

# How I Learned to Write Without Footnotes

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1

I keep telling myself I didn't really think this was going to be an easy piece to write. And I keep making longer and longer lists of the Bloom events that have filled New York this fall, events I can say I was wanting to be able to include in this article. And I can count, no longer on one hand, the discarded drafts of versions of this piece. And in the dead of the night, when I decide to get in bed and read the morning's *Times* instead of finishing what I think I can write about Harold Bloom, I admit how terribly difficult it is to write about someone one loves. That, of course, that last half sentence, and especially the speaking out loud of love, of passion, is not what we are mostly able to do, we academics. We write with footnotes—out of training and habit and perhaps mostly persuasion—and we by and large write in ways that reveal the most horrifying of the many horrifying truths in Nietzsche's line that Harold uses as an epigraph for the Shakespeare book: "That for which we find words is something already dead in our hearts. There is always a kind of contempt in the act of speaking." And yet.

And yet, what Harold does is precisely to prove Nietzsche wrong: he writes and speaks openly, ferociously, hyperbolically—even childishly, perhaps best of all—about things that are very much alive in his heart. And he writes from the astonishingly, scandalously, optimistic position that they—his multiple loves, his exuberant passions, from Falstaff (notoriously now) to the Gnostic Ibn 'Arabi of Henry Corbin—can be kept alive through these exhilarating, and to many, exasperating public declarations of such love. Far, very far, from Nietzsche's sang-froid and resignation and pessimism, Harold's Bloodhound-sad face and his regular declarations of every kind of "bloom and doom" (as he puts it) are only

masks for the most ferocious and tender of optimists, for whom love is, indeed, as strong as death—and thus to be taken seriously. Every day. Harold restates the bit about not being able to say “I love you”—which is what poor Nietzsche is saying—but he understands that the point is you spend everything you have *trying* to find the ways, and you hope they are countless.

Most astonishingly—I love, now, being able to use that great Bloomian expression in my writing—all of this he does, without apology but certainly with a sense of its exceptionalism, at a historical moment of terrible crisis in the ‘profession’ of literary criticism and scholarship. A profession whose many woes are amply chronicled and thoroughly bemoaned and perhaps even competently explained away—woes which, for me, can be most simply seen in noting everything Harold is, and most of us are not. Harold sees it as being Falstaff (or Bloomstaff, as even the *Times*, with great charm, conceded), and that is as good as it gets, but my more pedantic way of putting it is that it is about knowing how to write without footnotes.

2

There used to be no story more famous in my own branch of ‘the profession’—which is what used to be called Romance philology and now, in a fractured and many would say thus debased form, survives as departments of ‘foreign’ languages and literatures—than that of Erich Auerbach’s writing *Mimesis* in Turkey. The German professor of Romance philology—which meant teaching Old French, Old Provençal and Old Italian—is a Prussian war hero and survivor of the carnage of the First World War, but he is also a Jew and in 1935 the Nazis chase him from his position at Marburg University. In 1936 he goes into exile, to Istanbul, where he instructed “an audience mostly of well-brought-up young Turkish ladies who needed French” as his student Lowry Nelson, Jr. would say in a loving necrology. But it is here, in such extreme exile, with Europe and its cultures savaging each other, that Auerbach sits helpless at the edge of the desert, looking on, without his languages and without his books—and writes *Mimesis*. Famously, very famously, with no footnotes, no bibliography and with the inscription (on the verso of the title page of the 1953 English translation): “Written in Istanbul between May 1942 and April 1945”—as if by way of explanation of this lapse in ‘scholarship.’

I was first told the story as a graduate student in the 1970s, a moment which I think can now be seen as oddly ‘transitional’ in the history of

literary studies: there were still considerable traces of the older universe, degrees in Romance philology were still technically possible, graduate students were still told the story of Auerbach and, indeed, were expected really to read *Mimesis*. But it was also mostly clear that this was largely vestigial, that we were mostly being trained as scholars in one language and one literature and maybe even one century. Indeed, this was just one of the ways in which scholarship was clearly defined—pragmatically if not explicitly—as a matter of greater specialization rather than greater vision and breadth. And the very notion that any of this had anything to do with true love or passion or cultural values wouldn’t have crossed anyone’s mind—and would have been sneered at if it had, probably from both sides of the aisle: the old-fashioned philologists were by and large from the school descended from German neo-grammarians and as much interested in disembodied objective truth as the other neos, the New Critics.

So I was puzzled, as I think anyone who really thought about the Auerbach myth must have been: was the moral supposed to be that it was a truly magnificent scholar who could write a whole book without a library and thus without notes or bibliography? If so, what were we being trained to do? It was more than clear that whatever the moral was, it was certainly not that we should write our papers (let alone an entire book) without notes or a bibliography, as Auerbach had done. After all, literary scholarship in the ‘modern’ period meant one version or another—and these versions might be quite different from each other—of grasping that our field was as ‘scientific’ and ‘disinterested’ as any other, above all that it was about things which could be proven (or perhaps even be diagrammed or charted). Who would have suggested, out loud, in those years, that the footnotelessness of that book was an act of supreme love? Of the sort medieval writers, who believed in Memory itself as a necessary handmaiden to Love, had cultivated? (Peter Brown’s recent huge book on *The Rise of Western Christianity* is unblemished by footnotes, a mode described as “wicked” by Robin Lane Fox but rather deftly, although incompletely, explained by another reviewer: “Brown has rejected the world of footnotes and embraced a medieval scholarly aesthetic in which the reader is constantly challenged to identify the sources paraded anonymously through these pages.”)

But in my graduate school days, if Auerbach stood for a ‘revered’ but inimitable Old World, then Harold Bloom was the New, probably Brave, and certainly Scary as Hell. I knew who Harold Bloom was, as, I suppose, must have every even half-conscious graduate student in the seventies,

from *The Anxiety of Influence*, a book I could scarcely understand and which was nearly responsible for my deciding I was simply not smart enough to make it through graduate school, let alone the profession. Of course, what I know now that I didn't know then is that when my fellow graduate students acted as if they understood it, and thus made me feel I was the village idiot (or The Idiot Questioner), the truth was they didn't really have much of a clue either. The many reasons why this was so—why a book far more heterodox vis-à-vis critical and scholarly practice, and thus far more unintelligible within that intellectual context, than Auerbach's, was as iconic as it was—I will leave aside for the moment.

But it was so, and my own lack of real understanding was a source of extraordinary distress, mostly because I was a medievalist (actually a Romance philologist, one of the very last that would come out of the Department of Romance Languages at the University of Pennsylvania) and the whole question of 'influence' (and its vast army of foot soldiers, sources and etyma and derivations and origins and so forth) was just about all anyone did or had ever done in my neck of the woods. And it was what I wanted to do, too; I had already fallen upon what my subject would be, which was (in essence) the question of the repressed influence of Hispano-Arabic poetry on early Romance poetry—and somehow I figured that even though the repressed (or what I dimly understood to be 'anxious') component was that of modern scholarship, rather than the influenced poetry, this Bloom book everyone talked about and cited just had to be important for me. No doubt it would have been, and no doubt it would have influenced me in ways that would have, indeed (although for very different reasons) made me abandon my scholarly career. But in the midst of becoming a scholar I could not stop really to understand this book that had no footnotes, no bibliography, dozens and dozens of quotes—by which I mean lines inside quotation marks—with no work-and-page citations. And Bloom, as far as anyone knew, did not have the excuse that he had written his book in Istanbul.

I think I would never, on my own, have stopped really to understand that book, but that carriage decided, rather improbably, it would stop for me. I was hired at Yale in 1986, having written a first book (with the subtitle *A Forgotten Heritage* to stand, unconsciously, appropriately enough, for my version of 'anxious influence') which one enthusiastic reviewer characterized as having the best footnotes on the subject ever written. (Or maybe what she said was that the best part of the book was the footnotes.) Everything about that move was terrifying—at some only half-conscious level I knew, I was certain, that this was going to lead to

my being found out, that the fact I had been the single graduate student in the whole of the seventies who had not understood *The Anxiety of Influence* was going to be revealed, and probably published in the Sunday Magazine of *The New York Times*, where they had just published an article, with full-color pictures, on "the Yale Critics." To this day I remember the article as being called something like "Terror at Yale" (which seems quite implausible to me), and none of the guys in those pictures was smiling, least of all Harold Bloom. But since the 'flight' option was not really available to me in my moment of abject intellectual terror, I took the 'fight' which meant, of course, it was time to Grow Up and Figure It Out so when I actually met the Ferocious and Unsmiling Yale Critic I didn't end up too humiliated.

Talk about Misprision. By the time I actually met Harold, walking one day on the streets of New Haven, I had actually read enough, and well enough, that I wasn't even surprised to see him and the man who introduced me to him, Lowry Nelson, Jr.—the former student of Auerbach's who was one of the last of the very old-fashioned people, retrograde even, at Yale—exchange an obviously affectionate kiss. The essence of Harold Bloom—not just the personal essence, but the essence of this nonpareil reader of literature, this exemplary scholar of the twentieth century—is Love. Love in all of its manifestations, in every sense, from the Passionate to the Mystical and everything in between. And it is because the basis of his relationship to literature is Love, in all of its shapes—including, necessarily, all the fallout: the cruel jealousy, the rage against the false suitors—that he has not written a footnote in at least 25 years. And, more importantly—since the bit about footnotes is obviously both a little hyperbolic and a lot symbolic—that even 25 years ago, when he was writing stuff that was far from the recent books that have made the best-seller lists, his uncompromisingly and indefatigably personal version of criticism and scholarship was mostly unintelligible.

3

One of my very favorite pieces in the Bloom canon—likely to be read by the smallest handful of people, and certainly by nothing remotely like the public his vast *Canon* and *Shakespeare* and *J* books have had—is the preface to the newly republished *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* by the late, great Islamicist Henry Corbin. Corbin wrote with plenty of footnotes, by the way, and on a subject which is in no wise popular, and in a language that is sometimes as

hermetic as that of the great Andalusian Sufi about whom he writes. But in reading that whole string of critical Gnostics, from Ibn 'Arabi to Bloom, it is possible to see how much it is a matter of having a visionary critical relationship with the texts one reads, and thus loves; and Harold's deft equation of Gnosticism ('acquaintance' rather than 'knowing') with "visionary" suggests in every way that without Love the enterprise of 'criticism' becomes something more akin to 'knowing' (thus the pseudo-scientific impulse, whether that of the philologists or the structuralists or the social-constructivists) than to 'acquaintance.' Which being about love is also necessarily about the imagination, as well as about passion and hope and God and belief and a dozen other words that most people are embarrassed to say or write in public—in the public spheres of our profession, anyway. But not Harold. Quoting Corbin—with unembarrassed love and approval—he notes and reiterates that we pray to God *because* we created him. And thus the places where our knowledge of God and of literature—or even the history of literature—are much the same are forms of either Gnosticism ('acquaintance') or Kabbalism ('tradition'). Or Love.

I quibble with Harold, sometimes, over his ferocious denunciations of what he has called the School of Resentment, because I think it's a bit of a red herring. His relationship to literature of all sorts is rooted in the varieties of the loving experience, and my own sense is that his real rebellion was and in some profound way still is against literary studies as a 'professional' enterprise—professional in the sense of it becoming impersonal. The hyperbole in Bloomian critical language is invariably characterized (negatively) as if it were the hyperbole of scientific writing and assertions—rather than understood as the language of love that it is, with all the possibilities for transcendent and, indeed, outrageous Truths. And it is amusing, although sad-making, to read recent reviews of the *Shakespeare* book that take on the notion of the expression and the concept of "the invention of the human" as if it were an expression in a biology book written by fundamentalists—rather than a part of the languages of the human arts (God knows, not 'sciences') and thus contributions to the contemplation of the human, and ourselves. If writing about literature cannot be this, then what can? Of course, those of us trained as philologists should really have known better all along—after all, the concept that this is all about Love in the first place is perfectly embedded in that *un*-professional designation, philology. And Auerbach, who with considerable pride called himself a philologist, is more complex, as a writer of a famously footnote-less and bibliography-less

book, than a man accidentally caught without his library—which would be (how can I resist?) a bit like equating love with getting caught with your pants down.

4

The lines from Nietzsche are like a talisman, or a form of evil eye, or one of those other wonderful traditions that are meant to ward off bad things: it is certainly true that it is difficult, sometimes overwhelmingly so, to approach those things so close to the heart, or to write with critical nakedness, or to open oneself to the barbs of the Philistines, especially when the Philistines are our colleagues. (I found myself, just a few days ago, momentarily stung by what was unambiguously meant to be a derisive comment: my praise of what I truly believed to be a terrific book was dismissed as "rapturous.") The truth is that those who love are immensely vulnerable, and one maybe not-half-bad description of what love is could be that it is precisely that willingness to make oneself vulnerable. Which of course means anything other than that it is not difficult or hurtful—*au contraire*. Which is why we need the aphorism from Nietzsche, to urge us to try to say the unsayable, even when, especially when, we suspect the price involved.

This is the dread built into Falstaff's relationship with Hal—or, rather, the dread that Harold feels for Falstaff, when he contemplates Hal, who loves him now but will one day be King, will one day claim that his love for Falstaff is dead in his heart. There is a lovely passage in the *Shakespeare* book, towards the end, as I recall, about Falstaff's relationship with Hal being parallel to the poet's relationship to his lover and patron in the love sonnets. The terror of love, and the beauty of much love poetry, resides of course in that fear of abandonment of one sort or another—and one of the things Harold's reading suggests to me (which even as a medievalist who has read every manner of love poem I had never exactly glimpsed) is that the fear may be that we are abandoned *because*, as Nietzsche would have it, we never knew how to say that "I love you." But what Harold accomplishes is precisely to persuade us that it is crucial to keep trying, that there is only one kind of relationship to be had with literature, if we are to be critics true to what we pretend to write about: full-out and no holds barred, it must always be assuming it will be True Love and we will be able to find its name and say it.

No doubt 'posterity' and 'history' and all those other frightening things will remember Harold's astonishing accomplishments as the

foremost critic of his age in a manner perhaps appropriately complex, and certainly with that whole range of admiration and fear, respect and jealousy, that the truly prodigious inspire. He may, as he has more than once lamented, be remembered principally for the *Anxiety* thing. Or, perhaps, he will be remembered for the very different books of this decade, for what will most likely be described as a turn to the 'popular'—and an abandonment of his profession, *pour cause*. But for me it is all reducible to the simplest, most frightening and difficult thing: he talks and writes, and thus urges others to talk and write, as the Lover does to the Beloved, as Ibn 'Arabi does to his God, as Falstaff does to Hal. To write about literature, under Bloomian skies—which are sometimes brilliantly clear and other times stormy, and always very much alive—is to be involved with literature in the most human ways. To love and be loved.

NEW YORK, 1998