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REVIEW-ESSAY

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Barry Hannah's Bright Keyboard: A Reprise

IN 2010, THE PROGRAM COVER FOR THE SEVENTEENTH OXFORD CONFERENCE for the Book featured Maude Schuyler Clay's vibrant photograph of Barry Hannah on the Oxford Square, with the tall statue of the Confederate soldier behind him. Hannah planned to attend the meeting as the honored guest; friends, family members, and fans were looking forward to the weekend festivities. Even though cancer, pneumonia, and other health problems had weakened his stamina, Hannah's motorcycle was still a familiar sight in Oxford, often with an oxygen tank sharing the ride. When the author had a fatal heart attack at home on March 1, the conference was transformed—truly overnight—from a tribute to a memorial. In response, the stunned audience felt a tangle of emotions for three days of formal sessions and casual gatherings. The mixture of feelings was as dizzying as Hannah's prose, which Ruth Weston summed up in her 1998 study, *Barry Hannah: Postmodern Romantic*, as a "linguistic blitz" (131).

Conversations with Barry Hannah, a recent addition to University Press of Mississippi's Literary Conversations series, provides valuable commentary on both the pleasures and perils in the fiction and the life. Dating from 1980 to 2010, most of his writing career, the eighteen pieces were selected by editor James G. Thomas, Jr., from books, radio programs, popular magazines, and scholarly periodicals. The questioners range from professional journalists to close friends and colleagues who had spent happy hours fishing and riding motorcycles with the author. Hannah's bike gleams in the background of photographer Tom Rankin's cover portrait. Hannah tells one interviewer that he likes "the possibility of danger" on a motorcycle, "the fact that you have to protect yourself on it without being foolish about it" (61). In the final *Conversations* interview, novelist Wells Tower calls him "America's greatest living writer" (225), a writer who "wasn't satisfied with just the right word, it had to be the fiery, ecstatic word, too, a Molotov cocktail against

syntactic dreariness” (226). The image hints at the violence and the sense of risk in Hannah’s fiction, a subject that is as ubiquitous in the interviews as queries about Hannah’s thoughts on William Faulkner.

Hannah admits in the first interview that his writing “is always full of pain. . . . You get hurt and you tend to remember, if you’re human” (11). Another dialogue closes with his observation that we can do something about the suffering: “Life is a lot of confusion and pain and death, and the only way to deal with it is to face it with the attitude that there’s no place to go but up. ‘Sabers up, gentlemen!’ is the way I end *Ray* [1980]. That’s all I know. Straight ahead. Hit ‘em high” (82). Speaking with National Public Radio’s Terry Gross, Hannah suggests the role of the comic in coping with anguish. He acknowledges his “obsession with mortality and physical pain” during the writing of *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* (2001) but adds, “I also hope you don’t miss the humor that saves us in the book” (148). Not surprisingly, Hannah praises the comic genius of Mark Twain and Flannery O’Connor in several interviews. As early as his first book, the largely autobiographical *Geronimo Rex* (1972), Hannah’s comedy is in strong evidence, often in the form of farce. He tells Marc Smirnoff that he based that novel’s Fleece on his Mississippi College roommate, who was “such a large character” that it was “wonderful just to hear him” (175).

As Thomas says in his ten-page introduction, “Right out of the gate Hannah was a phenomenon, and critics roundly praised the debut of this new American voice in literature” (viii). From Hannah’s birth in Meridian, Mississippi, in 1942 through Grove Press’s posthumous publication of the story collection *Long, Happy, Last* in 2010, Thomas’s succinct chronology outlines such key events as teaching appointments, awards, and book publications. Similarly useful, the index leads readers to autobiographical comments on childhood, education, editors, friends, and favorite authors; references to history, violence, storytelling, and other major themes of Hannah’s fiction; and, more specifically, allusions to particular novels, story collections, and individual short stories, including the popular “Water Liars” and “Testimony of Pilot.”

Conversations with Barry Hannah records scores of insights on *Geronimo Rex* and the eleven books that followed, but Hannah also discusses challenges for beginning writers. In a 2008 conversation with Andrew Brininstool, he objects to the “redundant” subject of the self in interviews; however, he allows that his comments might benefit the reader: “But if I can say something of worth that would help or give

comfort to some young writer, so be it" (206). Not all of his advice is comforting. He explains to Louis Bourgeois, "As a mentor, I've seen too much booze and drugs among erstwhile writers who only talk a good game and never get down to the struggling pleasure at hand" (216). Hannah recalls the "revelry" of his youthful drinking with friends in his discussion with Tom Franklin (222), and in the final *Conversations* interview he characterizes "all my heroes" as alcoholics: "Joyce, Hemingway, Faulkner. How many more do you want?" (234). For years, he thought alcohol was essential to good writing. Drinking helped him to enter a "zone" of "quietness," where "I could find my own voice" (222). But, even in an early interview, Hannah confesses that alcoholism "busted up a second marriage. It's really not worth it to make other people go through that agony" (58). Speaking with Gross in 2001, Hannah urges young writers not to rely on alcohol but to "gut it and be more stubborn and trust your own head" (154).

Hannah was the first graduate of the University of Arkansas's MFA program, and, for him, graduate school was crucial for the discipline. "Deadlines are wonderful," he tells Smirnoff. "They get you to just start doing blasting work, and just finish it" (179). The author contrasts his experience with that of his friend Larry Brown, who took only one writing course and "just had good instincts about what made a story" (124). In a conversation with his University of Mississippi fellow professor and friend Daniel E. Williams, Hannah describes the short story assignments in his creative writing seminar: "Just get out your pencil and start being real. A beginning, middle, end, and thrill me and thrill the rest of the class." He compares writing to tennis, his favorite sport: "There are not many rules in tennis; it's just very difficult to play well." Reading is an essential component of his classes because "the writer should be aware of different modes, different ways of developing points of view" (161). Even poor stories can be instructive: "You learn a lot from a story that doesn't make it" (162).

Hannah urges students not to attempt the novel form until they become skilled in shorter works; for him, the short story is "more satisfying" because "You get this instant gratification; it's a complete thing you can look at" (47). Short stories and short novels like *Ray* also allow him to focus on the smallest components of his writing: "I'm trying to cut back on the sentences, pack as much into 'em as I can, rather than stringing things out like I did in the earlier books" (77). "It's the simplicity we're after, isn't it?" (222), he asks his friend and fellow writer

Tom Franklin in one of the last interviews. In the short story, in particular, “There are more fireworks, there is more emotional depth possible, because of its concentration” (101). While the strong plot requirements of a novel can lead to formulaic fiction, “you don’t have time to be phony in a short story” (102). Hannah’s ultimate recommendation for the genre is his remark to Tower that short stories are “the breath of life” (231). Interviewed a second time by Williams in 2005, Hannah returns to the necessity for discipline. Yet, he also believes that “nothing is ever lost. You can make up for blown time. Even if you were a wretch among wretches you can bring it on a page, and it’s not wasted” (202). Reacting to his students’ assignments, Hannah tells Smirnoff that he is tired of parody, irony, and insincerity: “In writing, you’ve got to commit” (182). One of his course syllabi, reproduced in a collection of tributes by former students and colleagues, concludes with a request for perfection in “English usage” because “This is your horn, your keyboard. Keep it clean and bright” (Bourgeois 181).

Barry Hannah loved storytelling from the time he was a child in Clinton, Mississippi, performing puppet shows with his friends; his appreciation for literature began in high school, when he read Keats and Salinger. Even though he rejected such terms as “postmodernist” for his work, he related to the Romantic tradition. William Blake was the focus of his MA thesis, and Hannah expected “wild ecstasy when I’m writing. I insist on emotion, like the Romantics, like Wordsworth. Fiction ought to be exploratory” (200). Interviewers seldom asked him about the Romantics. Instead, as Thomas points out, “Faulkner comes up in every one of the interviews included in this volume” (xi), often to Hannah’s annoyance. While he calls Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* a “marvelous” book that he has reread several times, Hannah says he is attracted to “the *mysterious*” in Faulkner rather than “the abstruse” (43). He contrasts Faulkner’s “really long sentences” with his own “staccatos—the telegraphed, quick, hard images” (174). The description fits the prose of Hemingway, whom Hannah considers a much stronger influence on his style than Faulkner. “Staccato” is a musical term, and, like the protagonist in *Geronimo Rex*, Hannah played trumpet. He tells Thomas Ærvold Bjerre that he “tried at being a trumpet man,” but writing was “my choice” (166). Although he played for the Jackson Symphony during high school and college, he explains to Don Swaim that he quit because he “wanted to be Miles Davis or nothing” (90). Interviewer Shawn Badgley spotted a Miles Davis poster in Hannah’s University of

Mississippi office in 2003, and music informs his work from beginning to end. *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*, his last novel, takes its title from a Bob Dylan song. "I owe a big debt to music," Hannah tells Williams. "Music was always there for me. Some of my pals are Bach, Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, and Mozart, ear perfect people. They stir me" (200).

Hannah worked on a Jimi Hendrix novel for years before abandoning it, and Hendrix's name comes up many times in *Conversations*. He tells Jan Gretlund that he considered Hendrix to be "a gatherer of the atmosphere of his age" (40); to R. Van Arsdall, he stresses that "Hendrix's music represents untold hours of practice. The guy was always at his instrument" (46). He speculates that Hendrix's military service as a paratrooper influenced his music: the sound of "helicopters probably inspired the huge volume." "Hendrix is to be enjoyed like a Romantic poet—in bursts" (110), Hannah suggests to James D. Lilley and Brian Oberkirch, and he makes many other parallels between the arts of writing and music. He hears "music" in the English language (89), and he says, "I don't like a bad sentence; it irritates me if I think it is bad or not musical. It's got to go with the music of the paragraph" (37). He won't buy a book unless it has not only "vision" but also "the rhythm, the ear" (126). Praising the novels of Cormac McCarthy in 1996, Hannah says, "I hope I will write books like that someday. That there is just not quite the language yet to describe it. I would aspire to the condition of music" (110). Similarly, he characterizes Eudora Welty's "Powerhouse," a story about a jazz musician's performance, as "a powerful piece of jazz work" (11).

While he doesn't mention the threat of death and danger in "Powerhouse," such dark elements are often more pronounced than references to music in Hannah's own fiction. Several interviewers press him to explain why he has a gun collection, why many of his characters own guns, and why he refers so often to war. He quotes Samuel Beckett's remark that "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness" (209), and he illustrates that from one of his own stories: "I try to put myself in grim positions and feel what I would do in a situation like being shot to pieces in a floating balloon, as in 'Bats Out of Hell Division.' I had a lot of fun writing that" (210). In Gross's radio interview, he admits that his wife Susan wishes he would stop writing about violence, but he has been doing it for thirty-five years, and, "as soon as the pen starts going, I become interested in it all over again." He conjectures that he is "a

student of violence,” intrigued by “what it does” and “how it quickens the character of those around it” (146).

Civil War General J. E. B. Stuart held a particular fascination for Hannah, who says, “I was always attracted to Stuart because he was so much unlike me. He’s pretty straight Presbyterian, didn’t smoke or drink, and had elegant phrases for his sweetheart and wife. It’s an old style that has just about perished” (56). In his introduction, Thomas notes that “The war and its legacy appear throughout Hannah’s fiction, particularly in the Jeb Stuart stories of *Airships*, and in many instances the Civil War and the war in Vietnam (and, ultimately, the Gulf War) have their parallels” (x). His high school friend John Quisenberry, a Navy pilot in Vietnam, was Hannah’s inspiration for characters in *Ray* and “Testimony of Pilot.” He told John Griffin Jones that Quisenberry “admires me for writing about the things he went through, being able to, and I admire him for going through them. It’s a mutual respect” (19). Hannah describes Vietnam to Van Arsdall as “a lousy, stupid war. But it is better to believe in something and do it” (59). Moreover, he believes that, under the pressure of violence, “things that are really meaningful come forth” (60).

“I can play the trumpet a little and a little tennis decently, but writing is the beauty,” Hannah emphasizes at the end of an interview with Don Swaim. He had just cited the “idealized language,” “exquisite rhetoric,” and even the quill pens with which historian Shelby Foote portrayed the Civil War, echoing the “beautifully literate” letters of soldiers from the North and the South (95). Like Walt Whitman, Hannah sees a commonality of soldiers on opposing sides. Resisting the label of Southern writer, he reminds interviewers that he has lived in Vermont, California, and Montana; he admires such diverse authors as Dostoyevsky, Vonnegut, Richard Hugo, Marilynne Robinson, and Tom McGuane. Not only does he describe a love-hate relationship with the South, but he views France as his “spiritual home.” When he was in graduate school, *The Sun Also Rises* made him long for Europe: “I think of Henry Miller and France in the thirties—Ernest Hemingway. That era was why I became a writer” (99). Set mainly in Paris, Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* is “a pretty nasty book but in sweet ways,” according to Hannah, who clarifies: “I saw the liberation of a man, and how to live, and how to get through the day. Good food, something to drink, women, and all of the absurdity and joy you have in human commerce” (162). Hannah could be talking about some of his own characters in describing Miller’s book and also in

picturing the French passion for the noir: "They love the down and out, the outcast, the gritty, the black, the pariah" (99). Although he didn't believe a writer "should be the final judge on what he is" (195), he declared two years before his death that "Avant-garde is the medal I'd seek" (217). *Conversations with Barry Hannah* reminds Hannah's readers just how fully he merits that prize.

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