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Protesting Too Much: Revealing Repetitions in Barry Hannah's Interviews

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Review Essay

Protesting Too Much: Revealing Repetitions in Barry Hannah's Interviews

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Conversations with Barry Hannah. Ed. by James G. Thomas, Jr. University Press of Mississippi, 2016. 240 pp. \$25.00 paper. Ebook available.

In a 2008 interview, Barry Hannah complains to Louis Bourgeois that “I love the interviews of the few I deeply admire. My own are redundant agonies I do only for friends and money” (216). The redundancy of literary interviews is also a persistent complaint in reviews of interview collections. A survey of reviews of other titles in the University Press of Mississippi’s long-running Literary Conversations Series reveals that this series has often been the target of such criticisms. However, this is perhaps more the fault of unimaginative interviewers than the editors of interview collections. After all, to edit such a collection one must “deeply admire” its subject, and although *Conversations with Barry Hannah* suffers from repetition, to cut any one interview on that account would also detract from the overall picture it provides of Hannah. The collection, edited by James G. Thomas, Jr., features eighteen interviews spanning the three decades between 1980 and 2010. In these interviews the reader will encounter variations on the themes that define Hannah in

the popular imagination. Interviewers ask about violence, sex, alcoholism, the short story versus the novel, literary influences, and teaching practices. Hannah's responses range from indulgence to annoyance: to another question posed by Bourgeois about whether Oxford, Mississippi is a "special" place to work, Hannah simply responds, "Yes." For the most part, however, Hannah is expansive in his answers, even when the questions have been posed multiple times.

Something, too, can be learned by the very repetition of questions and the variation in the answers Hannah provides.

A case in point is the vexed issue of Hannah's relationship to "Southernness." Hannah's typical response to direct questions about his status as a Southern writer is exasperation. He tells Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory as early as 1987, "Mainly I react with disgust when I hear those kinds of comments. In fact, before we really get started here, could I ask that we avoid all the standard questions about my Southern heritage, at least all the *dumb* ones?" (69). Hannah's preference is to be labeled an American writer instead of a Southern one, yet he applies the Southern label to other authors as well. At two different points he reminds interviewers that Donald Barthelme is a Southern writer. According to Hannah, the difference between himself and Barthelme is in content rather than regional affiliation: "It does not have to be the slammed screen door and the crazy aunt all the time, you know? Well, Barthelme is awfully good, and he is awfully un-Southern in that way," he tells John Griffin Jones (11). Hannah's work, while it is never exactly about screen doors and crazy aunts, often finds its subject matter in specifically Southern topics. For instance, the three stories in *Airships* (1978) about the Confederate cavalry officer J.E.B. "Jeb" Stuart, protest the Vietnam War by connecting it with the Lost Cause ideology still prevalent in the South. It becomes clear then that Hannah is less distressed by his association with the culture of the South than he is with the strictures that a Southern writer faces once his work has been associated primarily with Southern themes. "That kind of labeling cancels the audience's appreciation for what my books are, gets people to ignore my books who shouldn't," he tells McCaffery and Gregory (69-70). Tracing his varied responses to this crucial problem would be made much easier through the collection's index, but strangely "the South" or "Southern literature" is not listed. "Civil War" is, along with "violence," "alcoholism," "sex/sexuality," and "postmodernism"; in this way, the index reinforces Hannah's popular reputation. It will take a keener eye to spot less obvious repetitions.

William Faulkner, of course, earns a spot in the index. Hannah spent most of his career in Oxford, Mississippi, where Faulkner's legacy is unavoidable, and he sees the Southern Gothic style that Faulkner made famous as both an inspiration and a limitation. As Thomas notes in his introduction, every interview included here mentions Faulkner in some way, and when the interviewer doesn't bring up the subject of Faulkner's influence, Hannah does so himself. Shawn Badgley, writing for

the *Austin Chronicle* in 2003, is rewarded for his tact in avoiding the subject of Faulkner with a trip to Faulkner's Rowan Oak property (though Thomas, in his summary of this interview in the introduction, misattributes it to Rob Trucks). Hannah reveals to Badgley that "I'm doing this because you didn't ask me the same dumb question that everybody asks me, thank God. 'What's it like writing in Faulkner's shadow?' Well, fuck it, fuck Faulkner's shadow" (195). These conflicting desires—to drive to Faulkner's residence in order to deny his influence, to reward a journalist for not mentioning Faulkner by bringing him up yourself—succinctly illustrate Hannah's complex relationship with Faulkner and the Southern tradition he represents. The cumulative weight of Faulkner's influence, despite (or because of) Hannah's repeated protestations, is one of the facts of Hannah's career that the repetitions in this collection make abundantly clear.

All but one of the interviews in this collection have been published elsewhere, with the exception of an interview conducted for a Master's thesis by Thomas Ærvold Bjerre in 2001. As such, it may offer little for scholars of Hannah already familiar with his career. James Thomas himself notes this limitation when he remarks that the fate of Hannah's unfinished novel *Maximum Ned*, repeatedly alluded to in these interviews, can only be revealed by visiting the correspondence between Hannah and his editor Gordon Lish at the Lilly Library at Indiana University (xiv). Still, this volume is helpful as an introduction to the landmark moments of Hannah's career: the success of his first novel, *Geronimo Rex* (1972), the disappointing reception of and subsequent regret for his follow-up *Nightwatchmen* (1973), his return to critical favor with *Airships* (1978) and *Ray* (1980), and his struggle to complete his final novel *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* (2001) during his battle with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Barry Hannah remains one of the most unique literary voices of the post-war era, and though this collection does not provide new insights into his career, its overview of the definitive themes of his work will be useful to a new generation of students of contemporary American (not simply Southern) literature.