

THE MAKING OF A MASTERPIECE: BARRY HANNAH'S *RAY*

by

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DEDICATION

For Sunny, Sebastian and Marcel.

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE GENIUS MASTER OF HIS DRAGON

In the spring of my sophomore year in college I took a class called “The Short Story and Novella.” It was the class that made me fall in love with literature. In that class I was introduced to Poe’s stories as well as those of Hawthorne, Hemingway, Flannery O’Connor, Joyce’s *Dubliners*, *Heart of Darkness* and *Billy Budd*. Of all the days of that class I will always remember the last day, it was then that I was introduced to Barry Hannah.

As is appropriate I was also told my first Barry Hannah story via our professor. He began our introduction by telling us that Barry Hannah, tired of his student’s tedious fiction, stumbled into class drunk holding an empty bottle of Jack Daniels in one hand and a revolver in the other and that he unloaded the revolver in class causing all of the students to seek shelter under their desks. After a few moments of silence Barry simply said: “Now write about fear.” Our professor then proceeded to read aloud “Water Liars” and “Coming Close to Donna,” two stories from Hannah’s first collection *Airships*. It was then that I became hooked on Hannah. I quickly bought and devoured *Airships* and *Geronimo Rex* and became certain that Barry Hannah was the best writer I had ever read.

Next I bought and devoured *Ray*, his third novel. However, this experience was a little different, I didn’t get it, but I loved it. The experience I had reading *Ray* has only been matched by very few books. It really is a masterpiece in my mind. It was the first book that made me *want* to go back repeatedly and find new things in it. *Ray* is not only Barry Hannah’s most original work, but it is, in my opinion, one of the most original books written by an American. *Ray* is one of those rare books that defies literary classification, a book whose form (to paraphrase Samuel Beckett) accommodates the

mess, a novel in every sense of the word. Passionate, and free, it belongs on the same shelf as other imaginative meditations such as *Leaves of Grass*, Henry Miller's *Black Spring*, *Three Poems* by John Ashbery and *Spring and All* by William Carlos Williams. That is the purpose of this thesis: to examine and further illuminate Barry Hannah's masterpiece.

Howard Barry Hannah was born in Meridian, Mississippi on April 23, 1942. He graduated with a B.A. in English from Mississippi College in 1964 and went on to the University of Arkansas to receive an M.A. in English (with a thesis on William Blake) in 1966 and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing in 1967. In 1972 his first novel, *Geronimo Rex*, was published to almost unanimous praise and won the William Faulkner Prize and was nominated for the National Book Award. The following year Hannah's second novel, *Nightwatchmen*, was published to almost unanimous disappointment. For the rest of the decade Hannah continued to publish short stories, particularly in *Esquire*, and in 1978 his first collection, *Airships*, was published. It was not until 1980 that Hannah's third novel and his masterpiece, *Ray*, was published (Charney xi).

Since my thesis' focus is on *Ray* and its composition, the first chapter will briefly look at Hannah's first two novels as stepping-stones towards his masterpiece. I will also look at Hannah's personal state at the time *Ray* was written. I will then discuss how Hannah, in order to confront the anxiety of his Southern heritage, looked to more "underground" writers such as Jack Kerouac and Henry Miller for inspiration. I will also discuss how Hannah moved on from Kerouac and Miller and found his own original voice in *Ray*. Through this approach, I will attempt to amplify *Ray*'s significance by discussing the complex narrative structure of the novel as well as the controversial

content. I will also attempt to place Hannah, and *Ray* in particular, in an American canon that explores narrative through the use of the voice of a narrator/character/author starting with Walt Whitman, particularly in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, on through Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac and finally to Barry Hannah.

In the second chapter of this thesis I will discuss the literary criticism of *Ray*. I will look at Mark J. Charney's book, *Barry Hannah*, Ruth D. Weston's book, *Barry Hannah: Postmodern Romantic*, and the essay collection, *Perspectives on Barry Hannah*. I also want Barry to speak for himself, so that is why I will also be using the recently published interview collection, *Conversations with Barry Hannah*. I will also discuss the literary criticism of Harold Bloom, particularly his essay "Walt Whitman as Center of the American Canon" in his book, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. I will also talk about the literary criticism of Ronald Sukenick, particularly his book, *In Form: Digressions on the Act of Fiction* as well as his book *Narralogues: Truth In Fiction*.

In the third and final chapter I will discuss Hannah's subsequent novels in relationship to *Ray*. This will hopefully illuminate *Ray* as a monument in Hannah's oeuvre.

Ray is not only a special book to me, it really is an American classic and, sadly, the book doesn't even have an underground reputation on which to survive. The same goes for Barry Hannah himself. Too few people read Barry Hannah and even fewer have even heard of him. This thesis will attempt to change that, to truly show Barry Hannah in a new light and context, to (as Henry Miller said about D.H. Lawrence) "do justice to a

man like that, who gave so much...Not to explain him—but by writing about him that one has caught the flame he tried to pass on.”

II. FROM SOUTHERN BEAT TO MASTERPIECE

Barry Hannah grew up in Mississippi during the 50's and 60's just like the protagonist, Harry Monroe, in his first novel, *Geronimo Rex*. Although Harry and Barry are not the same person, there are some similarities. The biggest similarity is that Harry and Barry both play the trumpet. Hannah was so talented that he played with the Jackson Symphony while an undergraduate at Mississippi College. Music, therefore, plays a big part in *Geronimo Rex* and indeed in Hannah's fiction in general. Jazz and the idea of improvisation is also a major influence, not only on *Geronimo Rex*, but on *Ray* as well. Furthermore, *Geronimo Rex* can be seen as a "beat" novel and the influence of Jack Kerouac and Henry Miller is strongly felt in the book. This of course seemed natural to Hannah, who could actually play Jazz and was a professional trumpet player, Hannah says: "I tried it as a trumpet man. I didn't have the dedication. I wanted to be Miles Davis or nothing, so I quit early" (Swaim 91). There is a kind of music to his prose and although Hannah's books range in quality, there is one constant: his language. Few writing in the English language can match Hannah in innovation and execution. One of the best summations of Hannah's use of language is by Eric Miles Williamson in his essay on Hannah from his book *Say It Hot Vol. II: Industrial Strength: Essays, Reviews and Interviews*. Williamson says:

Hannah's graceful and seamless syntactic timing makes a story which is potentially either lewd or melodramatic crackle with poignancy. His sentences are constructed in such a manner that they jolt us with sequences of words we've never before seen next to each other; however, instead of seeming forced, instead revealing the heavy presence of a writer, the language flows

from the narrators and characters in such a way that the world we've become privy to is slightly askew and yet wholly believable. It's as if Hannah is showing us the world for the first time. (Williamson 188)

William Grialdi, in his essay "Thrill Me: Barry Hannah in Memoriam", gives a similar evaluation of Hannah's prose:

Hannah is the unholy lyricism of an outraged id, verbal voodoo. You may hurl 'lyrical' as a slur to mean plotlessness plus poeticism—all that prettiness in service of nothing...but the twisted lyricism in Hannah always administers narrative...He dismantles traditional American syntax and then constructs a bastardized hybrid of poetry and prose that is both riveting and irregular...(Grialdi 49-50)

This is not a new opinion and it is certainly not one that is challenged. In fact, fierce and original use of language is the one thing you can count on in a work by Barry Hannah. Even though *Geronimo Rex* is very much influenced by Miller and Kerouac, what sets Hannah apart are his unique and baroque sentences. The opening lines of the novel give us a glimpse of Hannah's peculiarity: "In 1950 I'm eight years old and gravely beholding, from my vantage slot under the bleachers, the Dream of Pines Colored High School band. This group blew and marched so well they were scary" (Hannah 3). We get a sense of rhythm in the sentences along with Hannah's interesting diction, phrases like "gravely beholding" and "vantage slot" make fresh a rather ordinary situation, and the fact that the band "blew" instead of "played" so well gives us a sense of authenticity. We know Hannah knows what he is talking about. Although Hannah, in *Geronimo Rex*, already had an original voice the novel is quite ordinary. It is a coming of age story and

Hannah's language as well as Harry's absurd and funny fantasies save the book from being a beat knockoff. Kerouac's famous explosions of language, no doubt, influenced Hannah a great deal. Kerouac's famous ending to *On the Road* is the seedling that blossoms in the best moments of *Geronimo Rex*. Kerouac ends:

So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going...the evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie...and nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old, I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty. (Kerouac 309-310)

On his early ambitions as a writer, Hannah says: "My model was Kerouac, and *On the Road*" (Tower 231). As previously stated *Geronimo Rex* is littered with Kerouacian exuberance and breadth. In one particularly great scene Harry and his roommate Silas find themselves playing with black Jazz musicians on stage and Hannah does a superb job of rendering the chaos and joy:

We'd never been better. Coming in tight, I hit the flatted seventh of what I meant to hit, way up there, and came back down in a baroque finesse such as I'd never heard from myself, jabbing, bright, playing the pants off Sweet Georgia, causing them to flutter in the beer and bacon smoke of the place. Silas began the dip-thrums and I unified with him while Joe locked the gates on the measures, back-busting that beautiful storm of hides and cymbals.

Harry had found it and he began screaming with glee through the horn, every note the unlocked treasure of his soul—and things he had *never* had, yes, he hit an F above high C! What a bop the three of us were raising in there, what a debut what a miracle. My horn pulsed fat and skinny. Oh, Harry was stinging them, but stinging them mellow. Didn't I see out the corner of an eye that some spades were moving to us, see some eyes blissfully shut, heads pumping, grooving, digging us, seeing Sweet Georgia shriek after her panties? I gave Silas the solo bars, seeking that F again. Joe lowered the storm, and Silas, he was coming forward, he was backing the cello up the wall, did he have some ideas? Yes. The pianist of the Mean Men slunk by me with the devil's own grin on his face. He wanted in on this, must have it. (Hannah, 196)

It can be argued that Hannah is probably better than Kerouac at the jazzy-prose game and that you would be hard pressed to find an equivalent, let alone a better, representation of Jazz on the page. Harry's ecstasy is so overwhelming that he begins to refer to himself in the third-person as if he is having a sort of out of body experience. This is something that Hannah is going to develop and perfect in *Ray*.

Of course there is the issue of racial slurs in *Geronimo Rex* as well as in Hannah's other work and while this is not new to people familiar with Hannah, it still causes problems in the evaluation and apprehension of his work. However, Harry calling the black spectators at the club "spades" is just Harry speaking of black people. Of course it is racist and of course it is politically incorrect. That is who Harry is—a product of his environment. Hannah is writing about the people and the language with which he grew

up in the South. All of Hannah's characters are troubled Southerners with a kind of passive racism that people Hannah knew growing up practiced and in some cases still do. His characters are not progressive, politically correct people. They are men and women from places that are steeped in old traditions. Some of us are from places like this and know of where Hannah speaks.

In fact, Hannah was deeply trying to disassociate himself from the Southern literary tradition. He told Wells Tower in an interview:

Categories are bad news. Being Southern will just kill you sometimes. It's not always a graceful adjective. Sometimes it means don't bother because it's gonna be...porch, banjo, Negroes. There's a canned dream of the South that a lot of people get into, and I've resisted that stuff my entire so-called career.

(Tower 230)

By turning to Jack Kerouac and Henry Miller for inspiration, Hannah was able to develop his unique voice, distinctly lyrical and Southern, but with a vivid, frank, hyper-realistic imagery. As previously stated, *Geronimo Rex* is an award-winning book that was met with almost unanimous praise. Mark Charney, for instance in his book *Barry Hannah*, part of the Twayne's United States Authors Series, says:

Hannah achieves continuity...not by leading the reader logically or smoothly from one event to another, but by introducing an array of minor characters who serve as foils to define Harry at various stages of his emotional and intellectual growth...Rather than illustrate his progress toward maturity through a succession of didactic "lessons," Hannah indicates changes in Harry's perspective by describing achronologically his shifting behavior

during each segment and his unpredictable reactions to other characters in the novel. (Charney 4)

I agree with Charney. Hannah's choice to avoid the typical bildungsroman, by placing a picaresque filter on it, gives him the opportunity to create something familiar yet new. Charney's view, however, is a potent one. Critics have more to say about the novel's "bildungsroman" style than any other aspect of the book. Ruth Weston, in her book *Barry Hannah: Postmodern Romantic*, says "*Geronimo Rex* and *Nightwatchmen*, Hannah's first two novels, are the only ones to exhibit...the novelistic style...of the traditional *bildungsroman*..." (Weston 2). In the first essay of the anthology *Perspectives on Barry Hannah*, Kenneth Millard says "Barry Hannah's *Geronimo Rex* (1972) is a classic coming-of-age novel that exhibits many characteristics of the bildungsroman..." (Millard 3). Even Hannah himself felt the constant critique. He told Marc Smirnoff in an interview: "*Geronimo Rex* is, I'm told, a bildungsroman. It was what had happened to me, just about, until my late twenties..." (Smirnoff 175). He told Don Swaim in another interview: "...*Geronimo Rex*...was greeted, hailed around...It's about growing up in the South during the Civil Rights Era...and the adventures of a trumpet man who fails and finds himself...But it's really just a kind of big howl, here I am, this is the way it went" (Swaim 85-86). The structure is, as the critics have said, quite simple. There are three "books" with smaller chapters in between, but essentially the three parts of the novel indicate beginning, middle and end, but scattered are Harry's exuberant fantasies of music and girls. It is within this somewhat tight structure that the juxtaposition of the free-form jazz-prose redeems this seemingly ordinary coming-of-age "bildungsroman."

Hannah also introduces us to his narrative aesthetic in *Geronimo Rex*, the use of voice as the driving force of his fiction. In most of Hannah's novels, but especially in *Geronimo Rex*, *Ray* and *Boomerang* he creates characters that are also perceived to be personas, not necessarily of Hannah, but whole poetic fictive personas whose voices carry not only themselves but the books as well. This is why I say that rather than the Southern literary tradition Hannah belongs to what I call the voice tradition, which, I believe, harkens back to Walt Whitman. Whitman in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* gives us a short book of pure voice from the untitled "Preface" to "Song of Myself" and "The Sleepers." In the "Preface" Whitman doesn't set out to establish a new order of poetry, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, but rather he is praising and poeticizing America as if to say he is the poet of this land. Whitman's poetic persona is similar to Chaucer and Dante's pilgrims or personas. Whitman's imaginative persona celebrates himself as well as life in America, but there is also a rhetorical and reflective element in Whitman's epic.

Henry Miller, the other writer who had a profound influence on Hannah, perhaps outdoes this rhetorical and reflective tone. Hannah says of Miller:

...the revolutionary way of looking at the world in *Tropic of Cancer*, that underground classic of college, probably touched me...I saw the liberation of a man, and how to live, and how to get through the day...It was just a raw down-to-earth beauty and I think Miller liberated me. It was my book for a while. (Williams 162)

Miller's use of the author-as-character technique seems to have evolved from Whitman's pilgrim-poet-persona. His underground classic, *Tropic of Cancer*, is not a typical "bildungsroman"/ "picaresque" novel like *Geronimo Rex*. Instead Miller has grand

visions that he is relaying to us as an American in Paris who is writing the book that we are reading. *Tropic of Cancer* is structured almost like an ongoing monologue. The only breaks in the text are akin to one taking a breath after talking for too long. Indeed we can see Miller's influence on *Geronimo Rex* as well as *Nightwatchmen*—the liberal use of frank language being the most obvious. As previously stated, Whitman, elsewhere but particularly in “The Sleepers,” is wandering in this night vision, just as Miller is wandering through Paris and Kerouac through the United States. Harry in *Geronimo Rex* is also wandering—through his own adolescence and understanding of adulthood and the world around him. The various characters in *Nightwatchmen* also wander, as does Ray. This sense of the writer as the poet-pilgrim and the use of the narrator's voice as the agent that grasps and attempts to understand the world that they inhabit is what Hannah takes from Whitman, Miller, and Kerouac. Harry Monroe could not exist without Whitman the poet-pilgrim, Miller the novelist-as-character and the various alter egos of Kerouac. In his debut Hannah uses Kerouac and Miller to his advantage and at the same time is beginning to abandon their influence. With no canned dreams and a whole lot of Jazz, Hannah puts a Southern spin on the first-person narrative and has something new and fresh on his hands, a southern beatnik novel of the first order.

That is not the case with Hannah's second novel, *Nightwatchmen*. Unlike *Geronimo Rex*, Hannah's second novel received mostly disappointed reviews and the book, according to Hannah, didn't even get issued in paperback. This is not a complete injustice. *Nightwatchmen* is a difficult book, not difficult like *Ray*, but difficult in that there are many characters' perspectives and bizarre events that are only interesting to the die-hard Barry Hannah fan. The book gained much negative comparison to Faulkner's *As*

I Lay Dying, for the similar structure of the two novels. The two novels couldn't be more different, though. While Faulkner's novel is about a family burying their matriarch and each character is developed through his or her telling of the events, Hannah's novel is a play on a murder-mystery. The negative comparisons, right as they may have been, seemed inauthentic since Hannah himself said that was not what he was trying to do in *Nightwatchmen*. When Rob Trucks asked if *As I Lay Dying* was in Hannah's mind when he wrote *Nightwatchmen* Hannah said: "No. I don't think I was familiar with that book much then. No, it wasn't" (Trucks 117). When pressed about the book's negative reception and lack of paperback publication Hannah says "I wrote that book in a hurry, some of it in New York, which wasn't very good for me. New York's too fascinating for somebody like me to write in. There are too many people, too many events" (Trucks 118). Mark Charney's assessment of the novel, however, is a positive one. While acknowledging that the book is not as tightly structured as *Geronimo Rex*, Charney says *Nightwatchmen*...achieves unity through its adherence to plot elements designed to resemble and satirize clues from a murder mystery...But a closer look at *Nightwatchmen* not only indicates thematic similarities to *Rex*, but reveals the basis for much of the experimentation of Hannah's later fiction (Charney 13-14).

Probably the major element the critics and reviewers missed about *Nightwatchmen* is that it is not a serious family drama like *As I Lay Dying* but is a satire and meant to be read as one. The novel is about "The Knocker" who is going around the campus of the fictional Southwestern Mississippi University and knocking people unconscious. We later find out that he has an accomplice, "The Killer," who is actually killing people at the university.

The “protagonist” of the novel is an awkward, gawky orphaned loner named Thorpe Trove. Thorpe’s parents were killed in a car accident and they left him their gothic Southern mansion near Southwestern Mississippi University. Thorpe, in order to earn some extra money, begins to rent rooms to graduate students of the English Department at the university and one of these students is Harry Monroe from *Geronimo Rex*. Harry, who is just a minor character in the book, and his new wife Prissy are just two of the five boarders living in Thorpe’s house. Two of the university’s night watchmen are brutally murdered and decapitated. Word spreads around the university and to Thorpe Trove who then begins his own amateur investigation. He begins making tape recordings of the different graduate students and the staff at the university. The novel is structured into different “chapters” with the title of each chapter a character’s name and the session number. Every other chapter has the initials T.T. for Thorpe Trove and those are Thorpe’s accounts and reflections on the case and his own life. As Mark Charney said, the book is satirizing a murder mystery, only Hannah puts a southern gothic spin on it. The opening lines of *Nightwatchmen* show Hannah having fun with his take on the genre form:

I thought of Mother and Dad when I heard about Conrad. Conrad was murdered and beheaded, with no money taken from his pants, in 1969. Mother and Dad were slain and thrown in a ditch in 1944. If I had been with them I’d have been in the ditch too. (Hannah 3)

There is almost no finesse in these first few sentences and yet it comes off as satirical, maybe even as parody. Where I disagree with Mark Charney is in the evaluation of the language in *Nightwatchmen*. Charney says:

Although Hannah's experimentation with perspective in *Nightwatchmen* lacks the strength and humor of his language in *Rex*, he does explore with finesse and insight the irony implicit in the lack of communication that often accompanies higher education. (Charney 19)

Contrary to Charney's estimation of Hannah's language, *Nightwatchmen* is full of the same brevity and madness of *Geronimo Rex*. The humor, I am willing to admit is different. While readers laugh at the absolute desperateness of Harry Monroe's fantasies in *Geronimo Rex*, I think having absolute grotesque events in *Nightwatchmen* warrants a darker sense of humor from the reader. Thorpe Trove, the awkward effeminate self-proclaimed lothario, is a walking joke. His hair is bright orange and curly and he wears thick rimmed purple glasses. His voice also leads many, in Thorpe's mind, to suspect that he is homosexual. Of course the humor comes from the fact that this grotesque character professes sexual longings and desires as if he were in a position to have such preferences. In a scene where Thorpe is describing his search for the perfect woman he reminisces with the same amount of ecstasy that Harry does in *Geronimo Rex*:

I was eighteen. My word I was all for boozing and cunting, just like the next man!...I began to search for beautiful solitary girls...I desired them. In point of fact I wanted to marry one of them, right off. I was hysterically pleased to discover, in my first drunken state, that I was not a queer: here I was, almost ravenous for a lady. The proof!...All the girls were escorted, however. All I could do was stroll (or reel) by them with a cunning expression of lust on my face...Ah how this college autumn hurt a body. (Hannah 5)

Thorpe Trove's statements come off as ridiculous and they are meant to be, to a certain degree, but he still wants some kind of sympathy from us because of his background and appearance. It is his behavior and attitude towards women that make it difficult. Trove is who he is because he had to grow up fast and figure out the world largely for himself. Where he achieves some sort of redemption with us is later in the passage when he reflects on meeting two women and his purpose for meeting these women:

I had two girl friends who were Lesbians, my only two friends, actually. They were in graduate school and had picked me up outside the Lyceum the previous spring... We walked over to William Faulkner's house one evening and wee-weed on his lawn... Perhaps I was supposed to enjoy these mute feuds, perhaps I was supposed to be being taught something from them, but I wasn't. I had no idea why the two of them picked me up. The simple lurking fact for me was that no one else around could stand me to even *be*. (Hannah 5)

Thorpe's vulnerability quickly spirals out of control once he catches the women spending more time with each other rather than with him. They have bought a new car without him and his troubled past shows in his contempt for them and his use of sexist-homophobic language: "Twats! Mouths! Evil women! Evil, queer, secret evil kissers!...Lickers!" (Hannah 6). Walking joke though he may be, Thorpe Trove is still one of the most fleshed out and complicated characters Hannah created. After the identity of "the Knocker" and "the Killer" are revealed, Thorpe goes on to live in isolation in his big mansion away from the world.

Aesthetically, *Nightwatchmen* is a farther cry from *Geronimo Rex* than critics have said. I do not think the novel is a "bildungsroman" as Ruth Weston has suggested

nor do I think that it is a complete failure. As a satire of the murder mystery genre and of academic life I think it succeeds. In a later interview with Louis Bourgeois, a few years before his death, Hannah expressed more optimism about his second novel:

I'd like to rewrite my second book, *Nightwatchmen* because I wrote it under hurried circumstance on the heels of my first book. It had no editing, and with just a few changes on the order of less-equals-more it could be a fine book, I think. (Bourgeois 215)

Less equals more is an understatement when describing Hannah's third novel *Ray*. At 113 pages with 62 chapters the novel is a masterpiece. At face value one may not recognize that the author of *Geronimo Rex* and *Ray* are indeed the same person. Hannah completely abandons his long-winded rhetorical style, picked up from Henry Miller and Jack Kerouac, for economical prose that simply astonishes and appears to come out of nowhere. Dr. Raymond Forrest is the protagonist/narrator/author of the novel. The novel opens up with Ray in a hospital, only this time he is a patient, not the doctor:

Ray is thirty-three and he was born of decent religious, I say.

Ray, I didn't ever think it would get to this...

Ray, you are a doctor and you are in a hospital in Mobile, except now you are a patient but you're still me. Say what? You say you want to know who I am? (Hannah 3)

Hannah creates a new literary aesthetic with *Ray*. While Harry Monroe is an "alter ego" and Thorpe Trove is just a fictional character, Ray is a whole other creation. Ray appears to be like Hannah had Hannah become a doctor as he had originally planned. When he was a junior in college Hannah was Pre-Med. It was then that he had a sort of "religious

conversion” to literature. Ray is the same age Hannah was when he wrote the book. He also has three children with the same names as Hannah’s. Even Ray’s parents have the same name as Hannah’s parents. However, there are major differences between Hannah and Ray that allow Hannah to explore the self more than Kerouac or Miller. Ray, unlike Hannah, is a Vietnam veteran. He is a pilot who fights alongside Hannah’s real childhood friend John Quisenberry, who was an actual pilot in Vietnam. Ray also has a relationship with a young woman named Sister Hooch who is not his wife. Ray’s wife, Westy, is, I believe, modeled on Hannah’s actual second wife. The basic story is that Ray is talking. Perhaps he is still in the hospital talking to some kind of professional. We can’t really be sure because Hannah does not tell us. Another theory is that we are reading Ray’s epic poem and that the ultimate conclusion of the novel is that Ray has finally become a poet. He has triumphed just as Hannah feels he did by choosing literature over medicine. By not making the narrator a nameless substitute for the author and by not creating an alter ego, Hannah really does create an original narrative technique. The short “chapters,” some of which are only one sentence, also lend themselves to Hannah’s ambitious idea. The short chapters are aphoristic as well as poetic. Coming from Ray’s voice the novel’s structure lends itself to many possibilities: an epic poem, a collection of poems or a monologue. These possibilities give the novel a quasi-metafictional quality that creates its own reality. Other than in his short stories, Hannah never again achieved this insight and originality in his fiction.

In one of the first scenes in the novel Ray meets Sister alone, crying by railroad tracks where two of her lovers have died in an accident. Ray begins a relationship with her but also with her family, the Hooches. Other than Sister, Ray spends the most time

with her father Mr. Hooch, who is a poet. He is not a professor and has no education. In fact the novel suggests that Mr. Hooch is unemployed. Ray admires him for this and also is envious because of his own inadequacy as a poet:

When I think I'm doing good, I have to come over and see that I'm not even in the contest. In fact I have put the old fart in contact with an English prof at the school, who's also a poet. It seems that the *Collected Poems* of J. Hooch are going to be a published fucking reality. (Hannah 111)

Ray digresses from his own life to talk about his friend Charlie DeSoto who is a direct descendent of the Spanish conquistador who discovered the Mississippi River. Hernando de Soto, Charlie's ancestor, met with the Native American chief Tuskaloosa and was present at the time of Tuskaloosa's death. The history is appropriate because the novel takes place in Tuscaloosa, Alabama where Hannah was teaching at the time. Ray's fantasies, unlike Harry Monroe and Thorpe Trove's, take him to back in time to the Vietnam War as well as to the American Civil War. In the fourth "chapter" Ray begins narrating his experience as a Confederate Captain:

We have come up in a meadow, all five hundred horses. We are in the Maryland hills and three hundred yards in front of us are the Federals, about fifty of them in skirmish line. What they can't see are the five Napoleon howitzers behind us.

Jeb Stuart is as weary as the rest of us, but he calls for sabers out. Our uniforms are rotting off us. It's so hot and this gray cloth is so hot. There is a creek behind us. I dismount and we send the orderlies back to the horses and

me...I would prefer not to fight them, but I can see they've rolled in a cannon and mean business.

Thing is, all the blue boys are going to die...

Stuart says to me, "Hold two hundred horses with you, Captain. Let us start the cannons and I will go forward."

Then we kissed each other, as men who are about to die...

Then the banjo player came up and we drank their coffee and ate the steaks on the fires. We threw earth over the dead. Stuart went out in the forest and wept.

Then all of us slept. Too many dead.

Let us hie to Virginia, let us flee.

I fell asleep with the banjo music in my head and I dreamed of two whores sucking me. (Hannah 39-41)

Ray also fantasizes that he is back in Vietnam as a pilot. The chaotic fragmentation of the novel lends itself to the abrupt change in setting as well as Ray's possible mental damage from the war. At the beginning of a new "chapter" Ray seems to resist going back to his imagination:

Oh, help me! I am losing myself in two centuries and two wars.

The SAM missile came up, the heat-seeker. It stood up in front of me like a dick at twenty thousand feet, and the squadron captain told me what the hell was going on...

Then when Quisenberry was down on the beach and the gooks were running out to capture my friend from Mississippi, I slowed it down and

turned the nose of that Phantom almost perpendicular to the ground. I used the cannons and missiles to clean them away. I saw their heads fly off and their chests...

I am very proud of the things I did for my country. I fought for the trees, the women...etc. (Hannah 45-46)

Hannah's use of time-travel and Ray's curious continual third-person references to himself are the source of the novel's originality. It is precisely this narrative technique that led to Hannah's "postmodern" label. However, Hannah resisted the name at all costs. He told Don Swaim:

I've been called postmodernist because I take a lot of freedom with form, but a postmodernist is generally provoking the audience and laughing at the whole idea of narrative and satirizing in almost every sentence. I don't like that. I like to believe a story. I don't like to hear a coy writer behind it, manipulating things, at all. So I'm very against the notion of hyperfiction. (Swaim 90)

Indeed, *Ray* is Hannah's most ambitious work of fiction and, in terms of originality, the most successful. Though *Ray* is as intellectually interesting as it is challenging, Hannah stays true to his philosophy and *Ray* is pure story. About halfway through the novel we get a chapter whose lines are the following: "Now I guess I should give you swaying trees and the rare geometry of cows in the meadow or the like—to break it up. But, sorry, me and this one are over" (Hannah 81). This "experimentation" in *Ray* comes naturally out of Ray's voice. Although he is aware that we are listening to his story or reading his "book," and lets us know he knows, it is not done cheaply. The effect is not achieved through the mere fact that Ray is breaking the fourth wall and becoming

self-aware as a character and an author, but rather it is achieved through the satiric irony that Hannah is using. This is Ray's story and he is telling it with genuine sincerity. Because Ray is a "poet" he, like Hannah, takes freedom with form. Ray's saying that he should break up the novel for pace is Ray being ironic, but by saying he should break it up, he ends up doing just that—just not the way the reader expects. The effect of Hannah's use of satiric irony can be felt in almost all of the aphoristic chapters in the novel. The effect is stronger when we remember that this is Hannah's novel about Ray. When asked by John Griffin Jones whether he was trying to explore a "new form of fiction" with *Ray*, Hannah said:

Yes. It's not a literary man writing it, although he wants to be literary very much. He wants to write good poetry. But he is at the edge of madness sometimes, you know?...So I was trying to get that. If it was experimental, that's what I was trying to get. And then sometimes rather longish reflections. But it breaks it up. (Jones 28)

In the same interview Hannah expanded more on *Ray*'s originality: "Ray is awfully short...It itself has been called poetic" (Jones 8). Later with Jan Gretlund he explained a bit more:

I like the ideal of poetry, but I like narrative even more. Poetry finally is too confining, and I like the looser environs...in my fiction I practice it per sentence. I don't like a bad sentence...It's got to go with the music of the paragraph...Some of the critics talked about *Ray* as a long poem. (Gretlund 37)

The brilliance in execution is the reason that we get originality and not the presence of the “coy” writer, whether it is Hannah or Ray.

Sex and sexual frankness also play a big part in the novel. Hannah obviously picks this up from Henry Miller. When John Griffin Jones asked Hannah about the “lewdness” in *Ray* Hannah said:

...it’s not pornographic. Pornography is contrived to elicit masturbation mainly. I don’t think my work is like that. Ray enjoys sex very much, he celebrates it. I think there is a very solid tradition there, if there’s got to be one, in Walt Whitman. It’s part of life, and if you don’t want to look at it you’re a liar. And you might be embarrassed if it’s on the page, but, my God, it’s there, and if you deny it you’re cheating yourself. (Jones 23)

In another interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, Hannah answered the same question with:

You know, I’ve never understood why people always ask me why there’s so much sex in my books. It is a major part of my writing because sex is a major part of all our lives...I’m not so sure about the philosophy of sex, but I don’t know anybody who doesn’t enjoy sex in one way or another...It’s fun. It also confirms the feeling that somebody else loves you...So I don’t understand why people feel uncomfortable about sex in my books...With a character like Ray, sex is something to be celebrated. (McCaffery-Gregory 72)

Hannah writes about sex with the exuberance that is appropriate and required. According to Hannah wild ecstasy needs wild prose. “I count on basic honesty and a hot moment,”

he told Jan Gretlund. This has been the catalyst for Hannah's continued originality in prose.

It is not just sexual exuberance that Hannah believes in. Reading anything by Barry Hannah is an experience. You're more likely to remember one of his sentences more than almost any one else writing today. He told Daniel E. Williams in an interview: "I want something marvelous to come out of my fiction. I expect wild ecstasy when I'm writing" (Williams 200). This is indeed what we get throughout Hannah's fiction and in *Ray* in particular.

Finally, after he has gotten over Sister's death and come to terms with Mr. Hooch's superior poetic talent, Ray leaves us with a vision that could be seen as ambiguous had Hannah not provided the answer. Ray ends with the following vision:

And you can see how my poetry is improving.

I'm climbing the high oak of learning.

I'm feeling the old force of yearning.

Hoo! Ray! Fucking Ray! Ray in the fourth decade!

Ray, yes, Ray! Doctor Ray is okay!

Charlie DeSoto and Eileen are together again. The nurses are getting married. Westy is coming with the hot oils and the balm. The Alabama team is still whipping everybody in sight. My patients are calling. Bill is getting ready to fish. Elizabeth is looking in the Holy Bible. Mr. Hooch has his hands on a pencil.

Sister!

Christians!

Sabers, gentlemen, sabers! (Hannah 113)

Indeed, what a vision it is. The poetic incantatory rhythm building in the last paragraph finally gives way to three notes, each note a little longer than the previous one. Ray's final notes take him back so he ends in triumph at the Civil War. Not literal triumph over the Union, of course, but the triumph of a possible better future. Hannah told John Griffin Jones the significance of the ending, "That last part is a dream you know, like 'Imagine,' Lennon's song. Imagine. I don't know if I did it right, but he goes into a dream state there" (Jones 26). Although Ray is dreaming, consciously or unconsciously, he knows well what he has to do. His life is not in order and he still has a lot of growing ahead of him, but he will fight on with sabers up.

Ray is, perhaps also with *Airships*, Hannah's most celebrated work and as previously stated his most original. Yet for all its originality it didn't receive any recognition beyond glowing reviews from critics and reviewers. Hannah has been nominated for the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize, but neither of those was for *Ray*. Nevertheless *Ray* is his masterpiece and is so, I believe, because it was written under great personal turmoil. The two years between *Airships* and *Ray* were two of the worst for Hannah. His alcoholism was so out of control that it lost him his wife and his job. Hannah's friend, the artist Glennray Tutor, recalls Hannah's behavior at that time:

Barry's agonies kept coming up. The agony of his divorce. The agony of finishing the proofs of *Ray*...And other agonies. I couldn't help him...

I had never seen anyone drink the way Barry drank: starting when he awoke for the day...Eventually he emptied Louis's liquor cabinet, including

the liqueurs. Barry's father had to come and take him back to their family home in Clinton...I had never heard a son say, "Fuck you," to his father.

(Tutor 167)

The author Brad Watson, a former student and friend of Hannah's, recalls similar events during that time:

When Barry was working on...*Ray*, he practiced some kind of literary voodoo...He would become Ray, call himself Ray, use himself to get at Ray, when he was combining writing with drinking...

...Barry finally overdid it...He'd taken to hanging out with a couple of...sycophants, staying out all night. Barry said they'd been shooting his Ruger .22 semi-auto pistol...He said they decided they were fed up...and were going to end it, put one through the temple. He...pulled the Ruger from his belt, handed it to me, and asked if I didn't want to go first. I declined.

(Watson 186-187)

Of course there are many things that Hannah did or didn't really do in Tuscaloosa. His hard-drinking-pistol carrying days are still myths and legends around the area, but at the root of these myths are very ugly truths. Hannah suffered in Tuscaloosa and made others suffer with him. He apparently fell asleep in his car with his top down during a rainstorm and then shot holes in the floorboards to drain it. He claimed he was arrested for reckless endangerment for firing a pistol in his front lawn to get his wife's attention. He also, apparently, shot a cross bow through the Dean's, or someone else's, front door. Of course the crowning jewel of Hannah's lore, although steeped in some fact, was the "pistol thing," for which he was subsequently fired from the University of Alabama. My

aforementioned professor's story was a rendering of the incident, although no one really knows what happened. Even Hannah has given various accounts of the incident. Perhaps the most probable one comes from his *Paris Review* interview. When asked by interviewer Lacey Galbraith about the incident Hannah said:

Yes, I was a tenured professor there, and I was fired. I had just been voted in, but I was too heavily into drinking. I was holding class at home or in my studio and they said, Don't hold anymore classes in your studio. And I said, Well, I will. I brought in an empty pistol once and, as I recall, twirled the chambers to explain six movements in a short story. And that is where the gun—pointing a gun at a student—rumor started, but I never pointed a loaded gun at anybody in my life. Even dead drunk. Never, never. (Galbraith 63)

At some point during all of this drunken behavior Hannah had moved out of his nice brick Tudor house into a little green shack by some railroad tracks. It was in this shack that Hannah worked on and eventually finished *Ray*. This is a period that Hannah doesn't mind discussing in his later interviews and in fact it is probably one of the more important factors to understanding *Ray*'s fragmented and original style.

Mark Charney, in his book *Barry Hannah*, says:

The experimental structure of *Ray*, then, attempts not only to delineate the thought processes of a doctor facing a crisis of the self, but also to describe Hannah's own inability to make sense of reality during one of the more emotionally stressful periods of his life. (Charney 43)

Charney sums it up quite nicely. However, this is not the whole story. Yes, while one function of the novel is delineation, another, more important one, is invention. He told R.

Vanarsdall in an interview: “When *Ray* is good I think it hits a new kind of logic...” (Vanarsdall 53). Hannah was not completely drunk out of his mind while writing *Ray*. He had a clear vision of what he wanted to do with this book. In fact, he allegedly threw out about four hundred pages of the manuscript while editing. When further discussing the “new logic” in *Ray* Hannah told the *Paris Review*:

Hardly anybody is in the moment...The past is never over, you’re still in it; or you’re projecting yourself into the future. So there’s hardly room for a present. *Ray* was supposed to answer that.

...I was trying to skip logic, trying to make time and place and space move quickly. *Real* quickly...I still love just a holler right in the middle of an ongoing narrative. Pain or joy, ecstasy. (Galbraith 55-56)

Along with Hannah’s new logic comes his unusual narrative technique, which is the driving force behind the novel’s originality. Mark Charney’s comments on Hannah’s technique in *Ray* are pretty close to perfect, he says:

To trace the associational process of Ray’s memory and to stress his dual roles as narrator and subject, Hannah uses both first-and third-person narration. This technique gives Ray the freedom to recount his own interpretation of specific choices that make up his life, but also allows enough distance for Hannah to clarify the irony in Ray’s decisions and machinations; in other words, in first person Ray admonishes the reader and chastises himself, while in third person he attempts to separate himself from his life in order to analyze it objectively. (Charney 43)

While Charney's evaluation is probably the best, he is still missing something. Ray's self-consciousness and self-awareness come out of the fact that Ray is writing, or telling, the story. The great ambiguity of it all stems from the fact that Ray's fantasies or memories are never quite distinguishable. We can never be sure if Ray is telling us a story, suffering a breakdown or trying to write good poetry. This complicated narrative prevents the novel from being just an ordinary story about a self-destructive doctor.

Ruth Weston, in her book *Barry Hannah: Postmodern Romantic*, also comments on *Ray*'s structure. She says:

For a person reading Hannah in the order of publication, even the astonishing stories of *Airships* might not provide proper warning for *Ray*, a novella that careens from one perspective to another, one war to another, one century to another...Ray is a physician and a former pilot who served in Vietnam...he is also a patient—an alcoholic—who introduces himself to himself...(Weston 94-95)

Weston goes on to praise Hannah's masterpiece by citing its originality and difference from his first two novels. Where I disagree with Weston is her insistence that *Ray* is a "postmodern" novel and a work of "surfiction." As previously noted Hannah was very much aware of and against the notion of his work as postmodernism. He told Wells Tower, "*Postmodern* is a very flat, meaningless term to me. I'm nothing like John Barth or Robert Coover. I don't like games about writing" (Tower 229). Similarly he told Don Swaim in an interview that: "There's so much headwork in postmodernism. It reminds me of jaded graduate teachers. I mean, it's donnish, and it's coy, and I just can't bear the attitude" (Swaim 90). Weston's characterization comes from Raymond Federman's

theory of Surficion. Weston defines Federman's theory as "fiction 'that reveals man's irrationality rather than man's rationality'" (Weston 97). While it may be argued and perhaps even true that Ray is irrational, especially during his fantasies, it is, once again, not the whole story. The majority of the novel is Ray being quite rational. It is only in his rationality that Ray can love and lose as well as come to terms with, and write/tell about, his follies as a man. Weston, although she mentions him, would be better off using Ronald Sukenick's definition of "surficion." While the term is attributed to Federman, Sukenick did have a better definition in my opinion. Rather than dealing with man's rationality and irrationality, Sukenick "defines surficion as disruptive and subversive, its form 'an object of invention...[and] a dynamic rather than an inert element of composition'" (Weston 97). While perhaps still a bit formulaic, Sukenick's definition of Federman's theory emphasizes the aesthetic idea that invention is essential to all original literature.

III. BARRY HANNAH: THE CRITICS' CHOICE

While Mark Charney and Ruth Weston are probably the most astute critics and assessors of Hannah's work, other critics seem to misunderstand Hannah and *Ray*.

Thomas Bjerre, in his essay "Heroism and the Changing Face of American Manhood in Barry Hannah's Fiction," says:

...Ray is a disturbingly unreliable narrator: like his story about stealing a Learjet and crashing it, his tales of sexual conquests may amount to little more than male fantasies.

...The sad irony is that Ray recognizes the painful split in his character between tranquility and violence, but blames it on history...Until he learns to let go of culturally ingrained masculine ideas, Ray will always oscillate between moments of insightful tranquility and bursts of violence. (Bjerre 53-54)

Of course Ray is an "unreliable narrator." That is the point. As previously stated this is Ray's book/story and Ray is the author as well as the narrator. Ray's "male fantasies" are not just a means to elicit escape and/or pleasure, but rather they are ways in which Ray copes with the stresses of his life. They are also literary devices that Ray (Hannah) uses in his story to describe the chaos of his life, which are his war experiences, his separation from his wife and his feeling of inadequacy as a poet. Also I don't believe Ray "blames" history. He embraces his history. He knows who he is and where he comes from, but most importantly he knows who he wants to be and is trying to get there by means of poetry/the book we are reading.

Similarly James B. Potts III also seems to miss the point. In his essay “This Shade of Faulkner’s Horse: Cavalier Heroism and Archetypal Immortality in Barry Hannah’s Postmodern South” Potts says:

Ray’s internal struggle for individuation is terribly harsh: on the one hand he misunderstands *eros* and interaction with women, which he reduces to “fucking,” and on the other hand he is drawn to *thanatos*-slaughter. In his chaos, there is little in between. (Potts 76)

Ray does not mistake “*eros*,” or love, for “fucking.” They go hand in hand for Ray. As Hannah previously said, Ray celebrates sex and even though Ray has many sexual encounters with women who are not his wife it does not diminish their importance to Ray. Ray loves with all his body and soul and we know Ray is wrong in his feelings, but Ray believes them to be true in the moment. In a particularly tender passage that is not full of sexually explicit detail Ray is writing to his stepson. In a flash of vulnerability Ray, and possibly Hannah, gives us an apology of sorts, an acknowledgment of his bad behavior:

There will never be, stepson, another person that I have respected and loved as much as you.

Your stepfather will not fall down. Your stepdad Ray has created abuse and horrors in the house because of him and drink. I wasn’t born straight. God gave me a hundred-and-fifty IQ and perfect pitch on instruments...

You, boy, will travel with beauty. Not just righteousness, which is easy, but beauty too. I saw you at Murrah move like a genius...

Never be cruel, weird, or abusive.

I promise not to take a jet anymore.

I love your mother.

Amy, Bobby, too. (Hannah 91)

Just as we are allowed to be wrong about certain feelings so is Ray. I do agree with Potts when he rightly states that “Ray finally turns to art in order to create something enduring: he becomes a poet” (Potts 77). Indeed *Ray* does endure and that is all Ray hopes for.

Another critic, Martyn Bone, in his essay “Neo-Confederate Narrative and Postmodern Parody: Hannah and Faulkner” says:

Of course, Ray Forrest is not really “here” on the battle field with Stuart at all, and his post-Vietnam trauma is such that he hardly knows where he is... Though Ray is, at best, confused about fighting with Jeb Stuart’s cavalry, his narrative yet rings true by suggesting the grim historical continuities between the two wars. (Bone 96)

I agree, I believe Ray’s war experiences account for his overactive imagination and obviously Ray being southern would have knowledge of the sense of defeat from the two wars. However, once again, Bone doesn’t seem to acknowledge Ray’s story. In other words Bone doesn’t seem to see the layers of narrative as I have suggested previously. Ray is anything but confused and his ability to draw “continuities” between the two wars suggests quite the opposite. Ray’s faculties are full and his imagination illuminating.

Similarly, Matthew Shipe, in his essay “Accountability, Community, and Redemption in *Hey Jack!* and *Boomerang*,” says:

Homer’s preoccupation with others differentiates him from his predecessor Ray Forrest, whose tendency to refer to himself in the third person signals not

only that he is mentally unstable but also that he remains narcissistically self-centered throughout his narrative. (Shipe 111)

While the focus of Shipe's essay is on novels subsequent to *Ray*, his limited evaluation of *Ray* warrants comment. Of course Ray is "narcissistically self-centered" in his own story where he is the narrator/protagonist. Shipe also fails to see that *Ray* is far more ambitious, and therefore more complicated, than both *Hey Jack!* and *Boomerang*. His dismissal of *Ray* as somehow inferior to the subsequent novels is questionable at best.

What Hannah achieved with *Ray* is something not many writers achieve. Through personal turmoil and agony Hannah reinvented himself and put everything on the page and produced a masterpiece. One hopes that *Ray*'s reputation will improve and lazy readings will be published less often.

In an attempt to render the chaos of *Ray* I am going to discuss two of my favorite literary critics, Harold Bloom and Ronald Sukenick. I will use their theories to try to help me discuss *Ray* as a truly transformative work of fiction. While Bloom and Sukenick are different critics, they both seem to have the same criteria for deeming a work of literature original: innovation and invention. Bloom sees himself as a critical descendant of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walter Pater and Dr. Samuel Johnson. This is why I intend to use Harold Bloom as a sort of critical template, a theoretical benchmark. Sukenick's credentials come from the fact that he is a fiction writer as well as a literary critic. I intend to use Sukenick as a kind of antidote to Bloom's seemingly elitist canon. However, I will point out that both critics, while seeming to present evidence that a writer like Barry Hannah (and a book like *Ray*) could pass their tests on what makes a writer and their work great, ignore Hannah and his masterpiece.

Bloom is a force to be reckoned with. Born in the South Bronx to Russian Jewish immigrants, Harold Bloom was born to be a literary critic. Raised in an all Yiddish-speaking house in an all Yiddish-speaking neighborhood, Bloom learned to read Hebrew by age three, Yiddish by age four, and taught himself English by age five. By the time he graduated from high school he had read the Bronx Public Library and while he was an undergraduate at Cornell he proceeded to read that library as well. Bloom received an M.A. and a PhD from Yale at the age of twenty-five. Since earning his degrees Bloom has been teaching at Yale and writing books, one of which is called *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. One of the better essays in that book is called "Walt Whitman as Center of the American Canon." In Bloom's essay he begins by placing America in perspective with the Western tradition of the arts. Bloom begins:

If one attempts to list the artistic achievements of our nation against the background of Western tradition, our accomplishments in music, painting, sculpture, architecture tend to be somewhat dwarfed. It is not a question of using Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven as the standard; Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and Bartok are more than enough to place our composers in a somewhat sad perspective. And whatever the splendors of modern American painting and sculpture, there has been no Matisse among us. The exception is in literature.

(Bloom 264)

Bloom claims that no poet or fiction writer in the Western tradition in the last hundred and fifty years has rivaled Walt Whitman. Since Whitman, Bloom argues, American writers have been among the leaders in creating great literature. According to Bloom: Frost, Stevens, Eliot and Hart Crane can easily stand next to Yeats, Rilke, Neruda, and

Valery. Similarly, for Bloom, Melville can stand with Tolstoy and Faulkner with Joyce. However, it is Whitman and especially the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* achieve greatness for Bloom. After Shakespeare, Bloom deems Whitman as perhaps the most original imaginative writer in any language. Bloom writes “To find [Whitman’s] aesthetic equivalent in the West one must go back to Goethe, Blake, Wordsworth, Holderlin, Shelley, and Keats” (Bloom 265). Bloom goes on to identify Whitman’s worthy disciples, which are Eliot, Stevens, Hart Crane, D.H. Lawrence and John Ashbery. This is the general tone of the essay: however, if one listens to Bloom’s criteria, as well as look at his vast reading list at the end of the book, one finds inconsistencies. The biggest one that I am addressing is, of course, Bloom’s negation of Barry Hannah. All of the characteristics that Bloom attributes to Whitman, and other “original” writers, could be said about Hannah. When he is describing the significance of Whitman’s debut Bloom begins:

If someone in 1855 had announced that the canonical American writer had just appeared with a book called *Leaves of Grass*, rather awkwardly printed and with no subject except himself, we might have expressed a modest skepticism. That our national poet should be an egotistical onanist, who proclaimed his own divinity in a series of untitled, unrhymed, apparently prosy verses, would probably have moved us to amiable pity at best. (Bloom 273)

The same thing could be said, in my opinion, about *Ray*. *Ray* is certainly a little book full of ego and little else. While Ray doesn’t quite proclaim his own divinity per se, he certainly feels that he is worthy of immortality, which is why he is writing his book.

Chapter five of the novel is Ray saying, “I live in so many centuries. Everybody is still alive” (Hannah 41). Through his book or story he will explore the many selves of himself, in the present and yet in the past and future seemingly all at once.

As previously stated, Bloom has a reading list at the end of his book and the list includes every major southern writer: Twain, Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, Tennessee Williams, Eudora Welty, Truman Capote, Walker Percy, William Styron and Cormac McCarthy. Bloom even includes a few lesser-known writers such as Henry Green, Lawrence Durrell, Henry Roth and Flann O’Brien, but no Barry Hannah. This is not the only fault in Bloom’s canon. His negation of E.M. Cioran, Juan Rulfo and of course Henry Miller and Jack Kerouac are puzzling to say the least. One wonders why they didn’t make the cut. Cioran’s aphoristic and originally structured books are perhaps the most entertaining books on philosophy since Nietzsche’s and Rulfo’s *Pedro Paramo* is, perhaps, responsible for all of the Latin American literature that followed. Perhaps Kerouac’s seemingly effortless prose style and Miller’s liberal use of profanity has something to do with it. Perhaps these monikers, in one way or another, make Bloom somewhat uncomfortable. This is a subject that Bloom addresses in his essay. When discussing Whitman’s poem “The Sleepers” and how in the poem Whitman investigates “the mystery of Incarnation,” Bloom appropriates Whitman’s definition not as literal incarnation but “in which the man-god and the poetical character merge” (Bloom 267). Bloom then goes on to say “I think that critics generally do not discuss it because it embarrasses them, just as Whitman’s frank autoeroticism is difficult to discuss” (Bloom 267). Frank sexuality as well as liberal use of profanity may be difficult to discuss for some critics, but not for Bloom. It appears that frank discussion of sexuality and liberal

use of profanity, perhaps, just didn't interest him and therefore he deems it inferior to high language and poetry. Nevertheless Bloom still seems to find great things in Whitman that I believe could also be attributed to Hannah's novel *Ray*. When addressing what he calls Whitman's soul, he says:

By the soul, Whitman means character or ethos as opposed to the self, by which he means personality or pathos. Character *acts*, but personality *suffers*, even if it is the pleasurable suffering of passion, high or low. So when Whitman writes "my soul" he means his own dark side, the estranged or alienated component in his nature. When he writes "my self," as in the title, *Song of Myself*, he means what he calls Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, palpably an aggressive male.

... The Whitmanian soul is unknown nature, a kind of blank, while the rough self is a persona or mask, an endlessly shifting series of identifications.
(Bloom 271)

This could also easily apply to *Ray*. Ray is a "series of identifications" all at once. He is a Civil War Captain, a former Vietnam War pilot, a poet, a literary character and, of course, a doctor. While Whitman's persona-poet identification probably can't be attributed to Hannah per se, it certainly applies to Miller and Kerouac. In fact, as previously stated, Miller and Kerouac discover this through Whitman. Both writers are themselves the protagonist/personas of their fiction. It was this very idea that Hannah himself started to adopt in *Geronimo Rex*, but smartly abandoned for broader horizons.

Another part of the essay deals with Whitman's supposed lack of wisdom. Bloom says that even though Emerson was perhaps the largest influence on Whitman he, unlike Emerson, has no deliberate wisdom to share with us. Bloom says:

Emerson is a wisdom writer, like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Freud, and his precursor Montaigne. Prudentially shrewd, Whitman has no wisdom to import, and we do not miss it. He gives us his torment and his division and the weird faculty of a self that is both the knower and the known. (Bloom 277)

Ray is "the knower and the known" of *Ray*. There is absolutely no other subject matter in the book other than Ray. Bloom provides some insight into this formula used by Hannah, Kerouac, Miller and many other American writers and poets:

Celebration and anguish coexist in many superb poets, but self-celebration and self-anguish are a startling, ever-present juxtaposition in Whitman. Elegies for the self are the characteristic genre of American poetry because of Whitman's example; the puzzle is not why Whitman invented the mode, but why it was so inevitably transmitted after him. (Bloom 285)

Whether Bloom likes it or not Whitman, as our national poet, is responsible for the poets and writers who, following his example, found ways of expressing themselves by way of themselves. This includes Henry Miller and Jack Kerouac who by way of their own poetic-personas broke at least some new ground and influenced practically every fiction writer who came after, especially Barry Hannah and his novel *Ray*.

While Bloom's canon may be seen as elitist, and ignoring the so-called underground writers, Ronald Sukenick acts as a kind of antidote. Ronald Sukenick, who is also not on Bloom's list, was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York and also went to

Cornell University, right after Bloom, where he was a student of Vladimir Nabokov and classmates with Thomas Pynchon. Sukenick then earned an M.A. and a PhD from Brandeis, but had little ambition to be a literary critic. Sukenick wanted to be a fiction writer, which he was primarily. His fiction also puts him in the tradition of Whitman, Miller and Kerouac. Which is probably why, other than Laurence Sterne and Wallace Stevens, they seem to come up most in his criticism. While Sukenick is the author of nine novels and two short story collections he is perhaps better known as a literary critic. While his first book of criticism, *Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure*, was an extension of his dissertation and really just a guide to Stevens' poetry, it is his second book of criticism, *In Form: Digressions on the Act of Fiction*, which cements his stature as an original literary critic.

In Sukenick's book *In Form: Digressions on the Act of Fiction* he lays out his agenda. In the beginning of the Preface Sukenick says:

What follows are the comments of a fiction writer about writing, not those of a critic on what has been written. They are more or less reports on experience—that of one engaged in an ongoing struggle with the angel of form, rather than of one studying its consequences from a cool distance: “in form,” not “on form”... The last thing I want is to burden myself with a formal theory to replace the kind of thinking that must occur in and through the creative work. (Sukenick ix)

Sukenick feels that he is in a unique position. By writing a book of criticism from the point of view of a fiction writer he will gather an insight not afforded to the average literary critic, Bloom included. Sukenick continues in the Preface: “In contemporary

work important to me, form is not a given but an object of invention, part of the content and, like it, determined only in composition” (Sukenick ix). One hears echoes of Bloom’s aesthetic and certainly Sukenick has the utmost respect for Bloom. In fact concerning Bloom he says, “Bloom’s criticism is, like Stevens’s poetry, itself a record of a mind in motion...What Bloom is presenting to us is the intriguing example of a critical intelligence in process of thinking like a poetic intelligence (Sukenick 233). However as Sukenick concludes his Preface he makes his stance clear:

This is not to reduce the importance of writers writing about their art. On the contrary, such writing must take precedence over more formal criticism since it must be part of the subject of that criticism...Further, it can be argued from the seminal effect of the best writer’s criticism (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Eliot, James, Stein, etc.) that the kind of theory about composition that concerns writers has an authority beyond the theory of interpretation that concerns critics. (Sukenick x)

Sukenick goes on to say that literary critics have a different way of thinking about literature and that they can’t and shouldn’t think like artists. Artist on art serves one purpose while critics on art serves another purpose. Neither of which really succeed one another, according to Sukenick.

In the final section of the book titled “Innovative Fiction/Innovative Criteria” Sukenick says:

Properly speaking, there is no such thing as “innovative fiction.” The novel *is* innovation—its not called the “novel” for nothing. Fiction is the most fluid and changing of literary forms, the one that most immediately reflects

the changes in our collective consciousness, and in fact that is one of its great virtues. As soon as fiction gets frozen into one particular model, it loses that responsiveness to our immediate experience that is its hallmark. (Sukenick 241)

Largely what he is getting at here is that originality and inventiveness in writing must come out of necessity and not out of trend. This is precisely why, out of all of the “postmodernists,” Barry Hannah’s syntactic inventions stand out. They seem to have been born out of necessity. Sukenick’s sense of aesthetics is certainly more inclusive than Bloom’s but Sukenick, like Bloom, still comes up short. In a section of the book titled “Fiction in the Seventies” Sukenick attempts to put his finger on the pulse of contemporary American fiction. While he seemingly goes out of his way to name more unknown writers than most literary critics, his selection is still biased and negligent. His list of the most important writers of the seventies includes: Raymond Federman, Clarence Major, Ishmael Reed, Steve Katz, Russell Banks, Jonathan Baumbach and Robert Coover. Most of his list belong to the Fiction Collective, a publishing house founded by Sukenick, Federman, Baumbach, Major and Katz to name a few. Nowhere in his book does he mention Barry Hannah, whose *Geronimo Rex* and *Airships* are certainly two of the best American books published in that decade. More importantly though is that nowhere in Sukenick’s book does he mention *Ray*, a book that clearly meets his criteria for inventive imaginative literature. In the first chapter of his book Sukenick says that the “flow of energy” in narrative is more important than plot or even story. Sukenick says, “Though there is not necessarily plot or story in a narrative, there is always a field of action, and in a field of action the way energy moves should be the most obvious

element” (Sukenick 12-13). The “field of action” is certainly the most obvious element in *Ray*. Whitman, Miller, Kerouac and Hannah are writers whose energy is felt first and foremost. Speaking on the power that language has in an original work of literature Sukenick says, “In poetry the metamorphic power of language comes to the fore, in which alterations of meaning defamiliarize and destabilize the conventional view of reality” (Sukenick xviii). Similarly, he says later concerning the same issue that: “Writers should do everything they can to release words from their normal contexts and associations, to make them available for creative use” (Sukenick 96). Both points could read as descriptions of Barry Hannah’s writing. In a scene from *Ray*, where Ray attends and observes Sister’s funeral we get Hannah’s ability at full force. He is commenting on the mother, Agnes Hooch, and how she is grieving: “She is a vision of permanent agony. Toward the end of the ceremony Mrs. Hooch raises a dreadful animal wail of fearful, unknown, soprano lamentation” (Hannah 59). What Hannah through Ray is describing is something that most of us have witnessed and yet have never experienced quite like that. Mrs. Hooch’s cry is familiar and yet foreign all at once. Though we know the sound people make while crying and grieving, it is highly unlikely we would use the phrases “animal wail” and “soprano lamentation” to have been the precise description. With his superb poetic diction what Hannah does is indeed “release words from their normal contexts and associations.”

Concerning form in a work of fiction Sukenick says, “Form is itself a metaphor and that of fiction is perhaps the most inclusive for our society. The form of the traditional novel is a metaphor for a society that no longer exists” (Sukenick 3). I couldn’t agree more. The form of a poem or work of fiction must, as previously stated, come out

of necessity. The necessity to assess and apprehend the world, as we know it, must give birth to an inevitably new form, such as *Ray*. Although the subject of form is the central thesis of Sukenick's book, it is when he elaborates on how the form of the novel has changed, and who changed it, that it becomes more interesting. Sukenick writes:

The more intensely the novel was "about" life, the less it was part of it...Further, fiction then has to be considered not only an artifact but also an activity which brings into play its connection with the personality of the novelist...It was the genius of Henry Miller to recognize this and to employ for the first time since Rabelais (with—as far as I can recollect at the moment—the possible exception of Sterne) what might be called a free-form style of composition whose main technique is improvisation, and the great exemplar of which is jazz...Kerouac picked this up...and so, perhaps, did the Abstract Expressionists...However, the work of Kerouac,...should not be minimized. It represented a return to what might be called a "poetics of experience," in which art tends to be considered not about experience but part of it, and which could be argued as the most vital tradition in American writing. (Sukenick 6-7)

This is precisely the tradition I place Hannah in. As previously stated Miller and Kerouac had a profound influence on Hannah. While *Geronimo Rex* and *Nightwatchmen* certainly attempt, and perhaps at times succeed, to reach a point of "poetics of experience" it cannot be denied that *Ray* certainly achieves this. In fact if *Ray* is "about" anything it is undoubtedly a living, breathing document of poetry and experience. Sukenick doesn't

stop there. He goes on to trace the literary tradition from Kerouac to Miller while relating it to Whitman. He says:

Henry Miller is for American novelists what Whitman is for American poets. The source of his vitality is the current that began flowing when he reconnected our art with our experience. Experience begins with the self and Miller put the self back into fiction. For a writer the whole point of literary technique is the fullest possible release of the energy of the personality into the work, and when one comes into contact with that force, the whole superstructure that one had assumed to be the point of literature begins to burn away. (Sukenick 26)

One definitely hears an echo of Bloom's previous similar statement on Whitman and the self. Bloom's description of the "Whitmanian self" is almost identical to Sukenick's description of Miller's self. Whitman's self, according to Bloom, is "an endlessly shifting series of identifications." The endless shifting is caused by experience. Whitman, like Miller, put the energy of the self into his poetry and therefore the "superstructure" of what poetry can be begins to "burn away", but also begins to invent. Sukenick continues:

Henry Miller in *Black Spring*, for example, taking off from Whitman to talk about the act of writing as "this expanding moment which has not defined itself in ticks and beats," an act performed by someone existing in time and space whose circumstances enter into the composition...(Sukenick 230-231)

Hannah, in *Geronimo Rex* but especially in *Ray*, also practices this idea of form and composition. What we get in Hannah's masterpiece are the ideas of this highly energized self who exists in multiple times and spaces seemingly simultaneously. As previously

stated Hannah said to Don Swaim in an interview that *Geronimo Rex* was more or less an autobiographical announcement. *Ray*, as well, has a lot of autobiographical information and attempts to recount as well as, perhaps, cope with the author's darkest days. In fact one could easily see *Geronimo Rex*, *Ray* and *Boomerang* as a kind of sequential trilogy. One could see *Geronimo Rex* dealing with Hannah's youth and his early adulthood, *Ray* dealing with his alcoholism and madness and *Boomerang* as a kind of gentle reminiscence on the events that shaped the two previous books. Those three, and *Ray* in particular, come right out of Hannah's circumstances entering the composition. Sukenick expands his thoughts on fiction incorporating experience. He says:

One felt the need to incorporate the vagaries of experience, its randomness, its arbitrariness, to affirm the experience of composition, and to deny the work as illusion, so that while we admitted the brokenness, the discontinuity of experience, we also swept away many of the chronic schizoid Western attitudes toward mind and experience, thought and poetry, form and chaos, and we gave to our works the only structure that seemed possible or even desirable—the structure of our own minds. (Sukenick 19)

He is of course talking about Miller and Kerouac, but also of himself. As previously stated Sukenick's fiction is largely in debt to Miller and Kerouac. This, however, also applies to Hannah. A lot of *Ray*'s originality comes from the fact that what we are reading is the structure of Ray's mind and more importantly of his imagination.

"Fiction," says Sukenick, "is neither true nor false factually, but only good and bad" (Sukenick 31). Because, according to Sukenick, fiction must employ a new language with new meaning we can't hold fiction accountable the way we hold other disciplines

accountable. Sukenick then says, “To hold fictive language to a standard of truth with reference to empirical reality denies that such language has a reality of its own and that it is a source of knowledge in itself, both in its exploration of possibility in the consciously unreal space of fiction” (Sukenick 237). In other words fiction shouldn’t imitate reality. It should create its own. *Ray*, and indeed much of Hannah, creates its own reality. Ray creates his own reality, which becomes the novel. All of this, of course, must exist between two covers. “A novel,” according to Sukenick, “is both a concrete structure and an imaginative structure—pages, print, binding containing a record of the movements of the mind” (Sukenick 205). These seemingly whole movements, however, move in fragments. Sukenick says,

To speak of fragments is to imply that finished and successful works remain fragmented, and this is not the case. We think in fragments and we compose in fragments, but the fictive art consists precisely in the use of the medium to compose out of fragments viable wholes. (Sukenick 46)

As previously stated *Ray* is a fragmented novel and the fragmented structure as well as Ray’s fragmented psyche extend the metaphor to an almost boundless end. *Ray* is made up of nothing but fragments. Yet the novel as well as Ray’s composition is absolutely whole in the reality he and the novel create.

IV. RAY WITH THE OTHERS

Ray is Hannah's masterpiece. He published five more novels after *Ray*, but never reached the heights of originality that he had reached in *Ray*. As I also said before, although Hannah was, generally, a better short story writer than a novelist, the novel was his preferred form. He told Gene Edwards on the Mississippi Public Broadcasting program *Conversations* that his "favorite form is the novella. The power to weight ratio of something like 'The Stranger' by Camus..." It appears that with *Ray* Hannah felt that he had reached a similar result. This, I believe, is supported by the fact that after *Ray*, with the exceptions of his short story collections, he wrote only novellas or short novels until *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*, his last book. It is in these four short novels that we see Hannah struggling to capture the magic of *Ray*.

The first of the post-*Ray* short novels was *The Tennis Handsome*. After the publication of *Ray* Hannah's reputation was cemented. If Hannah had not written another word after the final "Sabers" were drawn he would still be the towering figure he is today. *Geronimo Rex*, *Airships* and *Ray* seal Hannah's reputation. The fact that all three came from the same imagination is astonishing. So it is somewhat disappointing to have a book like the *Tennis Handsome* follow *Ray*. Of all of Hannah's books there are two that I believe to be his only failures. One of them is *The Tennis Handsome* and the other is *Never Die*. Although they were not published sequentially I will take only a moment to comment on them before discussing Hannah's other, relatively successful, novels.

Hannah begins *The Tennis Handsome* by taking two stories from *Airships* that were not linked and changed some details to make them the first two chapters of the book. In doing so, I believe, he cheapened two very good stories. The book is about an

autistic-savant tennis player named French Edward. He almost drowned trying to save his tennis coach and this caused severe brain damage. His handler and mentor is another “disgraced” doctor, Dr. Baby Levaster. The other key cast member is French’s tennis coach Dr. Jimmy Word, who is in love with French’s mother. The novel, like *Ray*, doesn’t have much of a plot. In fact the novel suffers because of that very fact. What we end up with are just various situations from no one’s particular point of view. Hannah uses the third-person narrative, which he himself says he doesn’t like, and it seems to be the root of the novel’s problem. Of this narrative technique he told the *Paris Review*:

Third-person...is the most natural and inevitable, I guess. But you’d best beware the monotone in it and the temptations toward false wisdom, cleverness. First person is where you can be more interesting...The wisdom there is more precious than in the sage overview...I’m also wary of the glibness that third person invites. (Gailbraith 51-52)

Although I wouldn’t say that there is any “false wisdom” in *The Tennis Handsome* there is almost nothing more than cleverness or an attempt at cleverness. Had this been French’s account or Baby Levaster’s there would be more room for wit and humor, but I’m afraid it just isn’t there quite enough to save the novel. Also due to the fact that this is no one’s particular account of the events there is very little characterization. Other than French Edward who possibly has the potential to be a real character, I’m afraid everyone else comes off as mere verbal constructions. While Hannah is not known for his well-rounded characters, at least, at his best, their flatness comes out of the fact that their desperateness and desires are very deep. There seems to be a decent sentence or observation on every tenth page or so, but not much else to the book. The book ends with

French Edward's daughter Murphy graduating from college in Louisiana and meeting a young man named Barry. They get married, have children and live happily. It appears to me that Hannah tried desperately to recreate the experience of *Ray*. *Ray*'s fragmentation comes very naturally due to Ray's mental state and his objective to write good poetry. There is no such driving force in *The Tennis Handsome*.

Nonetheless, some critics, Charney, and Weston included, generally liked the book and saw it as further proof of Hannah's newfound way of writing concise yet wild prose, officially abandoning his somewhat flowery rhetorical style. Mark Charney says about the novel:

And, indeed, the humor and insight Hannah achieves in *The Tennis Handsome* relies on its fragmented style and intentional lack of continuity...Hannah intends for his readers neither to believe the incidents he describes nor to concern themselves with their chronology. Because the characters in *The Tennis Handsome* are very much a product of their past and present experiences, Hannah's random juxtaposition of events offers psychological insight into their motivation...*The Tennis Handsome* challenges readers to look beyond the narrative to recognize associations between juxtaposed prose passages. Characters, then, are defined not only by their own stories, but also by their placement within an achronological structure. (Charney 55-57)

I'm afraid I just don't agree. The aesthetic achievement of *Ray* is nowhere near the supposed achievement of *The Tennis Handsome*. Yes, both novels are constructed almost entirely out of fragments, but the circumstances couldn't be more different. The fragmentation in *The Tennis Handsome* reads more like an exercise a writer might do to

experiment with form while he is trying to work things out. Having a novel that is pure chaos with no center holding it together is not the same thing as having an original novel that is chaotic. It is precisely because *The Tennis Handsome* has no center to it that it is not saying anything. Agony and torment went into *Ray* and the fragmented structure is proof. Ray endures and survives, as did Hannah, and his work will prevail in the end. What readers enjoy is Ray's struggle to want to be great, but in order to do that he must become decent things first. Similar to the novel's ongoing monologue style, Ray's sense of figuring himself out is also ongoing. *Ray* is not about the past or future, but about the present. The novel is a living document of Ray's struggle.

Ruth Weston comments favorably on *The Tennis Handsome* as well. She writes:

A particular aspect of identity of interest to Hannah is that of the special problems of extraordinary achievers: people Hannah calls "interesting monsters." These include war heroes, sports figures, musicians, writers and other storytellers, such as Hannah himself. To the extent that these figures are larger than life and usually obsessed of one facet of their experience of truth, they are less than fully rounded human beings, and thus they are avatars of what Sherwood Anderson called "grotesques"...Primary among these figures are Hannah's many liar characters, whose lives are vicious cycles of dreams, lies, and confessions...They are exemplified by the dual protagonists French Edward and Baby Levaster...in *The Tennis Handsome*, a novella that, when compared with the first versions of its chapters, demonstrates the increasing poetic condensation characterizing Hannah's mature style. (Weston 4)

I am afraid I also cannot agree. Weston seems to forget that the details added to the stories' "Return to Return" and "Midnight and I'm Not Famous Yet" to make them chapters take away the level on which the originality of them as complete and separate stories work. We get quick hard impressions and no logic as to the characters' behavior. Hannah breathed new life into American prose, especially the short story, with this technique and *Airships*, then *Ray*, were testaments to that. We simply don't get this in *The Tennis Handsome*. What we get is a watered down pale comparison to his celebrated early work.

Hannah's other failure was, in my opinion, his novel *Never Die*. This novel, published before his two story collections *Bats Out of Hell* and *High Lonesome*, is basically a parody of a Western. The title is, I think, a reference to Cormac McCarthy's masterpiece *Blood Meridian*. At the end of McCarthy's epic the villain, Judge Holden, declares that he will "never die." Reading this novel, one feels like Hannah, perhaps, embarked upon this project to amuse himself, but then about halfway through got bored with the story. It also seems that with *Never Die* Hannah's newly found form, the fragmented, experimental short novel, seems to have run its course. It would be the last one he would write. The story is about Judge Kyle Nitburg who renames the town after himself. He is an absurd villain, nowhere near as singular as Judge Holden from McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, who must be stopped by the gun slinging "hero" named Fernando Mure. There is also Nitburg's henchman, the dwarf Edwin Smoot. These are the "protagonists" of the novel. As with *The Tennis Handsome*, *Never Die* is also told in the third-person. Meant, no doubt, to be comic the novel does succeed for about the first-

third of the novel and seems to be on the brink of a hilarious parody. Then the novel spirals out of control.

Ruth Weston makes a very good point as to Hannah's objective in the novel. She writes: "Clearly this narrative announces itself as a freewheeling multiple parody of many genres, including the fairytale, the sentimental romance, the Western and the tall tale" (Weston 94). Hannah was trying to write a comic novel, perhaps even the most comic of comic novels. It certainly gave him freedom with his characters and plot. *Never Die*, at its best, illustrates a tremendous amount of freedom. Descriptions of the Southwestern landscape are followed by a morphine-induced hallucination. As with *The Tennis Handsome*, *Never Die* has some funny, interesting, and syntactically daring sentences, all things we can expect from Hannah. While structurally Hannah had more reason, than in *The Tennis Handsome*, to use the third-person narrative technique the novel still seems to suffer from the technique as well. The heavy parody that the novel carries allows Hannah to experiment with character, plot and narrative technique and due to the novels deliberate absurdity the third-person narrative technique seems like an appropriate fit. This technique gives Hannah the opportunity to make characters as round or as flat as he wants in order to fuel the comedy. The comedy itself must be served first, in my opinion, in order for the novel to work. However, the novel falls apart precisely because the comedy appears to take a back seat to Hannah's tendency to make wild digressions and have character's burst into fantasy and ecstasy. The "plot" spirals out of control and jumps around in scenes and fragments. Unlike *Ray*, *Never Die's* fragmented style attempts to create unity through a series of comic episodes meant to evoke a sense of

parody upon parody upon parody. While *Ray* is actually quite a serious book, *Never Die*, in my opinion, is merely meant to entertain us and it fails.

Hannah's next novel that followed *Ray* was *Hey Jack!* Published after *The Tennis Handsome* and the story collection *Captain Maximus*, *Hey Jack!* is Hannah's attempt to write the opposite of *Ray* in a sense. *Hey Jack!* is narrated by Homer, a Korean War veteran. The novel is made up of Homer's thoughts and impressions of his small Mississippi town and his friendship with a coffee storeowner named Jack. The novel is not a failure like *The Tennis Handsome* or *Never Die*. However, it is not the caliber of *Ray*. The novel, like much of Hannah's work, is comic and does succeed in that Hannah did not repeat himself. Instead he did the opposite of what he did in *Ray*. Although the novel is told from Homer's first-person perspective we actually get the least information about Homer. Homer, the ancient Greek poet, told the myths of his land and time. So does Hannah's Homer. He is giving us his account of the people, things and place that he knows well.

Mark Charney makes the connection between *Hey Jack!* and oral storytelling:

In the manner of oral tradition...*Hey Jack!* leads the reader through a series of stories involving recurring town characters, often shifting voice and persona to define the Mississippi town...as a microcosm of Southern society...Hannah continues to experiment with structure and organization: he distorts conventional space and time, imitating the formlessness of storytelling and the immediacy of cinematic image, in order to establish a personal and sometimes sentimental vision of the sense of community...(Charney 84)

Again I agree with Charney about Hannah's technique in *Hey Jack!* While *Ray* is very stylized and purposefully experimental, *Hey Jack!* is an attempt at the opposite. *Hey Jack!*'s experimental and fragmented style is meant to flow naturally as an oral story would, whereas *Ray* is meant as a document of a man writing poetry about himself with himself as the subject.

Ruth Weston also favors the novel's plainspoken style. However, she characterizes the novel as "confessional." While the novel's narrator is sharing with us his memories and giving us his impressions of life in a small Mississippi town, I'm not quite sure I would call *Hey Jack!* confessional. Weston writes:

Homer, named for the ancient Greek teller of tales, is afflicted with an existential dilemma related...to the psychological agony that has inspired religious confessionals from St. Augustine to Thomas Merton...A casual reader of Hannah's wild scenarios, told in outrageous, often profane, and sometimes scatological language, might smile at the mention of the confessional, especially the religious confessional. (Weston 31)

In fact, when one thinks about Hannah's fiction the word "confessional" doesn't come to mind, but that is exactly my argument for his primary aesthetic, especially as a novelist. *Geronimo Rex* and *Ray* are great confessional novels. However, *Hey Jack!* is not a confessional novel. Homer may have the agony and the nostalgia of a man wishing for bygone days, but he is a character constructed completely out of Hannah's imagination. We get no sense of Hannah in the confessional tone in *Hey Jack!* as we do with *Geronimo Rex* and *Ray*. He is indeed a far cry from Harry Monroe, Raymond Forrest and the narrator/protagonist/character of, perhaps, Hannah's most confessional novel.

In *Boomerang*, perhaps the only novel that fully lives up to the promise of *Ray*, Barry Hannah is the narrator/protagonist/character. Hannah's aesthetic, as a novelist, is that of a confessional novelist, which he picked up from Miller and Kerouac. In fact, *Geronimo Rex*, *Ray*, and *Boomerang* can be read as a sort of trilogy, chronicling life in the modern South through the eyes of various narrator/protagonist/characters, which serve as vehicles for the author. Of course this isn't entirely a new concept.

Ruth Weston made a similar connection when she stated that: "*Geronimo Rex* [and] *Boomerang*...demonstrate Hannah's relation to the tradition of autobiographical writing..."(Weston 2). This has been one of my focal points and it also appears to be the focal point in Mark Charney's evaluation of *Boomerang*. Charney writes:

In *Boomerang* Hannah abandons the thinly disguised autobiographical narrator...to write more openly about the family, friends, and conflicts that have influenced his life and career...Although *Boomerang* contains the disclaimer that "this novel is a work of fiction..."...the autobiographical elements of *Boomerang* are obvious. Using a fictional framework, Hannah adapts recognizable incidents from his own life, such as his five days in a mental institution, his first two unsuccessful marriages, his admiration for Willie Morris, and his friendship with the McGuanes...(Charney 94)

In *Geronimo Rex* Hannah chronicles what happened to him from childhood up until just before writing the novel: in *Ray* he chronicles, probably, the worst years of his life, but he filters it through this character who is like Hannah and who is writing his own imaginative account of his life. In *Boomerang* Hannah appears to come full circle, hence

the title of the novel. *Boomerang* begins in Hannah's childhood and jumps around the present and the past following only the vaguely titled chapter structure.

Where the novel, I believe, moves beyond *Ray* is in the fact that it is the only book, other than *Ray*, in which Hannah gives himself completely to the novel as the author/narrator/protagonist. *Geronimo Rex*, *Ray* and *Boomerang* would, in my opinion be examples of what Ronald Sukenick calls a narralogue. In his book *Narralogues: Truth In Fiction*, Sukenick extends his thesis of a literature of experience. Sukenick begins:

A narralogue is essentially narrative plus argument...Part of my argument in the Narralogues is that narrative is a mode of understanding that uniquely is quick enough, mutable enough, and flexible enough to catch the stream of experience, including our experience of the arts...In short my argument is that fiction is a matter of argument rather than of dramatic representation.

(Sukenick 1-2)

Sukenick sees fiction as a serious form of discourse. In order to achieve this, though, Sukenick says that fiction needs to stop representing the willing suspension of disbelief. Once fiction begins to create its own reality rather than try to imitate it then more fictional possibilities open up. *Geronimo Rex* is, perhaps, still at times representational fiction rather than narrologue, but *Ray* and *Boomerang* indeed create their own realities.

Mark Charney's point is the same but his terminology is different. Charney writes:

The tone of the novel is confessional, but Hannah manages to achieve some distance between reader and writer by inventing a structure that fragments reality into blocks of seemingly unrelated narrative memories...(Charney 95)

The distance that Charney is talking about is similar to the distance that fiction must have in order to create its own reality. In an interesting way the closer Hannah gets to his own experience and writing about them the farther away from straight autobiography he gets. By inventing a structure of fragmented realities made up of seemingly unrelated memories Hannah opens up more fictive possibilities. Anything can happen because, to paraphrase Sukenick, “the traditional contract with the reader and writer is broken and a new one is written.” Sukenick explains a bit more on this subject:

Once the “mirror of reality” argument for fiction crumbles, possibilities long submerged in our tradition open up, and in fact a new rationale for fiction becomes necessary. There is no longer any excuse for confining fiction to the plot-character-description in noncommittal plain style zip zip zip between margins to the bottom of the gutenbergian printed page... Fiction is no longer an imitation of the supposedly real, but has a reality in itself whose purpose is to reflect on experience to arrive at truth, however contingent. (Sukenick 3)

Once Hannah acknowledges that he is writing a book and that we are reading the book that he has written then anything that happens in that book is held together by the common experience that all of the seemingly unrelated experiences have. It all becomes part of the same experience and creates something new, a novel. Hannah certainly achieved this in *Ray*, but also in *Boomerang*.

Hannah’s last novel, and indeed the last book he would publish in his lifetime, was the highly praised *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*. The title of the novel is a reference to Bob Dylan’s song “It’s All Over Now Baby Blue.” Because the novel is so different from *Ray* and Hannah’s original aesthetic as a novelist I will only make a small comment

on it. The novel, set on and near Eagle Lake, Mississippi, is not like any of Hannah's previous novels. The characters are the old liars on the pier Sidney Farte and Ulrich, to name a couple. They originally were characters from some of Hannah's best short stories such as "Water Liars," "All the Old Harkening Faces at the Rail," and "High-Water Railers." The novel's central character is the villain Man Mortimer. He looks like Conway Twitty and collects his debts with a knife. He is evil personified, another nod to McCarthy's Judge Holden, and a grand metaphor. Indeed sometime in the late 1980's Hannah discovered McCarthy's work and constantly cited him as perhaps his last influence. It is certainly felt in *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*. Hannah, once again, abandons the first-person point of view and adopts, again, the third-person omniscient view with moments of apparent stream-of-consciousness. What is different this time is that Hannah has no comic agenda. He is merely giving us a snapshot, or series of snapshots, of what life in Eagle Lake is. The novel is still distinguished by Hannah's unique style and in that way it is unmistakably a Barry Hannah novel. However, it is a far cry from his original aesthetic as a novelist. The reality that Hannah was creating with the novels *Geronimo Rex*, *Ray* and *Boomerang* almost goes out the window with *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*. Hannah's early aesthetic seems nothing like the new one he adopts for *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*. While the three aforementioned novels were examples of Hannah pushing the boundaries of fiction by writing novels that created their own reality, *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* almost appears to be the antithesis of that. It is much more conventional than Hannah's previously mentioned novels and was the most successful commercially. It was his first and only "airport book." The novel's dark theme might have something to do with Hannah's personal life at the time. He was diagnosed

with cancer just before starting the book and wrote it while undergoing chemotherapy. In fact he almost died before finishing the novel. *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* more than any other book by Hannah has an agenda, to shed light on the darkness in our times, in the form of Man Mortimer. Perhaps this was a new aesthetic that Hannah was creating and if he were still here with us we might have more books like *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* and extensions thereof. While the novel is not as original as *Ray*, I am glad that the novel found some commercial success. I think he deserved it.

Barry Hannah is one of the greatest writers America has produced and *Ray* is his masterpiece. In a career that spanned four decades he remained an original voice in American literature. In *Geronimo Rex* Hannah gives us his coming of age tale filled with the syntactic idiosyncrasies that became his moniker. In *Nightwatchmen* Hannah begins to break away from the overflowing rhetorical prose learned from Henry Miller and Jack Kerouac. Hannah finally comes into his own at full force with the publication of *Ray*. Hannah appears to have abandoned his former prose style completely for a style so original that Hannah spent the rest of his career trying to capture it. We see this particular struggle in the short novels that followed: *The Tennis Handsome*, *Hey Jack!*, *Boomerang*, and *Never Die*. After publishing nothing but short stories for a whole decade Hannah finally found the critical and commercial success he deserved with the novel *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*. Eric Miles Williamson said about Ronald Sukenick:

It's a rare writer who changes the way other writers think about writing. James Joyce changed fiction. Cervantes. Herman Melville, Henry James. Laurence Sterne. Henry Miller, Malcolm Lowry, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Friedrich Nietzsche, Joseph Conrad, the writer of the Book of Job, the

Shakespeare of *King Lear* and 1 *Henry IV*, Milton. The list starts getting thin after the big guns. Ronald Sukenick is one of the big guns. (Williamson 7-8)

Barry Hannah is also one of the big guns.

APPENDIX SECTION

INTRODUCTON

1. The title of the introduction “The Genius Master of His Dragon” comes from the story “Testimony of Pilot” from Hannah’s first collection *Airships*.

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