



Harold Bloom, Ieva Lesinska

Breakfast with brontosaurus

An interview with Harold Bloom

Pre-eminent American literary critic Harold Bloom's twenty-ninth book, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, was officially launched a few hours after this conversation took place in his Manhattan apartment on 26 October 2004.

Ieva Lesinska: Every article about you mentions your amazing ability to read and remember. My question then is what do you forget?

Harold Bloom: Ah, that's really interesting indeed, dear. First of all, I am getting a little older and... Well, I have always had a very selective memory: I don't remember period pieces, I don't remember junk of any kind and, of course, I have many enemies in the English-speaking world, in and out of universities and the media, because I was politically on the extreme left. Culturally, I totally reject this horrible political correctness, this hideous notion that people should read and study any work of literature, of the imagination on the basis of the ethnic origin, the agenda, the sexual orientation or skin pigmentation of the writer. That strikes me as real fascism. And I fought against it bitterly from about 1967 till the present — it's a battle I've waged for thirty-seven years and of course I have acquired many enemies in the process. I am told that by now I have been translated into seventeen languages, so tens of thousands of readers all over the world are getting in touch — I receive thousands of emails and letters a month — so I have to answer these things very selectively. Unless I respond very slowly, I tend not to respond at all. I hardly sleep at all, but there still isn't enough time. I had terrible health problems just a few years ago. I survived, but I had to cut back some. You never know how much time you have.

IL: Do you prepare for that moment of passing in any way?

HB: No, no, no! In my new book — I don't know if you've had a chance to look at it yet — I quote one of my heroes, the French essayist Montaigne — certainly one of the greatest essayists of all time — who says: "Don't worry about getting ready for your death, don't prepare — when the moment comes for you to die, you will know how to do it well enough."

IL: What is the new book about?

HB: It's very different from the previous ones. I had written a book called *Wisdom and Literature*, and it was mostly finished, but after I got so ill, almost exactly two years ago — first I had a terrible bleeding ulcer, I lost seven pints of blood, and then I had a heart attack and they had to save me by giving me a three-way open heart bypass surgery. It took me six months to recover. It gave me a terrible trauma. Anyway, so I had written this book *Wisdom and*

Literature, and I threw it away. But I got better. And in a year, from April to April, I wrote this book *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found*, which is a study of wisdom writing as I understand it, beginning with the Hebrew Bible, Book of Job, Ecclesiastes, passing on to Plato in particular, who has an endless struggle with Homer, particularly in the *Republic*, and the *Symposium*. And then I thought, who are the two greatest writers that the Western world has ever known, well, it's certainly Cervantes and Shakespeare. So I wrote a chapter on Cervantes and Shakespeare, contrasting the wisdom of each. And then the second part of it, called "The Greatest Ideas Are the Greatest Events", which is, of course, a notion of Nietzsche's. I thought I'd take a great moral essayist for each of the four centuries, the seventeenth, the eighteenth, the nineteenth — Montaigne, Francis Bacon, Samuel Johnson, Goethe, who, to this day, is the mind of Germany, and the great American sage Emerson. When I reached the twentieth century, I had a real dilemma, because I do not regard Freud as an analyst, as a psychiatrist; I considered D.H. Lawrence, his polemical writings, I considered Paul Valéry, the last French sage and theorist, but they didn't quite measure up. But then I said, ah, the two greatest writers of the twentieth century are James Joyce and Marcel Proust. Joyce is interested in changing the form of the novel in relation to the character, whereas Marcel Proust, the great moralist, is in the great tradition of Descartes and Montaigne. So I contrasted Sigmund Freud with Proust. And then I said to myself: well, I have talked about the great Hebrew literature at the beginning, and in the course of it, I talked about the Talmudic sages, the second-century Gnostics, but, with the exception of Dr. Johnson, I don't have a Christian sage. Who else should I choose but the normative Christian wisdom of St Augustine? He also seems to me the inventor of reading as we know it. But in the end I suspect that the truest word on wisdom belongs to the doctor and psychologist William James: "Wisdom is in learning what to overlook." Pragmatically speaking, that seems to be as wise a remark as I have read.

IL: Do you possess wisdom?

HB: No.

IL: No?

HB: No. If I possessed any wisdom, I would not write a book called *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found*? I am very unwise, I can assure you. Unwise in all things. I think I am a good teacher of literature, particularly of Shakespeare. At Yale on Wednesdays I give an undergraduate seminar. Of course, I am a one-man department, I divorced the English department back in 1976, I convinced them to reappoint me as a "professor of absolutely nothing" — I give courses in something called humanities. And on Wednesdays I give a course, year by year, where we read all of Shakespeare together. And on Thursdays I give a course called "The Art of Reading Poetry". I regard myself as a teacher. I remark in this new book that I have only three criteria for whether a work should be read and reread and taught to others, and they are: aesthetic splendour, cognitive power, and wisdom. And those are not the standards now applied in the universities and colleges of the English-speaking world. Nor are they the standards applied in the media. Everyone is now much more concerned with gender, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, skin pigmentation, and twenty other irrelevancies, whereas I am talking about what I have never talked about before, and that is wisdom. But I am not a wise man, I am not a sage. I am an aesthete, a very old-fashioned aesthete — I have been realizing that increasingly.

IL: Would you apply to literary criticism your notion of misinterpretation? Are you misinterpreting somebody?

HB: The twentieth-century literary critics who were my friends, they are all dead now, the English George Wilson-Knight, William Empson, the Canadian doctor Northrup Frye, the American Kenneth Burke, together with Ernst Curtius, the German critic whom I have never met — these seem to be the major literary critics of the Western world of the twentieth century. I try to emulate them. They seem to me primarily aesthetes, I am even more directly an aesthete, because I react against this repugnant political correctness. So I think a great influence upon me are John Ruskin, Walter Pater, and the divine Oscar Wilde, all of whom are very wise literary critics. I am fascinated by Samuel Johnson and William Hazlitt, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, yes. Yes, I wonder what the Latvian equivalents for "misinterpretation" and "misreading" would be.

A lot of people in all languages tend to mix up what I call strong misreading with a kind of dyslexia — obviously, I am not talking about that. It really seems to me that all strong literature is a strong misreading of one kind or another of literature. And yes, I think it applies to literary critics also. Nietzsche said: "*Jedes Wort ist ein Vorurteil*", which I would translate as "Every word is a misjudgement". He also said in *Twilight of the Idols* — and I quote it again and again teaching about Shakespeare — "Anything that we are able to speak, to say or formulate, is something which is already dead in our hearts" — we can't even feel it anymore, you know. He says there is always a kind of contempt in the act of speaking — that sounds like Hamlet himself, don't you think? I think it relates to the same phenomenon... You can't really catch the living moment of what is happening to you as you read Shakespeare or as you read Tolstoy, or Dante, or Cervantes, or Dostoevsky — any of the greatest writers. Who is the leading Latvian writer to date?

IL: Most would say, Rainis.

HB: Oh yes, yes. Rainis. Well, it would apply there also.

IL: But as to what happens as you read — I think that your book *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited* comes closest to capturing that very moment.

HB: Well, this is the book that the English disliked intensely — well, they generally dislike what I write. Of course, the United States is in a terrible condition, we have a kind of fascist regime here — I think it's the real truth about it and you can quote me on that. A few years ago, when I was in Barcelona receiving the national prize of Catalonia, I remarked when somebody asked me a question about president George Bush: "He is semilliterate at best, to call him a Fascist would be to flatter him." He has now sufficiently grown in depth that you are no longer flattering him by calling him a Fascist — it is simply a descriptive remark. And yet the United States is not a dead country — primarily because it still allows people to come in here — of course, this fascist regime is trying to keep them out, but the lifeblood of this country has always been immigration. I teach my classes at Yale and what cheers me up are my Asian American students — about half of the students who take my classes are Asian Americans. What in my generation the Jews were — the intelligentsia — these people are becoming. The Jews in this country are now so assimilated that looking at their score cards I could not tell the difference between my Gentile and my Jewish students. The Asian Americans are the new Jews — they are the ones who study hard, they have a

real passion, a real drive to understand. If this country has a future, it will be because of the new immigrants, the Asians, the Africans, the Hispanics. Our regime is fascistic, but our constitution is good. The best provision in that constitution states that any child who is born on the American soil is an American citizen, and therefore all these so-called illegal immigrants are now the parents of American citizens. I may not live long enough to see it, but my hope is that this country would be saved by the Hispanic Americans, the Asian Americans — the new waves of Europeans. This is still a vibrant and living culture, whereas the English are incorrigible. They have no minds at all. That little book had a mixed reception in the United States, a terrible reception in England, a very good reception in other countries. The Italian, the Spanish, the Portuguese, the Scandinavian readers want to understand me, the English don't. I really don't want to go there again, it's an absolutely dead culture. It no longer has any poets, it no longer has any novelists, it cannot produce a composer or a painter anymore. The French are not much better.

IL: But how about the literature written by people from the former colonies who are living in London?

HB: Something good may yet come out of it. But they are not as high a percentage of the population as they are here. The only hope to get rid of the Republican party, since it's the white male population who votes for them, is that in another generation the Asian and Hispanic and other new Americans will be numerous enough so that — I hope — there will be political changes. The American literary culture is still very much alive — there are real poets here — John Ashbery is a remarkable poet; we have four remarkable novelists still alive and at work: my friend Philip Roth, my friend Don DeLillo, the mysterious Thomas Pynchon, and that remarkable, reclusive novelist Cormac McCarthy who wrote that astonishing book called *The Blood Meridian*, which I wrote about in *How to Read and Why*. I don't know if a book like *The Anxiety of Influence* would be translated in the Baltic countries — they exist in Russian, they exist in Czech and Polish... I would like to know more about the Baltics, but I am a very bad traveller, I don't know if I'll ever go abroad again.

IL: Have you been anywhere in eastern Europe?

HB: No. My parents' families were slaughtered there, so I stayed away. I also don't like to reschedule classes. I have stopped teaching at NYU, though. Teaching full-time at Yale and part-time at NYU is simply too much, so after sixteen years I decided to cut down. I care a lot about teaching and — I hope I'm mistaken — I sometimes fear I am the last who does. All my friends have retired, people of my generation who have taken teaching seriously have retired. I am beginning to be a dinosaur, a brontosaurus. But I don't want to give up, I really want to go on teaching.

IL: But why? You have talked about reading as a certain kind of an escape from the cruelties of life.

HB: Yes, my dear child, it's the same thing. I don't distinguish between certain kinds of reading, writing, and teaching — they seem to me a part of the same kind of activity. I can't give up any of the three and still be myself. Also, I have taught for fifty-two years — the longest continuity of my life. In some kind of superstitious way, I would consider it a kind of dying to give up such a long continuity. Also, by teaching I bear witness to the insistence on aesthetic values and wisdom. You know, I am very glad you liked that little book I wrote, I think it's more even than the new one. I feel that in that Hamlet book I

really let myself go, I allowed myself — if only once — to write for myself, even though I found myself saying things that I know other people have difficulty understanding and which they consider extravagant.

IL: What are some of these things?

HB: Well, for instance, that Hamlet starts to fight back against Shakespeare, that he attempts to rewrite the play that he is in, that he has a kind of authority of consciousness, that even more than Falstaff he breaks away from Shakespeare. He is so gifted that, to quote Nietzsche, "He does not think too much, he simply thinks too well." He knows too well, he understands too well, he has thought to the end of thought. He has thought himself into an abyss that is nothing. Of course, Hamlet moves us because there are all these hints about transcendence, but to me, it's the darkest literary work I have ever read, its implications are simply shattering.

IL: I think I can more or less intuit what horror understanding represents for him. Yet I still wonder why he doesn't simply kill himself, why he has to do away with seven other people?

HB: Good question. He is simply not the nicest guy in the world. He is as much a villain as he is a hero. He transcends these categories as he transcends any category.

IL: As I was reading the book, I found myself wondering where you place yourself, the author, in your own scheme of things? You say it's Hamlet's consciousness expanding, Hamlet is wiser than all of us including Shakespeare. Where does that put you, the person talking about Hamlet and the play, and Shakespeare?

HB: It is a very wise question and a very apt one. (*Long pause*) I think that the special power of Shakespeare is to pack more in Hamlet than there is in Falstaff or Cleopatra or Iago or Lear, but probably the other thing is that we cannot exhaust Shakespeare in meditation. Yes, I suppose I can count myself in the picture. Shakespeare more than any other writer allows the reader's consciousness to expand. Hamlet's consciousness is extraordinarily wide and it becomes an interesting question whether or not he ever really is mad. And I don't think he is, if he says "I am but mad north–north–west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw." I think my meditation, even though I try to be a faithful reader and a useful literary critic... I think that when Shakespeare and Hamlet together expand my consciousness to its limits, my consciousness starts to get the point.

IL: What is that point?

HB: I run into my own limits, not so much from the aesthetic apprehension, but partly from encountering wisdom, I have to say I have no wisdom. I was wondering about that as a child and now am wondering again as an old man: what are my peculiar gifts? I am not so sure. The speed of reading, the speed of picking things up, the extraordinary memory — what is all that? So I know all my Shakespeare by heart, I know my Goethe. I know there has to be some kind of intellectual power that accompanies such gifts, but they are not of themselves counted as gifts, they are something else, they simply indicate the frontier to psyche and physiology. At times, I run into my own obsessions — that is, my own strength and weakness as a literary critic and a teacher, and writer — I have to personalize everything. I think readers like it a great deal or

dislike it a great deal, the same way my students like or dislike me a great deal. Because, like Walt Whitman, addressing the readers of his poetry, I sort of reach out, I shake the reader, I say, listen to me, you know — very urgently, and very personally, very emotionally. I understand that while it gives me a kind of immediacy, it is also a limitation. So it is not just a question of wisdom, it gets rather complex. I find your question very interesting, but I guess the best answer is that I am still trying to establish where I am in all this. I would not want to be Hamlet because, as I grow old and ill, I attach much more importance to being rather than knowing.

IL: Although you claim not to be wise, I would still like you to try to formulate what you understand by wisdom.

HB: In a roundabout way I would have to sneak back to Pirke Aboth, to the Talmudic Sayings of the Fathers to which I turned for comfort as a child and do so even now. For instance: Hillel used to say: "If not I for myself, who then? And being for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" To me, it's an example of perfect, balanced wisdom.

IL: Reportedly, you are in the habit of reminding your students: "There is no method but yourselves." What do you mean by that?

HB: Yes, indeed I tell them that. What theory did the great critics, the likes of Dr Johnson and William Hazlitt have? Those who adopt and preach some sort of theory are simply emulating others. In my opinion, any useful criticism is first of all rooted in experience — experience gained by reading, writing, and, most of all, living. And wisdom also is first of all a personal matter. No, there is no method. You know, I am really alogos, without a philosophy, without a system. Any attempt to systematize leads to the kind of purism Plato had — I am of course not talking about the wonderful ironist writing the life story of Socrates — who has no place for poets in his ideal republic.

IL: You seem to have your reservations for philosophers, yet you glorify Freud.

HB: But you understand that I have no use for him as a psychoanalyst. I perceive him as a codifier and an abstractor of Shakespeare. It is Shakespeare who has provided us with a map of the mind, not Freud. Shakespeare is the real author of Freudian psychology. Freud has simply translated it into an analytical language.

IL: You talk about Shakespeare as a demiurge. Your attitude seems almost religious.

HB: But isn't what we experience when reading the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament the same as when we read Homer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, or Proust? Isn't the difference between the scriptures and worldly literature only social and political? The centuries-long polemics on the contrasts between poetry and faith can perhaps be reduced to the question of whether we should consider one poem or story holier than another. I have long since come to the conclusion that we can say with certainty that any powerful literary work is holy. And the opposite claim, that it is worldly, is equally valid. But it would be completely senseless to consider any great literary work holier or worldlier than another.

Now I am starting a book that may also interest you — that I have always wanted to write and I think I am old enough now — and the title is rather ironic — *Exodus and Higher Culture*. Jewish high culture has influenced the processes of high culture in Russia, Germany, Spain, the United States, South America. It's a very complex thing. By exodus I don't actually mean the exodus from Egypt. That was a Greek word that translates. The Hebrew word that Yahwa first says to Abraham and later says to Moses in Hebrew is *yetsiat*, which is best translated as "get yourself out", pick yourself up and get yourself out, get out to the world and then on to the public ground. And so the whole notion of global higher culture as a kind of exodus. Get yourself out of yourself. Get yourself out of the bondage of yourself. I think what we call nineteenth-century romanticism and twentieth-century modernism are variations of this exodus. What we see today in the United States, also in the so-called "culture studies", is the death of Europe, it's the twilight of Europe.

IL: But, after the events of 9/11, isn't America going back to Europe?

HB: This regime really hates Europe. It doesn't ask for allies. This regime is acting as if the United States is the new Roman Empire. And it's trying to force another Pax Romana upon the world, which is no peace at all, like Nazis, like Fascists, like Stalinists...

IL: But that's what I meant — does it not constitute going back to Europe?

HB: In that sense, yes, but it has nothing to do with higher culture.

IL: Your insistence on what you call higher culture makes many people mad, and when you talk about your dismay at the decline of the book as a cultural phenomenon, they say that never before in history have there been as many books and bookstores as now.

HB: I spend a good part of my life in bookstores — I give readings there when a new book of mine has come out, I go there to read or simply to browse. But the question is what do these immense mountains of books consist of? You know, child, my electronic mailbox overflowing with daily messages from Potterites who still cannot forgive me for the article I published in *Wall Street Journal* more than a year ago, entitled "Can 35 Million Harry Potter Fans Be Wrong? — Yes!" These people claim that Harry Potter does great things for their children. I think they are deceiving themselves. I read the first book in the Potter series, the one that's supposed to be the best. I was shocked. Every sentence there is a string of clichés, there are no characters — any one of them could be anyone else, they speak in each other's voice, so one gets confused as to who is who.

IL: Yet the defenders of Harry Potter claim that these books get their children to read.

HB: But they don't! Their eyes simply scan the page. Then they turn to the next page. Their minds are deadened by clichés. Nothing is required of them, absolutely nothing. Nothing happens to them. They are invited to avoid reality, to avoid the world and they are not invited to look inward, into themselves. But of course it is an exercise in futility to try to oppose Harry Potter.

IL: You have discussed at length the intimate relationship Americans seem to have with God.

HB: The United States calls itself Christian, but it isn't really, it has nothing to do with European, Middle Eastern historical, theological Christianity. It is an indigenous American religion which started 200 years ago: it is fermenting, it is enthusiastic, it is mystical. Two days ago in the *New York Times*, someone wrote about a woman who was the governor of Texas and whom everyone called Ma Ferguson, and she said that nowhere in Texas is there any language other than English to be taught. And she said: "If English is good enough for Jesus Christ, then it's good enough for us." This Jesus is an American Jesus. The Holy Spirit of the Pentecostals, which is a burgeoning religion here, is an American Holy Spirit.

IL: Do you have any relationship with God, be it intimate or not?

HB: A Christian has to believe that something is so, that Jesus of Nazareth was the son of God, a Muslim is asked to submit to the law of Yahwah — and the submission is the actual translation of the Arabic "Islam" — a Jew is not asked to believe that something is so and neither is he asked to submit to anything. He is asked to trust in the covenants between Yahwah and his people. Since it does not seem to me that Yahwah, historically speaking, has trusted in the covenant or observed the terms of the covenant — otherwise how could there have been Auschwitz? How could there be schizophrenia? How could there be cancer? — I do not accept. Oh, dear child, it is very complicated, I am in a difficult situation — I do not trust in the covenants, and I believe that Yahwah is in exile, that he has deserted us. On the other hand, the Kabbalah seems to me the truth.

IL: You like to call yourself a Jewish Gnostic.

HB: (*Laughs*) Partly for polemical reasons, partly because I have a religious temperament and my culture is Jewish culture or American Jewish culture. And the more deeply I read Jewish literature, the more I become convinced that what we now regard as the normative Jewish literature is essentially a fossil going back to the second century of the common era. It is based upon a strong reading of the Hebrew Bible, but it is not the only possible strong reading of the Hebrew Bible. Clearly, the tradition of Jewish Gnosticism, which goes from at least the second century of the common era to the present day, represents a very strong reading also of the Hebrew Bible in the Jewish tradition, and it's one which seems to me to account much better for the whole nightmare of Jewish history than the normative Jewish religion possibly can do. On the other hand, my interests are far from what would be called religious, or rather I do not distinguish them from what I find in Shakespeare. So I find your question about my relationship with God almost impossible to answer. It's like with that question about the Hamlet book: I feel that my consciousness breaks and I cannot get past a certain point. So I can just wave at you some quotes. For instance, if you, my dear, would cling to me in desperation and plead: "Is there really no hope at all?" I could cheer you up: Oh, yes, lots of hope — plenty of hope for God, just none for us.

Published 2005–10–07
 Original in English
 Contribution by Rigas Laiks
 First published in *Rigas Laiks* 4/2005 (Latvian version)
 © Ieva Lesinska/Harold Bloom/Rigas Laiks
 © Eurozine