contemporary world.

19. **GH:** He knew about the violence, and he knew it from England's history itself. He became a very strong supporter of the *via media*, yet was not overly concerned with religion. He may have been close, early on, to the spirit of Methodism, and did not fear "enthusiasm" the way that Locke and other enlightened thinkers feared religious mania of every kind. Chiefly, though, he was concerned that if your thoughts turned too much towards otherworldliness and became trapped in compensatory religious structures of the imagination, then your sensibility would move away from nature even more, and closer to apocalyptic fancies. And *that* violence, leading to the loss of the natural world as what should suffice, as poetry's true nourishment, he wanted to avoid at all costs. That is one reason why he doesn't, like Blake, erect a counter-visionary structure in his poetry. He doesn't try to replace one vision by another but subtly transforms, "naturalizes" an older symbolic mode entirely.
20. **MR:** I'd like to pursue that along a particular track, and it's a bit self-interested because I've been trying to write about the "war on terror" in relation to certain Romantic sources, if you can believe it . . .
21. **GH:** You gave a lecture on that at Yale I could not attend.
22. **MR:** Yes, and in (I think) 1947, Jean Paulhan wrote a book that's pretty much forgotten except in French departments called *Les fleurs de Tarbes, ou la Terreur dans les lettres*, and it had the sort of counterintuitive thesis that modern literature, we would say romantic as opposed to classic literature, craves terror in a sense because it craves transparency.
23. **GH:** Craves?
24. **MR:** Desires.
25. **GH:** Desires . . .
26. **MR:** . . . is attracted to terror, to the Revolution, because it desires immediacy, or to pick up the great title . . .
27. **GH:** Okay, that's . . .
28. **MR:** . . . "unmediated vision."
29. **GH:** I must admit to an early admiration (craving?) for unmediatedness. It may be that the terror experienced by the poet, also as the Terror that beset a phase in the internecine struggle of the revolutionary factions in France, has something fanatical and ideological in common with our contemporary experience. I am not sure, though, that this murderousness in the name of religion (also of "enlightenment" or self-empowerment when we think of Wordsworth's critique of Godwinianism in *The Borderers*) arises out of a desire for the unmediated. Yet as a wish to throw off all hypocrisy, repression, convention, arbitrary mind-shackles—in short "second nature"—it tends that way and may indulge in fantasies of a violent purgation. The French Revolution joins up with, becomes, a political religion. Wordsworth was, for a time, an enthusiast of the revolution; his understanding of it was not far from that of Carlyle, who later on saw it, despite its militant secularism, as a religious phenomenon—a religious phenomenon in the political realm. The wild post-Revolutionary speculations, Wordsworth wrote in *The Prelude*, tried to separate future from past absolutely. They separated, as by a gulf, the man who would be, the man of a new order—I'm paraphrasing—from the man of the past. Eventually that led the poet to return, in reaction, to continuities with his own tradition; even to define the poet generically as one who would be saved from the wound of such discontinuity by memories returning of his early intercourse with a beauty "old as creation." Even the early fearful experiences bound him, as he now saw, to his habitat. He turned from certain abstract immediacies and came to honor the concrete, embedded qualities of a religion apparently formed by spirit of place, by local and

national traditions. There is, we might say, a return from globalism to localism. But still, being a complex if unconventional thinker, Wordsworth had a notion of natural religion that was pedagogical. Nature was a great pedagogue, and any social engineering, any mechanical scheme of education, could not replace the accidented and multifaceted influences that, he claimed, made him a poet. In *The Prelude* he describes, for instance, how Nature liberated him from, well, I call it a "spot syndrome," from fixating localizations. Their localization has a mythic, even theophanic strength; but that does not cancel the psychological drama of having to progress from their haunting to the concept of Nature itself, nature as Nature, something much larger. Wordsworth's *Prelude* becomes our first significant poem centering on developmental psychology. He couldn't simply go back to local virtue, or local attachment. "Local attachment" at the end of the eighteenth century was a dialectical response—well, even if not dialectical, it was a reactive response to the growing cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment. All these are the complicated movements which factor into what we call "Wordsworth."

30. **MR:** Yes. And perhaps, to just pursue this one step longer and then we'll turn to something else, Paulhan defines "terror in letters" as the desire to extirpate the flowers of rhetoric, right, and to achieve an unmediated vision, and Wordsworth's relation's highly complex . . .
31. **GH:** Yes, yes, it is . . .
32. **MR:** . . . the achieving of a plainer style.
33. **GH:** Exactly . . . Paulhan would be relevant to Wordsworth and his distrust of rhetorical "glitter." Yet in *Lyrical Ballads* he didn't want to extirpate, really, the flowers or colors of rhetoric. He wanted to give them genuine roots, wanted them to proceed from the popular imagination, and, as it were, emerge from the soil, from a heart, or homeland. So Yeats too asks us to ground myth in the earth. The result is, as in many of the *Lyrical Ballads*, a minimalism of incident and style; and when the poet does use flowers of rhetoric, they are very closely, almost pedantically, but still quite powerfully attached to the particular person or story. In the "Idiot Boy," even though it is night, the idiot boy thinks the moon is the sun which shines so cold, and the owls hooting are the cocks crowing. So the metafelicity of this, the distortion, the coloration—what one could call strong, crazy metaphors— is sunk into the specific instance. Otherwise he is a minimalist, as in the Lucy poems. There, when you compare "Strange fits of passion" to "A slumber did my spirit seal," you see how much he elides, or rather condenses in the latter. But there is no sense of wishing to extirpate figures, only dead metaphors. Live metaphors, however rare, are the stuff of poetry. When in "The Ruined Cottage" the baker's cart goes by Margaret's house, because she has no money, so why stop there, she says, "that wagon doesn't care for me." She doesn't say "the baker doesn't." She transfers it to the wagon, "That wagon doesn't care for me."
34. **MR:** It's the more powerful because it's a sense of a process.
35. **GH:** Yes, you feel the poetic process, the metaphoric transfer or displacement . . . The animation of what is inert, of the mute, insensate thing, is part of that, and is justified by Margaret's passion, even as she remains movingly shy of cursing, or anger, or attributing blame directly.
36. **MR:** I suppose I'm trying to connect this to Wordsworth's resistance to apocalypse as you have taught us to see.
37. **GH:** If apocalypse is also . . .
38. **MR:** . . . as a resistance to terror.
39. **GH:** Yes. Well, that's a jump, yet it's relevant. Apocalypse is always associated with violent images of purgation, and with a rhetorical violence too, about which Wordsworth may be too squeamish. So I



think that is right, your perception is to the point. Wordsworth's purgation of poetic diction is not terroristic in Paulhan's sense. His plain style bypasses (to Blake's disgust) the "terrors" of a theomantic imagination for the deeper, daily, subtle profoundnesses of a mind seeking what will suffice.

40. **MR:** And then let me ask you a question that goes in a slightly different direction; again, I have half my eye on the contemporary world that we are living and suffering in. One aspect of globalization, of course, is the global spread of English. And in our little local part of the world, what that means is a great deal of stress put on foreign language departments, near catastrophe for German departments in many universities . . .
41. **GH:** Also for French at the moment.
42. **MR:** For French, yes. So here, just to sound a little perverse about it, is a problem that Wordsworth can't help us with as it were. One would want to, of course, instead urge that people read Rilke or Valéry in the original. The serious question I would like to ask you is for any reflections on comparative Romanticism and the future you see for comparative study in the world today.
43. **GH:** I can't give you even a moderately simple answer that would suggest a clear corrective or resolution for the paradox that even as we become multicultural we neglect the basis of every culture, its language. Our globalism becomes ever more abstract and our actual knowledge ever more parochial. That is why I prefer not to limit your concern to Romanticism. Of course, one should go back to Romanticism and extrapolate from it because there is so much of it that involves theory of language. I don't mean just Rousseau's theory of language but also the more concrete, empirical reflections of Humboldt in Germany. We should learn, I think, to pay attention to, to study as an ensemble, language theory, interpretation theory, and the creative literature that arises at a time that introduces via Goethe the concept of world literature, without any thought of abandoning the study of the particular national literatures. Then you also have to go back in time and study the dialectic of global and local: the way a language renews itself, is renewed by writers trying to revive its fossilized metaphors or retrieve its supposed original vigor. The short answer is that unless we cultivate a greater respect for the way language is an infeasible part of thought rather than its utilitarian shell, we won't progress but will regress in this media age.
44. It would be pedantic of me to offer a précis of the differing literary histories and philosophies of language in major European countries, the ones I know about (France, Germany, England), but Comp. Lit. scholars are acquainted with how productive and erudite European stylistics was in the hands of a Spitzer or Auerbach, who knew the evolution of the relevant vernaculars and could closely relate them to their developing literatures—interactive yet distinctive for each nationality. So one can extract some very important lessons concerning the way that language fertilizes itself and exerts great influence on a historical thesaurus but also on the imagination. How language is intrinsic to the development of a literary imagination. It's not that you have an imagination and then you strive to find a language for it, somehow create new words. It is a much more intricate process. So I would go in that direction, but the modern instance is made more difficult because language is proliferating unequally: in certain areas very, very fast, and in some areas hardly at all. Just think of the popular craze for acronyms and abbreviations now exacerbated by e-mail and text messaging. Multiple sources from print and speech flow into the river, the flood of language and junk speech. The growth of the optical deceives us, makes us believe (a willing deception on our part) that we can understand all this as if—to return to your concern—it were transparent, as if it could be understood immediately. But that immediacy overlooks the linguistic and interpretive moment and is, in reality, more mediated than ever. Whether our knowledge of language is expanding or contracting—and there is a lot of inventiveness around—it doesn't settle or sift incrementally. The new or idiosyncratic is soon consumed. It does not seem to build up, as in Shakespeare, to a creative synthesis of popular and higher genres. There does seem to be

an important current, however, an incipient canon of popular music that may already be contributing to the thesaurus of speech, rhythm, poetry. So, I'm not saying that the contemporary situation is arid, rather that it is confusing, and has led to an unfortunate neglect of a vast heritage as well as a disincentive. There is a distinct lack of interest in the deeper study of poetry, and generally of the way traditions have always refigured themselves.

45. **MR:** I suppose it goes back to a theme that we were discussing in the panels today. Just the double-edged nature of mediation, technical mediation; although,
46. **GH:** Yes, technological mediation . . .
47. **MR:** on the one hand, the technical flowerings of creativity, and on the other hand, standardization.
48. **GH:** It is very interesting, this encroaching standardization. Auerbach mentions it in the last chapter of *Mimesis*, one of the Comp. Lit. Bibles, as both eulogy and elegy for a many-splendored historicism. I.A. Richards too should be mentioned—Ogden and Richards worked together on *The System of Basic English*. Ogden, actually, wrote a book around 1930, called something like *Against Babel* or *Debabelization* [chuckles]—and that was a tirade against French and German etc., against bothering to be multilingual. Their position was "it is better for education and world peace to have a language which can be adopted universally, so let's work on basic English." Another side of that was the short-lived utopian idea of a universal Esperanto. What one is afraid of is that language will now, on the one hand, spin out of control in various ways, and on the other standardize and impoverish itself.
49. **MR:** Yes, well in particular of course from the point of view of the people who teach languages other than English . . . I don't know . . .
50. **GH:** The case has to be made that everyone should have more than one language. Now, that kind of bilingualism is necessary, not primarily as an epistemic or even economic tool, but because you cannot understand and really own your language unless you have also another language. That is the minimum principle to be adopted, and I wouldn't care what language it is, whether an African-American pairing or a Spanish-American, or English-Latin. But you should try to master two languages; and, if possible, two languages with either a significant written canon or a recorded oral tradition, and—you were talking about comparative literature—you would acquire some capability of comparing them. That is, to test the limits of translatability, and as you get to the limits of translatability, you also see how and perhaps why cultures are different. . . Disaster awaits if you underestimate the depth relation of a culture to its language, as we see in American foreign policy, its ignorant adventurism.
51. **MR:** Right. Let me close the interview with a couple of questions about poetry, just to bring us full circle. There was a very striking moment, at least for me, in an interview that Harold Bloom gave around 1985, I think it was Imre Salusinszky . . . if I got the name right . . .
52. **GH:** Yes, he published an interview with Frye, who else, myself, Bloom, Gayatri Spivak perhaps, and . . .
53. **MR:** Maybe Edward Said, I don't remember . . .
54. **GH:** Yeah, I think Said was there too . . .
55. **MR:** Well, anyway, at a certain point in the interview, I think that it is this interview, Bloom confessed to having completely changed his mind about Blake. He commented that when he was young he would have said he put Blake on the highest level, and Pope lower, considerably lower, and now he would do it the other way around. So, that's the case in which a critic has changed his mind about something very

large given the history of this particular critic's writing. I wonder whether you've had any experience that's analogous in which a writer who once meant a great deal to you maybe now means less, for reasons that would be interesting.

56. **GH:** No, and I don't think that reflects favorably on me [laughs], the fact that I have to say no. It may be that I don't go out on as many limbs as Bloom does. And I know it was quite a reversal, because Bloom and I were in very close daily contact for a long time. And I saw, even wrote about the change in his attitude about Blake, but that is another subject. [Pause.] I really don't think I have ever reversed myself, because even when I fall away from a poet such as Rilke, I still enjoy that poet. Bloom has to adopt something wholeheartedly and then reject it. I mean he takes it into his bosom, and then he divorces. I think a certain love/hate remains; he's a very passionate person in that respect. I seem to be more cautious, I fall for a poet easily enough but have to work hard to justify what I feel, to prove that poet's worth to myself. Bloom, however, has a capacity of intuition when it comes to poetry that is absolutely remarkable, while I have to woo a poet, and do it from the outside. I look at the style and say, "Now this is interesting . . ." and very gradually, you know, I get used to it, attain a certain intimate confidence, but it takes time. Now, in the case of Wordsworth, it had something to do with my displacement into another language. And with Wordsworth and English nature hitting me at the same time. Not that I was in the Lake District, I was in another place, in Bucks, but it was a typical English rural nature that hadn't changed all that much when I found myself there in '39. So, I got a start like this. But even with Wordsworth, I stayed a long time pondering features of style Bloom would have probably have considered trivial—the repetitions, and so on. I don't think they should be disregarded, but Bloom is not particularly interested in diction, or stylistic norms and deviations, unless they tell his ear about a deviant borrowing from precursors. When he comes to a poet like Hopkins, he kind of throws the diction away, and flies immediately to the poetical ideology, as it were. I have a very close relationship to Wordsworth, but—how should I put it—I don't incorporate the poet that I read, or anything that I read, in the way that Bloom does.
57. **MR:** In the 50s and 60s, you wrote about contemporary American poetry . . .
58. **GH:** Yes, I did.
59. **MR:** Do you still read contemporary American poetry?
60. **GH:** I still do, but it is not as intense. I decided early on that I was going to do poetry reviewing, because that's how I would get into contemporary American and English poetry—through, you know, the pressure. I need a lot of pressure. My aim was to be a poet, so at that time I read poetry to get on as a poet. To inspire and feed me. To encourage me. And this reviewing of poetry was really my way of getting deeper into the poetry. I was also piquing my intellect, because each poet is a little world, a heterocosm, so that was the challenge. I made some discoveries, or I thought I made them, like A. D. Hope, the Australian poet. I was sent his book together with about 30 others by the *Kenyon Review*, and I said to myself, "This is a great poet. How come no one knows about him?" Of course, while they didn't know about him in America, he was already famous in Australia, so I wrote this review under the illusion that I was a discoverer of a new poet, that's how naïve I was. I had no big background. Whereas Bloom, as he told me, from very early on read and read and poetry simply fell into him. He memorized Yeats completely. He didn't say he memorized every other poet too, but he knows, he knows a tremendous amount by heart. Empson was another who knew the canon by heart, big swatches of it. I envy their capacious memory, or should I say heart: their non-mechanical learning by heart. That is lost to so many of us.

<sup>1</sup>This interview was conducted at the 2005 NASSR conference on August 16, 2005. It was recorded by Kate Singer, transcribed by Lisa Marie Rhody, and lasts 36 minutes and 42 seconds.

# Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom: Two Interviews

## An Interview with Harold Bloom<sup>1</sup>

Laura Quinney, Brandeis University

1. **Laura Quinney:** Ok, so it's November 27<sup>th</sup>, in New Haven. We're at Harold's house, and my name is Laura Quinney. This is an interview with Harold Bloom about his latest book *Jesus and Yahweh*. Tell me what the epigraph was to have been.
2. **Harold Bloom:** Well there was originally a double epigraph. One is still there because it explains the subtitle, *The Names Divine*, and that is the second of the two quatrains of the concluding "To the Accuser who is the God of this World" of the final version of Blake's little emblem book "For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise," that is to say:

Though thou art Worshipd by the Names Divine  
Of Jesus and Jehovah thou art still  
The Son of Morn in weary Nights decline  
The lost Travellers Dream under the Hill—

but originally I had wanted to have with it a very great sentence, spoken by an actual governor of Texas back I think in the early 1930s who rejoiced in the name of Ma Ferguson. And when this lady was inaugurated as governor of Texas, she announced that so long as she was governor, no state-supported school, from junior high up through the University of Texas at Austin would be allowed to teach any foreign language whatsoever, and her reason for this she expressed in one very great sentence: "If English was good enough for Jesus then I suppose it should be good enough for us."

3. **LQ:** [Laughs.] Thank you. I wanted to ask you in particular about what it means to be a Jewish Gnostic.
4. **HB:** Ah.
5. **LQ:** In your book, in the opening paragraphs on "The Jewish Sages on God," you write: "The God of the Gnostics is called the Stranger or Alien God, and has exiled himself from our cosmos, perhaps forever. I do *not* regard Yahweh in that way" [p. 193, Quinney's emphasis]. And yet you describe yourself as a Gnostic.
6. **HB:** Well, I am partly relying upon my great mentor Gerhard or Gershom Scholem, who in many conversations with me, primarily in Jerusalem, but also in Boston, New York City, and here at this table in New Haven, would frequently say to me that the great disaster of Kabbalah was its Neoplatonic scheme or myth of emanation—the sephirot—and that he greatly preferred what he called the Gnostic kabbalah of the early Merkavah mystics, which he thought had been renewed by Moses Cordovero, who was the teacher of Isaac Luria, and then by Isaac Luria in which Ein Soph, the Kabbalistic name of the infinite one, or Yahweh—whose name you're not supposed to use, but I am now—Ein Soph creates the universe by contracting and withdrawing inside himself, or as I say, going back to the original Hebrew of the Zimzum, which means to sharply draw in or take in your breath—it is that act which at once creates and ruins worlds, according to Cordovero and Luria, and those who came after them. But Gnosticism: Scholem was convinced and Moshe Idel, to whom I am much closer in every

way—he is a close personal friend—Moshe Idel on this agrees with Scholem though frequently they don't: Idel says that fundamentally he thinks that what someone like Hans Jonas and other scholars after him have called Gnosticism is actually a kind of parody or echo of a kind of archaic Judaism which we don't have any more, though you can find curious versions of it in the different books of Enoch and other apocryphal literature. Even when I was a little boy, the Talmudic rabbi who fascinated me was the one denounced by all the others in the Pirke Abboth or Sayings of the Fathers, the rabbi Elisha Ben Abuyah, whom the others called Akah, meaning the stranger or the alien, and who is reported to have ascended into heaven in a mystical trance and there beheld not one God but two gods, sitting on thrones facing each other, one being Yahweh, and the other being Metatron, the angel of the divine presence who simply was the transmogrified human being Enoch after he is carried off by Yahweh to the heavens without the necessity of first dying. There are all kinds of complex traditions, some of them going back a long, long way, even though we have no texts of what could be called an original Jewish Gnosis. As I understand Gnosticism,—and it seems to me in this I am highly consonant with my hero Ralph Waldo Emerson, as I am with Valentinus of Alexandria or Basilides of Alexandria, or with Luria or Cordovero, let alone that splendid fellow Nathan of Gaza, who wrote the treatise on the dragons and was the spokesperson or prophet for the false Messiah Sabbatai Zevi,—Gnosticism essentially comes down to a few convictions. One is that the best and oldest part of every one of us, even if we don't have immediate access to it, or easy access to it, is part and parcel of God. (I want a very small sliver, dear.) Another is that the creation and the fall are not two separate events, but one and the same event with all of the unfortunate (that's fine dear) the unfortunate pragmatic (thank you dear)—pragmatic consequences of this (mmm . . . it's full of liquor; mmm, it's yummy . . . ).

7. **LQ:** [To the tape recorder.] A whisky cake is being consumed.
8. **JB:** [Laughs.]
9. **HB:** Willie, come and have some whisky cake. A very Yahwistic whisky cake.
10. **Daniel Flesch:** Is this yours, Mom?
11. **William Flesch:** Shhh . . .
12. **HB:** I suppose the remaining basic conviction of Gnosticism is that there is, besides the divinity to which it is so hard to have access, it is very deep in the rock of the self. There is also an exiled component of the true God, who is not Yahweh but presumably the Anthropos, the original man/God of the hermeticists. Except, who knows? Akiba—Akiba who was after all the normative rabbi, the founder of what we call normative Judaism in the second century of the common era, Akiba specifically said that his favorite name for God was *ish*, which is man. So—in any case I suppose the final tenet of Gnosticism is that there is an exiled component of the Godhead, but it's not in this world, which is governed by the archons and governed by Blake's Nobodaddy as it were, and that far off beyond our solar system, in the cosmological outer spaces there is the—aren't you going to give Willy some of that?
13. **WF:** I had some.
14. **HB:** Well put it back in there: you don't want it to go to waste.
15. **WF:** But I might want more.
16. **JB:** Stop talking in the microphone.
17. **HB:** Pussycat? Oh, I'm sorry.

18. **LQ:** It's ok, it's ok. It can be edited. Or not.
19. **HB:** It doesn't matter.
20. **LQ:** But your Yahweh is not Blake's Nobodaddy.
21. **HB:** No. No no no no no. He is—he was for me the surprise of my book. As I say at one point he usurped this book. Indeed he wasn't supposed to be there at all in the first place. Originally the title of the book was *Jesus and Christ*, since I regard the two of them as totally separate figures, but I found that as I got into it, it didn't make any sense to me unless I really talked about Yahweh, and I think the really original part of the book is the second half, on Yahweh, which actually goes so far as to apply Lurianic Kabbalah to the whole question of the origin of Yahweh. You will remember that in Kierkegaard *Nebuchadnezzar*, after he had been changed back from a beast in the field to a man, says of Yahweh, "Nobody knows who *his* father was, or who taught him the secret of his strength" [quoted from Quidam in *Stages on Life's Way*] and I speculate in a perfectly Kabbalistic way, I say—I speculate that a perfectly—aren't you going to eat it—?
22. **LQ:** Yes I'm going to try it.
23. **HB:** In a perfectly, I think, Kabbalistic way that Yahweh may have come into existence by this act of *Zimzum*, this act of contraction or withdrawal, which means that he diminished himself in order to get started. Which I find fascinatingly parallel to Walt Whitman, in which I again follow Scholem: who used to say in conversations with me, that in a secular world somehow Whitman by some miracle without knowing anything about Kabbalah had in effect reinvented his own Kabbalah, and I think that is true. Whitman throughout *Song of Myself* and elsewhere is always saying that he is expanding, that he is getting to contain more and more multitudes, that his sense of self is steadily increasing. But in fact he too is always contracting and withdrawing. He is endlessly elusive and evasive, and the worlds that he creates and ruins also seem to come from some process of self-withdrawal.
24. **LQ:** This may lead to my next question, which is something that puzzles me about the book. And that is that in some sense I was not sure why you think of the Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible as a true description of a Deity, rather than as a . . . ?
25. **HB:** Well, there are Yahwehs—just as I say there are seven versions at least of Jesus or Jesus Christ, or Jesus and Jesus Christ, in the Greek New Testament, there are innumerable versions of God in Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, but the one who interests me and always has and always will, is the original one, the first Straha, traditionally called J or the Yahwist, probably written as early as the reign of Solomon, 3,000 years ago, in which most certainly he is as I say a stern imp, up to a lot of mischief, something of a trickster God—human all too human: he's always walking around on the ground; he isn't flying up in the air—he's walking around on the ground in order to make personal, you know, sort of on the job inspections of how things are going. He closes the door of the ark—of Noah's ark with his own hands; he even more memorably buries Moses in an unmarked grave, with his own hands; he is very fond of picnics; thus at Mamre he sits beneath the terapim trees because he always likes to be in the shade rather than the sun, thus he walks we are told in Eden in the cool of the day, at Mamre, with two of the Elohim who are his angels he sits beneath the terapim trees, and he has a sumptuous rather full-scale luncheon prepared by Sarah—roast veal and whey and freshly baked sort-of cakes. And how is one to put it—he on Sinai, on the side of Sinai, he sits there and shares a meal with 73 elders of Israel. They stare at him and he stares at them and that's it. He doesn't say a word and they don't say a word, but there he is. And according to Kabbalistic tradition, from the Merkavah thing on, he's enormous, he is I say the King Kong of deities, he is of enormous size.

26. **LQ:** What leads you to think of this God as more than an exceptional fiction?
27. **HB:** Well, his metaphysical density, his ferocious and vivid personality, his intensely human traits—I gather you're not going to eat that so I'm going to put it back in there—
28. **LQ:** One more bite.
29. **HB:** Go ahead, go ahead. He is . . . he is a . . . the reason why I keep invoking Shakespearean characters like King Lear, who is I think Shakespeare's version of Yahweh, or Hamlet, who has a very complex relation I think to Mark's Jesus, is that Yahweh, Mark's Jesus, Hamlet, King Lear, Falstaff, Cleopatra, Iago—they are all more real than you are, whoever you are, and yes, they are fictions, but if they're fictions, what are we? Since they are livelier than we are, exceed us in energy and in dynamism, as Yahweh does also. It seems to me that—I mean he may just be not at all an attractive version of what Mr. Stevens wanted to call the supreme fiction, but he is . . . he's quite a fiction, he's very persuasive and as I keep saying in the book I wish he would go away. I don't like him. I don't feel anybody can like him. His famous definition when Moses asks him his name—his famous self-definition is ehyeh asher ehyeh, translated by William Tyndale as "I am that I am" and that's kept in the Authorized Version of the English Bible. The Hebrew "ehyeh asher ehyeh" actually means "I will be, I will be;" "I will be *that* I will be," or to make it into better English "I will be present wherever and whenever I choose to be present," but I say throughout the book that also means "And I will be absent wherever and whenever I choose to be absent." And he is very distinguished by his absences, it seems to me. But if he is just a literary character—well first of all I don't recognize any distinction between literary and human characters; I mean I'm notorious for that, and why not be notorious for that—it seems to me that the sacred Bloomstaff, as I call him, is at least as real as old Bloom—Sir John Falstaff, of course. But not even kidding, I mean what can you say about the Yahweh of the J writer? He is endlessly memorable, he is endlessly unreliable. [Pause.] But he gets inside you. I repeat I would like him to go away, but he doesn't seem to go away.
30. **LQ:** Why doesn't he go away?
31. **HB:** Well, because I'm pretty sure he is our equivalent—I mean, our equivalent for him now is what our Uncle Siggy Freud called "reality testing" and the Reality Principle. Freud says that reality testing means that you have to "make friends with the necessity of dying."
32. **LQ:** So he's the name of everything that opposes our will.
33. **HB:** Yeah, he is . . . [Pause.] I think I remark somewhere in the book, with a certain amiability—I wouldn't say *irony*, but a kind of zest, that God had breathing trouble and this trouble created the world. And I think I remark something like, "Try to hold in your breath for as long as possible, and then just before you can't stand it any more, try to think something into creation, try to will or think something, and see what happens." Which always makes me think of Kafka's very grand remark to Max Brod, where he says, "We are one of God's thoughts when he was having a bad day." It seems to me he has mostly bad days. But since I don't think there's any distinction whatsoever between sacred and secular texts, there's only great writing and bad writing (or good writing in between I suppose or fair writing) then it's natural to speak of—in fact, remember what Blake says; he says religion is just choosing forms of worship from poetic tales, and then he adds—this is *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* — "Thus men forgot that all Deities reside in the human breast." But that doesn't mean that they don't reside there. And of course, this is now a very tricky business, because I'm not sure anybody—you're not supposed to believe in Yahweh anyway if you are a normative Jew, you're supposed to have Emunah, you are supposed to trust in the covenant with him, but he's never kept the Covenant himself, and I get awfully weary of the Hebrew prophets who are always denouncing the people of Israel for violating



their covenant with Yahweh when Yahweh hadn't kept his for a moment, and always seems to be hard at work destroying his chosen people. He seems to resent sometimes, precisely because he had such trouble bringing them into existence I suppose and they are after all according to that story the original people that he brought into existence—

34. **LQ:** The title of Frank Kermode's review is "Angry at God." Do you think anger is the correct word?
35. **HB:** "Angry at God" is not what Sir Frank says. That's on the front cover of *The New York Review of Books*. If you look inside, Sir Frank's review is "Arguing with God," and I think that's what this book is, and an old Jewish tradition is an argument with God.
36. **LQ:** What adjective would you use to describe your feelings about . . .
37. **HB:** Yahweh?
38. **LQ:** . . . God?
39. **HB:** I don't like him. I repeat I wish he would go away. But somehow he doesn't. I don't think I have any nostalgia for him. I wouldn't dream of praying to him, but then I'm an Emersonian, and Emerson in "Self-Reliance" says quite wonderfully, "As men's prayers are a disease of the will, so are their creeds a disease of the intellect." Now Christianity has creeds; Judaism doesn't. Islam has creeds; Judaism doesn't. There are now one and a half billion so-called Christians in the world and one and a half billion so-called Moslems in the world—those who have submitted: which is what it means, Islam means "submission." There are perhaps fourteen million Jews still left, so obviously it's a thousand to one. The fight got settled a long time ago, but on the other hand there are even more Hindus. Nobody knows how many people there are in India—they don't practice birth control there, unlike the Chinese who so rigorously try to keep their population from getting completely out of hand; there may well be more Indians now than there are Chinese—in any case, if you add up all the Indians, excluding the Pakistanis or the Moslem Kashmiris, if you add up all the Hindus and other modes of religion in India which are not Moslem or Christian, and you add in all the Taoists, Buddhists, and Confuciusists, not only of China but of the rest of Asia, and the Buddhists and Shintoists of Japan, there are more non . . . what are we to call them? Ultimately at the moment it seems to me that with great crusader Bush leading us there is a kind of religious war being fought between the Moslem world and the Christian world, just as there is obviously a religious war being fought between the state of Israel and the Moslem world, which is why Israel is sitting on top of that vast mound of atomic and hydrogen bombs in Dimona, but in the long run I suppose the religious future may well lie with the East.
40. **LQ:** Um hm. Would you think the word "disappointed" would be a fair characterization? Would you say that you are disappointed . . .
41. **HB:** . . .with Yahweh?
42. **LQ:** Yes.
43. **HB:** No. I wouldn't have dreamed of trusting him in the first place. So what is there to be disappointed with? He is, he's bad news, he has always been bad news. No, I'm not disappointed; I find him very fascinating, very interesting. As I say, he's even more interesting than King Lear, and to some extent at least—well, Mark's Jesus and Hamlet run almost neck and neck in interest. Each of them has incredible mood swings, as Sir Frank points out, following me in that part of his review. No I'm... [Pause.] Look, I've been teaching how to read for 51 years now. I've been writing and publishing criticism for 51 years. It seems to me that what I've written in this book is really just an extension of the book *The Anxiety of Influence*, which in its first form was written back in the summer of 1967 when I was 37, and

actually contained a rather savage chapter on the Gospel of John, which I detached and later published separately, and now in revised form have put it into this book, so it's a pretty direct line from one to the other. I was rather amused, though, to see my old student Jonathan Rosen, in the review that appeared in today's *Sunday Times Book Review*, saying that: Well after all what difference does it make that Wallace Stevens strongly misread Shelley in order to produce characteristic Stevens, what matters is religious truth, and, you know, it is the truth or falsehood in regard to one another of, say, Christianity and Judaism or of Islam that matters. That may be Jonathan Rosen, but that isn't me, and that isn't in the book that he's reviewing. Not that I'm ungrateful for his review, which you know certainly shows a warm heart, and reminds me of a wonderful pun I once—quoting from the Hebrew—of an almost Lewis Carrollian or Joycean dimension, that I threw into an outrageous public lecture here on the relation between the so-called two covenants or two testaments. I also liked the joke, which I'd seen before but hadn't seen for a long time. It's an old Yiddish remark, that the Christians stole our watch 2,000 years ago, and are still telling us what time it is. I like that. It's almost as good as my favorite Yiddish proverb, as I translate it: "Sleep faster, we need the pillows."

44. **LQ:** [Laughs.] I'm still fascinated by the question of your relation to Yahweh, as you can see.
45. **HB:** Well, it seems to me no more or no less vital or of concern to you as my close friend or to me, as my relation to King Lear. I would have great difficulty in saying what my relation to King Lear is. I agree with Charles Lamb: you shouldn't even go and see somebody try and act the part, because it's unactable. What can you do with a figure who actually stares up at the sky and cries out, "You heavens, you should take my side because you too are old." That's so marvelous and I can't imagine an actor enunciate it. And I've never seen a Lear that worked. I think that trying to play Lear would be rather like having a drama in which somebody played Yahweh. Inconceivable.
46. **LQ:** You do use one phrase here which struck me very much. I was fascinated by it. I'm not sure I can imagine you using it about Lear. You speak of your "waning skepticism" about Yahweh.
47. **HB:** Well, I have waning skepticism about Lear also. I mean the difference is that I get fonder and fonder of Lear, irascible old creature as he is. Waning skepticism.
48. **LQ:** Yes, that's interesting. It's a good surprising phrase. You expect the reverse.
49. **HB:** I drag it in at the end of the book because I got very bored by Sam Harris. You know pragmatically there's no difference between Sam Harris urging an end to faith; I would say fine, Judaism isn't faith anyway. That's Pauline Pistis, the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. No, the only question is whether you trust Yahweh or you don't, and obviously you shouldn't and can't and couldn't and won't, because he's bad news, as I keep saying. He's as good an explanation for why everything goes wrong all the time as we could want. And he's had a terrible effect upon the world. Because in a somewhat altered and perhaps even more aggressive form, he is the Allah, which is a variant in Arabic on Elohim, of the Koran, of the Recitation, and he utterly disappears in Christianity, where God the father is just kind of an unfortunate, weak imitation of Yahweh. [Pause.] Surely it comes back to Leibniz, doesn't it? Which is then picked up by the horrible Heidegger. Why should anything be, anyway, rather than not be? Since Yahweh puns on ehyeh, which is the ancient Hebrew verb for being. I don't know. In the end I suppose if I have to vote and go with any one, I go with Hamlet, who is a nihilist as I read him. I think Shakespeare's ultimately is nihilistic, not Christian, not even Hermetist, just nihilistic, but I don't know that pragmatically there's any difference between Yahwism and nihilism. You know: is this a difference that makes a difference? to invoke William James's, you know, quite Emersonian definition of American pragmatism. It doesn't seem to me that it is a difference that makes a difference.

50. **LQ:** I see. So the phrase "waning skepticism" doesn't mean "increasing faith"?
51. **HB:** No, there's no faith to be had anyway. Certainly, the only issue is whether or not you trust him. I don't trust him. He's not worthy of trust. He is *very bad*. He is . . . .
52. **LQ:** You speak often of the Holocaust as—I take it that that for you is emblematic.
53. **HB:** Oh sure. Oh sure, I mean Yeshua, if he was crucified, was one of hundreds of thousands of Jews who were being crucified by the Romans in those days. And the biggest single holocaust of Jews took place after Rabbi Akiba proclaimed Simon bar Kosba, Simon bar Kochba or son of the star and said he was the Messiah, ben Joseph, that is to say, not the Messiah ben David but the Messiah ben Joseph, the warrior who comes first. And that led all of the Jews in the world into a terrific rebellion against Hadrian, and millions of Jews were eventually slaughtered and Akiba tortured to death at the age of 95; Bar Kochba went down heroically, taking legions of Romans with him. At one point in the book I have a sentence that Jeanne, my wife, reading it, said "Harold, it shouldn't be there; it will get you into trouble." But I'm glad it's there, because you know the great phrase about Yahweh in the Psalms and elsewhere is that Yahweh is a man of war, and I think his most memorable single appearance, and I talk about it, in the Bible, in Tanakh, is in the Book of Joshua, where at one point Joshua—you know it is after the death of Moses and Joshua is in command of the Israelites and they conquered Canaan, and before a crucial battle near Jericho he notices an armed warrior. He doesn't recognize him, and he boldly goes up to him, and he says, "Are you one of us or one of them." And the fellow replies, "The ground upon which you stand is holy. Take off your sandals." At which Joshua takes off his sandals and abases himself because he recognizes that it is Yahweh a man of war come to fight in the battle of Jericho, which he does, as he also fights, you know, with the tribes that came to the battle in the first Hebrew poem that we have, the song of Deborah and Barak in Judges 5. So I have this sentence in the book: "If Yahweh is a man of war, then Allah is a suicide bomber." I think they are all bad news, Judaism and Christianity and Islam. But I wanted to make clear in the book that there is no such thing as a Judeo-Christian tradition. That is absolutely ridiculous. And fascinatingly enough there are two things that I've said throughout my life when I've addressed Jewish audiences, say at the Jewish Theological Seminary or such places, and they always get furious at me. But they're both true. One is that nowhere in the whole of the Tanakh does it say that a whole people can make themselves holy through study of texts. That's a purely Platonic idea, and comes out of Plato's Laws. That simply shows how thoroughly Platonized the rabbis of the second century were. The other one, which I say in this book and it has already given some offense, is that in fact not only is Judaism, which is a product of the second century of the common era—and it's worked out by people like you know Akiba and his friends and opponents like Ishmael and Tarphon and the others, is a younger religion than Christianity is. Christianity in some form exists in the first century of the common era. What we now call Judaism comes along in the second century of the common era. Christianity is actually the older religion, though it infuriates Jews when you say that to them.
54. **LQ:** I wanted to go back to your comment . . .
55. **HB:** I think my book is good clean fun.
56. **LQ:** Well I thoroughly enjoyed it. I wanted to go back to your comment. . .
57. **HB:** But I don't think it's irreverent.
58. **LQ:** No.
59. **HB:** Because I think the category—you know any time you want to say that some text is more sacred

than another then you've made a political statement, and I don't like political statements. It is utterly insane that by vote of the United States Congress, the Church of Scientology has a tax exempt status. That means that *Dianetics*, by L. Ron Hubbard, which I challenge anybody to try to read, is a sacred text, by vote of Congress. And of course what it is is very ninth rate science fiction. Though it now has distinguished believers like, I believe, Tom Cruise and— isn't John Travolta also a Scientologist?

60. **LQ:** To go back to your comment about Yahwism and nihilism: What is—I don't know how to put this question exactly—but what is—why do you describe yourself as a Gnostic rather than an atheist or an agnostic?
61. **HB:** Ah, that's what my wife always wants to know. She regards herself as an atheist. [Pause.] I don't think I am.
62. **JB:** [Whispers.]
63. **HB:** Bad wife.
64. **LQ:** Sorry, what did you say, Jeanne?
65. **JB:** I regard him as an atheist.
66. **LQ:** I see. That was "I regard him as an atheist."
67. **HB:** No, no I'm not an atheist. It's no fun being an atheist.
68. **JB:** True! But what alternative is there?
69. **HB:** Well, the alternative is to entertain all of these fictions. Remembering what Uncle Wallace taught us, which is that the final belief he says is to believe in a fiction, with the nicer aspects of belief, that knowing that what you believe in is not true. It's just imaginatively much more interesting to be a Gnostic rather than an agnostic, to be fascinated by Yahweh rather than indifferent to him. Walt Whitman liked to say that the United States are in themselves the greatest poem. Alas they're not, but it's a nice idea. Yahweh is a great poem. [Pause.] I don't think Jesus Christ is a great poem. [Pause.] I never quite make up my mind about Allah, though I'm fascinated by the fact that the Koran is the only book I've ever read in which every single phrase is spoken by God himself. It is the voice of Allah that you hear from the beginning to the end, supposedly by mediation of the angel Gabriel, being dictated to Mohammed, who however doesn't write it down because supposedly he's an illiterate, which baffles me, because he's a successful merchant, and how could you have been a successful merchant if you were illiterate, and couldn't read or write? But supposedly he memorizes it and then he dictates it—a very suspicious process of course, but then no more suspicious than the formation of Tanakh or the Greek New Testament. I don't say it in this book, because I had said it in the book just before, called *Where Shall Wisdom be Found*, in the chapter there that reprints with a few modifications a commentary that I'd written on the Gnostic or quasi-Gnostic Gospel of Thomas,—I ask every New Testament theologian I've known in this life the same question; I've asked the great Pelikan this question, at which he had just shrugged his shoulders and walked off smiling amiably: How is it that we don't have an Aramaic Gospel? Why is there no Nazarene Gospel? Even though we know that no one who wrote anything that is now in the New Testament had ever seen the historical Jesus, had ever heard him say a word, nevertheless, for any of this to make even an iota of sense, that person did not go around speaking Koiné, speaking demotic Greek. He went around speaking Aramaic. Aramaic and demotic Greek are totally different languages. The nuances of thought, expression and spirituality of one are not readily translatable into the other. How could you believe that you were hearing the *ipsa verba*, the actual words of the incarnate God, and not write them down and preserve them? And what

makes me even more suspicious is, you will notice, as though they throw it in to show the authenticity of this inauthentic schmaltz, all through the Gospels suddenly you're thrown a phrase or two in Aramaic, including, you know, the last words spoken from the Cross. Why? And where's the rest of it?

70. **LQ:** You say in the book when you come to the question of why Christianity has been appealing, I believe you say, it's the promise of the resurrection.
71. **HB:** Well, even more simply now though: I was on Charlie Rose some weeks ago, and Charlie, I suppose playing straight man—a hard role for Charlie to play—said: To what do you attribute the fact that you've just spoken of, Harold, that there are a billion and a half Moslems in the world and a billion and a half Christians and only fourteen million Jews, how do you explain the enormous appeal of these religions? I said: Well on the one hand, in both Islam and Christianity, you're getting a great deal in exchange for very little. All you have to do in Christianity is say, "I accept that Jesus of Nazareth was also Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the anointed one or Messiah," and as a result you have life eternal. And all you have to do in Islam, as they say, which is what it means, is submit just to the statement that Mohammed, who is certainly not divine and doesn't pretend to be divine is nevertheless the seal of the prophets, the final kind of a prophet and all you have to do is submit to the will of Allah, and in return you get Paradise. And of course there's also the fact, as I said on Charlie Rose, that Christianity triumphed not just because of that but because Constantine the Great looked over what was available to him, including Mithraism and so on, and said, "The right way to hold the Empire together, the right state religion is Christianity." So he swung the sword of Constantine, and out went all the heretical versions of Christianity also, including the Gnostics and we got the Church, the Roman Catholic Church indeed. And then Mohammed, as the Koran makes clear, and all the texts after it—Mohammed is definitely a man of war and kept defeating the Arabian Jews and he defeated the various Arabian pagans, and after his death his Califs went on and on and on magnificently (ah yes, beautiful wife) magnificently went on conquering. So both Islam and Christianity triumphed by the sword, and of course then started engaging with one another—in the Crusades, in Spain, in North Africa, and at the moment, whether we like it or not, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and God knows where next.
72. **LQ:** I take it that you find the Hebrew Bible not only aesthetically deeper than the New Testament, but also that you find it—how shall I say it—spiritually deeper?
73. **HB:** The only thing in the New Testament that seems to me spiritually valuable is the general epistle of James, undoubtedly written by a disciple of James, that is to say Jacob the brother of Jesus, by tradition anyway the brother. And that is precisely what Martin Luther wanted thrown out of the Bible—he called it an "epistle of straw"—because it said specifically that faith is not enough, that only works matter, and it ferociously, like the prophet Amos and the first Isaiah, cries out against those who oppress the poor. I'm not sure how much spirituality really interests me in the Gospel of Mark. The Gospel of Mark—and a couple of early reviewers, in places like *Kirkus* and (what's that other one?) *Publisher's Weekly*, got very angry with me about this—and they both picked this up and a couple of reviewers I've seen since—where I say that in many ways the author of the Gospel of Mark reminds me of Edgar Allan Poe, in that he writes very very badly on a sentence by sentence basis, and yet he's got a spooky kind of universalizing imagination. You know, he dreams universal nightmares, and it's very hard to get them out of your head.
74. **LQ:** Like Dreiser, or Mary Shelley. Both bad writers on the sentence level.
75. **HB:** Yeah. Oh yeah. Dreiser is endlessly fascinating in that regard. *Sister Carrie* breaks my heart, and *An American Tragedy* hurts so much I hate rereading it. But on a sentence by sentence basis they're impossibly drab and dreadful. And it's quite true, *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*, as prose are very badly written, but they work, they work. And the Gospel of Mark I think is very badly written, by an

amateur writer, evidently a Jew in Rome, writing at about the time, you know, word is reaching him that the temple is being destroyed and the city is being burned, and—it is very compelling. And then of course I hate the Gospel of John because as I say candidly in the book it hates me so I hate it. It keeps saying that the Jews are all the children of Satan. Now that's very interesting, in the whole of the Hebrew Bible, except for one brief, rather muted reference, I think in the prophet Zachariah, who's late, the only place where Satan enters is not as a fellow named Satan, a personage named Satan, but as the ha-Satana, the accuser, the prosecuting attorney, at the beginning of the Book of Job. But in the Greek New Testament, the only character who matters besides Jesus Christ is Satan, who is onstage almost non-stop. It's a Satan-haunted piece of work.

76. **LQ:** Oh, speaking of being haunted, there's a beautiful passage at the end of the book, where you say "I very much want to dismiss Yahweh as the ancient Gnostics did, finding in him a mere demiurge who had botched the creation . . . . But I wake up these days, sometime between midnight and two A.M., because of nightmares [of] Yahweh" (p. 236).
77. **HB:** Oh, yeah.
78. **LQ:** And so . . .
79. **HB:** He frequently looks like Uncle Siggy, in a three piece Edwardian suit, with a beautifully groomed beard and hair, and flashing a cigar at me. But Uncle Siggy—If asked what Yahweh looks like, I wouldn't think of Blake's Nobodaddy, I would think of Uncle Siggy.
80. **LQ:** Ah. It's a figure of authority.
81. **HB:** Yes.
82. **LQ:** But . . .
83. **HB:** Uncle Siggy is obviously a kinder and more humane personage than Yahweh.
84. **LQ:** I think I understand...
85. **HB:** All this is just confirming my wife's view that I am an atheist. But I'm not, I'm not. [Laughs.] How uninteresting it is to be an atheist. I mean, you can't make literature out of that.
86. **LQ:** Are you being diplomatic when you say that? Do you think atheism is possible?
87. **HB:** Diplomatic?
88. **LQ:** Well, I thought when I read the book: I've always described myself as an atheist, but maybe it's dishonest, maybe I should say I'm a Gnostic. I'm angry with God. Perhaps that's Gnosticism.
89. **HB:** Yeah, I think if you argue with God, or you're angry at God, if you have a grudge against him, then that's much more fun than just saying he's not there at all.
90. **LQ:** Do you think genuine indifference is possible?
91. **HB:** Well, remember we live in the United States of America, under the reign of W. the Great, who is on record as saying that Jesus Christ is his favorite philosopher, and is sitting there in Camp David at this moment, telling his intimates that he's on a mission from God to install democracy in Iraq, and will not cease, you know, till he either leaves office or has done it. And I believe him, I think he is that

crazy. He is an authentic crusader, unlike his Papa, who knew when to come home. And this is Jesus Christ CEO, you know this is the American Jesus of the Christian right. It's very interesting. There is no Yahweh in the United States. I mean God the Father is just about gone. There is of course the BVM, or as I like to call her, thinking of her manifestation in the Houston Astrodome, visiting the refugees there, the BBB, the Blessed Barbara Bush. That's our deity, or one of our deities. My wife is particularly fond of the Blessed Barbara Bush. I guess I like her too. She is very good value. It's fascinating that we have an American Jesus, and he's always been an American, not a Jew at all, but the Christian right has now so compromised him, that when Hispanics come pouring into this country from south of the border or the Caribbean or further down, like so many African-Americans and like so many increasingly poor whites in the South or even in the Midwest, they're turning to Pentecostalism, which is the fastest growing religious movement in the United States, which has nothing to do with Jesus really, or Jesus Christ. It's all about the Holy Spirit, which is pouring down upon them and they're all shouting and jumping with him. I'm not so sure that in the end this will not be a Pentecostal nation. In which case it's true pre-Scripture will turn out to have been *The Crying of Lot 49*.

92. **LQ:** Where does the idea of the Holy Spirit come from?
93. **HB:** Ah. On the basis of almost no New Testament evidence—a dove or two—Christian theology manufactured, needing a third person for the trinity, along with God the father, to finish Yahweh and Jesus Christ the theological God—they needed another entity, so they gave us the Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost. But he never really took root in European or Middle-Eastern Christianity, or in East European and Russian Christianity. It's here in the United States that Pentecostalism really took off, and it's burgeoning, you know, every day. The largest single Pentecostal unit is the Assemblies of God, and they just sort of surge on in number all the time. There are independent Pentecostal groups all over the country. I've got some former students in Atlanta, who shall be nameless—charming people—who are literary critics, teachers of literature by profession, and they are ferocious Pentecostalists. They—I attended one such service in Atlanta, and there they were all whooping it up and shouting when the Spirit hits them indeed and crying out in strange tongues and defying the laws of gravity, and it's all wonderful stuff. I'm not being ironic. So it *was* his mother.
94. **LQ:** The kids are getting restless, so just one more question.
95. **HB:** I know you must go home, because it's going to be 10:30 before you get those pussycats in bed.
96. **LQ:** Ok, one last question then. To come back to this passage about wanting to dismiss Yahweh . . .
97. **HB:** Yes. Who wouldn't want to dismiss him?
98. **LQ:** . . . and being haunted. Now the question is, why do you think you're—what is it that—why are you haunted, what keeps bringing you back?
99. **HB:** I read the Hebrew Bible. I brood about it. It's a very strong text. Whether you read it in the original, or you read William Tyndale and Miles Coverdale, who between them write about eighty-five to ninety percent of what you find in the authorized version, and who are, with Shakespeare and Chaucer the four great writers of the English language as far as I can tell. Tyndale writes prose, Coverdale does Psalms and battle hymns and so on. Both terrific writers. And as I say, with Shakespeare and Chaucer, the most powerful writers.
100. **LQ:** But you read the texts because you're already haunted.
101. **HB:** Well, Laura, you reread *King Lear* and *Hamlet* because you are already haunted, and then you get more haunted by reading them. They are infinite. They go on forever, in the same way the war song of

Deborah and Barak or the great chant in the Second Isaiah about the suffering servant, palpably meant to be the people of Israel, which becomes however in the Christian interpretation the suffering Christ—

102. **LQ:** Yes. I just wondered if you wanted to pinpoint what it is—what it was—

103. **HB:** Remember you have to get your pussycats home.

104. **LQ:** Ok.

105. **HB:** But go on—one last thing.

106. **LQ:** One last thing—just if you wanted to pinpoint a little what it is that prevents you from dismissing Yahweh.

107. **HB:** [Pause.] I think it's an aesthetic matter.

108. **LQ:** I see.

109. **HB:** But you know, how do we know what an aesthetic matter is? Its dimensions are endless.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>This interview was conducted on November 27, 2005 after dinner. Present are Harold Bloom, Laura Quinney, Jeanne Bloom, Daniel Bloom, William Flesch, Daniel Flesch (9), and Julian Flesch (5). The interview was transcribed by William Flesch.