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Culture's Peak: an interview with
Harold Bloom

When I first encountered Harold Bloom's work, I discovered a remarkable mixture. Bloom is Professor of Humanities at Yale University, and is widely considered America's leading literary critic. His many books combine an enormous breadth of reading with a great depth of response. He is both an upholder of western literary tradition and a radical critic of the ways it has been interpreted. He is ironic and sceptical, but in books such as *The Anxiety of Influence* and *The Western Canon*, he has championed an approach to literature that is based upon the concerns of spiritual life. In this way he opens up possibilities of looking to the western literary and spiritual traditions to fill the gap left by the conventional religions.

Bloom's most recent book, *Omens of Millennium*, explores the preoccupations of contemporary spirituality in the light of the western mystical traditions of Gnosticism, the heretical counterpart of early Christianity; Sufism, the mystical tradition of Islam; and kabbala, or Jewish mysticism.

Central to Bloom's approach to both literature and religion is the idea of 'the imaginal', which he draws from Henri Corbin, the French writer on Sufism. This idea suggests the richest and deepest kinds of experience that can only be expressed in poetry or religious symbols. The imaginal, according to Bloom, 'is a middle reality between ordinary perceptions and the realm of the divine. This middle world of angelic perception is equated with the human world of the awakened imagination, the dwelling place of sages and poets – and all of us in certain exalted or enlightened moments when we see, think and feel most lucidly'.

I first became familiar with the idea of the imaginal through the writing of Sangharakshita, my own Buddhist teacher, who emphasises the importance of cultivating 'the imaginal faculty', the ability to enter the world of an artistic or religious image, through meditation and aesthetic appreciation. Bloom's approach has much in common with Buddhism, and offers a way to discern what is most valuable in western traditions, in the arts, and perhaps even in Buddhism itself. However, Bloom still uses traditional western religious terms, including God and 'the self'.

Fulfilling a long-held ambition, I visited Bloom at his home in Connecticut, to explore the similarities and differences.

Dharma Life: In *Omens of Millennium* you speak of your rejection of the major western religious traditions, including their view of God, and you explore alternative ways of thinking about spiritual life. What did you reject?

Harold Bloom: I was raised in the Judaic tradition, but I am totally alienated from it. I have increasingly seen it as a terrible parody of what I regard as the authentic Jewish religion. What we call 'normative Judaism' is based on a very strong misreading of the Hebrew Bible, propagated in the 2nd century ce in Palestine by rabbis who were trying to meet the needs of the Jewish people under Roman occupation. To think that 1,800 years later it answers the realities of Jewish (or anyone's) existence is preposterous. It accounts for so much of what is wrong with Israel and what is wrong with Jewish life in the U.S..

But I think that nothing can be done about this. A historical imposture that has lasted for 1,800 years will not be undone, just as the imposture of what absurdly calls itself

Christianity, and has lasted 1,900 years, is not going to be undone. It seems that Buddhism is not so contaminated among most of its adherents by a false reading of its original texts as every variety of Christianity that I know.

V: In looking for viable spiritual alternatives you draw on the esoteric traditions of western religion – Gnosticism and kabbala. Why are you so drawn to these seemingly arcane traditions?

HB: I cannot hope to understand the religious history of the East. Hinduism is impenetrable to me. A number of my friends have become Buddhists – I estimate there must now be several million Buddhists in America. But for me Buddhism is barely available – I have tried, but I don't think I understand it. So I am confined to the western tradition. That means I look at Judaic tradition, and what came after it in Christianity and Islam. And I find that all I can identify with are the heterodox elements – the traditions of 'gnosis' or 'knowing' in its various manifestations.

If I look at Classical thought, I can only identify with a particular strain in Platonism, which in turn engenders the vast neo-Platonic tradition, and then rejoins the Gnostic tradition, in Hermetism. The early Hermetic circles were confined to a very few people who were evidently secular, philosophical and scholarly, but they have had a vast influence on western literature. Again and again when you have poetry that is aware of itself as poetry, Hermetic elements reappear. This happens with William Blake, with the French Symbolists, with the High Romantics, with Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson in the us. That seems to be most available to me.

What fascinates me about Sufi texts as expounded by Henri Corbin – the indispensable guide to Sufi tradition and a grand writer – is that they turn invariably on the notion of the imaginal, which they speak of as 'the angelic world'. It is a notion implicit in Hermetism, which I first came to know through my study of Kabbala. The imaginal is that realm which is available to us in many guises, aesthetic and not at all aesthetic, which is neither the super-sensible nor the empirical. It is what Corbin calls 'the middle territory'.

V: 'The imaginal' suggests the realm of the imagination. But when you speak of the angelic realm, I am reminded of Wallace Stevens's phrase 'the necessary angel', which suggests there are some truths and experiences that can only be expressed through images or symbols. Why are angels 'necessary'? Why do we need images to apprehend the spiritual?

HB: The traditions of western heterodox spirituality that fascinate me have always been concerned with image-thinking. Poets do not conceive without imaging. Plato himself is the most powerful of image-thinkers. The Yahwist [the original biblical writer], who is the gateway to a more archaic Jewish religion, is a great image-thinker. Jacob's encounter with the angel cannot be regarded as literal, and therefore must be seen as an enormous image. The Yahwistic account of the creation is an ironically humorous image. God makes a mud-pie, and breathes into it! I don't know if any spiritual traditions are possible without images. In every Buddhist text I know there is extraordinarily beautiful image-thinking.

V: The implication seems to be that if we ponder such images deeply enough we can have access to the realms of experience from which they arise. Could you say something about your own explorations of the imaginal in your engagement with western literature?

HB: I have used the concept very much in my work, though I have found alternative ways of talking about it. I am now writing – you see the evidence piled up around me – a vast book on Shakespeare and Imagination, which I have been trying to write for the past 11 or 12 years. I don't think I will actually use the term 'imaginal' in the book, but I will use the concept, drawing my terms from Shakespeare himself.

Shakespeare is the greatest inventor of character, and I believe he is the inventor of the human as we know it in the West. I think Shakespeare's also the greatest master of the imaginal. For instance, the world of the Romances, where we think of things as supernatural or preternatural, is simply the exercise of the imaginal. This is perhaps more suggestive than anything in Dante because it is so ambiguous. There is a kind of glancing upward from the human condition to something beyond the human condition.

V: This implies that in investigating poetry you are also investigating how the human mind makes sense of reality in ways that go beyond ideas and concepts. Could you talk about how this process works?

HB: In his death poem, 'Of Mere Being', Wallace Stevens uses the image of 'the palm at the end of the mind'. I don't know if he was aware that it was a Sufi image. The Sufi Ibn Arabi says, when God formed Adam from the moistened red clay into which he breathed, there was a certain lump left over that he couldn't put into the Adam figure and from which he made the palm tree. Stevens says:

The palm at the end of the mind
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze distance ... on the edge of space

Here we are surely in the realm of the imaginal. It is a reaching towards what would have to be called the super-sensible, yet Stevens is a wholly secular and naturalistic poet. Simply because he executes the full range of the poetic imagination, he finds himself again and again in the imaginal realm. He defines the imaginal in the America of his day. Just before he left for the hospital to die of cancer, Stevens wrote the last lines of the poem:

The bird sings, its feathers shine.
The palm stands on the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in its branches.
The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

The last words of a master. 'Fire-fangled' means fashioned out of fire, so the bird is a kind of phoenix. He did not overtly think the poem was about resurrection, but I interpret

it implicitly in that highly Gnostic sense of resurrection. As the Gnostic Valentinian gospel says: 'Christ was resurrected, he rose, and then he died'. The resurrection takes place in this life. That view is purely American. The American relation to Jesus is one of knowing yourself resurrected in this life. By being 'born again' American Christians mean something much more graphic than European Christians ever meant.

V: When we move from the sphere of literature to the sphere of religion, one of the differences is that religion in the West has traditionally involved belief. Your emphasis on the imaginal seems to be an alternative approach, and yet from a Buddhist point of view it is striking that you use certain terms (such as God and the self) drawn from the theistic traditions, which Buddhism would reject. Why bring God into it?

HB: The deepest influence on me since my own 'middle of the journey' crisis around 1965 has been Emerson. I am always battling with friends like Richard Poirier who, like myself, argue for Emerson's centrality in American literature, thought and existence, but who want to despiritualise him. It is Emerson who insists on bringing God into it, because he says, 'it is God in you who speaks to another or hears his own words on the lips of another'.

But also it is an experiential matter for me, as it was for Emerson. I do believe – in fact I know – there is a best and oldest part of oneself, and that best and oldest part seems to me definitive of God. That hardly means I am sitting here as a representative of God. I am certainly no such thing. Finding that best and oldest part of one, that spark or pneuma as the Gnostics call it, is not easy. I can't get at it. There is so much rubble in the self. You have to burrow down and try to get at the original spark and usually the effort does not work. Occasionally it does manifest itself, but most of the time I am not in communion with the best and oldest part of myself – alas. I am far too imperfect an old wreck for that.

V: You say that to understand literature or religion 'the only method is the method of the self' – experience is the only touchstone. Can you say more?

HB: I think everything else is a delusion, or an imposition, or yielding to someone else's self. Anything else is inauthentic.

V: Your critics say that by insisting on this you deny social and political realities, and even risk falling into solipsism or relativism. When one moves from questions of literary response to questions of religious truth, many people would find the method of the self inadequate if it denies the possibility of 'objective' truth.

HB: We cannot get at anything ultimately authentic outside of ourselves – outside our experience – so we have to look into what we understand by the self. Here my understanding of the self comes out of the complexities in Gnosticism. There are two selves. One is a self-aggrandising, or outward self, which is what Meister Eckhart meant when he said so fiercely that 'only the self burns in hell'. But the other self is what Whitman calls 'the real Me, or Me myself', what Emerson calls 'part or particle of God'. Emerson does not mean the outwardly aggressive, accumulative self. He means something else, and I do also.

When I use the term I mean what Gnosticism calls the individual spark or breath, which is what remains of the authentic God in one. But my academic critics, who are

preoccupied with what they assert are communal (i.e. political) concerns, are not going to understand this. That is why you get the developments in modern academic life, which I call 'the school of resentment'. In a Buddhist context, where I would agree with the rejection of the limited self, I do not think I would face so many misunderstandings.

V: There seems a strong tendency to literalise images, which is perhaps the origin of conventional religion. Instead you try to see the imaginal in its own terms. Most writers on religion or literature, however, tend to 'interpret down' something that is expressed in images and symbols into a system of rational thought.

HB: Far from understanding poetry to be 'spilled religion', as Matthew Arnold considered it, I've always thought religion is spilled poetry. I try to interpret religious or poetic symbols upwards – to apprehend at a distance those elements in the imaginal which really do intimate something that goes beyond the realm of the aesthetic and seems to knock at the gates of the super-sensible.

In my writing and thinking I try to establish a 'modern Gnostic' version of the imaginal. I draw on Romantic and post-Romantic literature for my vocabulary because of its intense implicit Gnosticism – its insistence on the direct experience of knowing, which creates its own images. I utilise that as a vocabulary for the imaginal. But I cannot say that I have as yet made such a project cohere, though I am trying, with help from Shakespeare.

V: Your recent work in religious criticism has grown out of your career as a literary critic. How did that change take place? Was it because you came to see poetry in more or less religious terms?

HB: I would emphasise that my work is religious criticism, not religious writing. I have not learned to cross the divide – I am far too limited in the religious sphere. I want to make the right distinctions and help others to do so. But I cannot become a religious teacher because I have no light of my own to dispense.

I am not so sure there has been any fundamental change in my approach to poetry, but my work has moved into new areas and I think Shakespeare has made the difference. The distinction between secular and sacred vanishes when you invoke Shakespeare. He is not a Christian dramatist, and yet he is not an anti-Christian dramatist. GK Chesterton brilliantly said that although he wanted to make Shakespeare into a Catholic writer, he couldn't because what Shakespeare essentially shows is 'great spirits in chains'. And that isn't the Christian vision. I agree.

V: In *The Western Canon* you are highly critical of recent developments in academic approaches to literature, such as 'cultural materialism', which are mainly concerned with political agendas. Does literary study still offer this training in the imagination?

HB: There is always the hope that we might revive the study of literature as one which takes the images of literature seriously again. But I think that is a dream. The study of literature in the West has been effectively destroyed. It will certainly not revive in the academies. It is by no means dead among common or general readers, as my correspondence shows. Every time a new translation of *The Western Canon* appears I am deluged with letters from readers who dislike what the academic study of literature has become, because it belies their experience.

Traditional literary study teaches you not to reduce the image. It takes images very seriously indeed as ways of structuring reality. The leading literary critics of the 20th century – Wilson Knight, Northrop Frye, even a secular figure like Kenneth Burke – taught that everything depends upon the sanctity of the image. It must not be reduced or discarded, and one must not try to find a cognitive substitute for it.

V: Can the tradition of western literature provide an alternative canon to that of theistic traditions, a source of spiritual nourishment from within western culture?

HB: That is a fascinating suggestion and it runs counter to current fashion in the us and Britain, particularly in the universities. It is what I suppose I stand for, or battle for. But it is an extremely optimistic notion. People who are supposed to be students of literature and scholars of the literary canon have turned against it with a horrible odium.

None the less, what is still most available to us, as a gateway to the imaginal, is indeed the literary tradition – if only we knew how to get at it. When you read texts from kabbala, Sufism or Gnosticism, they retain an arcane aspect. Something that does not lose the aura of the esoteric is, in a sense, never fully 'available'. But the literary tradition is not arcane, even if its spiritual aspects are becoming arcane, because it has been so hideously politicised and it is so badly taught – where it is taught at all.

Shakespeare is available. So is Dante, though to fewer people as he is more abstruse. Blake is available, though not perhaps when he is most fully himself in the Prophetic Books; Whitman is available, though he has been so badly expounded and it has become difficult to see that he is indeed a religious writer. The idea of aesthetic experience still has a universal aspect.

So, for me at least, the aesthetic can provide a gateway to the imaginal. I find myself happiest and most at home when I teach Shakespeare. In trying accurately to expound Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear or the high comedies, it seems as if I am closest to my own spiritual experience. I cannot regard Blake as other than a spiritual preceptor on the one hand, and on the other hand a very great aesthetic phenomenon. What moves me in the Hermetic writings, or Sufi texts, is the image-making power that is involved. To me the aesthetic is the imaginal. The heterodox tradition in the West is the imaginal, and the two fuse.

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