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## Review of Geoffrey Hartman, *A Scholar's Tale: Intellectual Journey of a Displaced Child of Europe.*

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**Geoffrey Hartman, *A Scholar's Tale: Intellectual Journey of a Displaced Child of Europe*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. 195 pp. (+ xii) ISBN 9780823228324.**

**Reviewed by Mimi Godfrey, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC**

Among his many instructions about the publication of his own autobiography, Mark Twain wrote,

When a man is writing a book dealing with the privacies of his life—a book which is to be read while he is still alive—he shrinks from speaking his whole frank mind; all his attempts to do it fail, he recognizes that he is trying to do a thing which is wholly impossible to a human being. The frankest and freest and privatest product of the human mind and heart is a love letter; the writer gets his limitless freedom of statement and expression from his sense that no stranger is going to see what he is writing. (*Mark Twain's Own Autobiography* xviii)

Surely, no autobiography could be more fraught, in Twain's terms, than the academic memoir. The hapless author must navigate the rocky shoals of jealous colleagues or fretful students, decide how (or if) to record departmental or professional quarrels, consider whom to blame and whom to praise. She must account for her own life—and whose life is better documented than a professor's, with that long *vita* recording every course and project and prize?

Nonetheless, many academics take the plunge. With George Steiner, Jane Tompkins, Alvin Kernan, Jill Ker Conway, Mark Edmundson, and many others contributing, the academic memoir has become a crowded field even in the burgeoning memoir market. Some chronicle their careers, some offer correctives for the state of the university or for the humanities, some write of the challenges of teaching or remember the teachers who inspired them. There are now so many on the market that Cynthia G. Franklin has completed a book-length study of the form, where she argues that in "the current cultural and political climate in the academy," the academic memoir acts as "a barometer for the humanities during a period of crisis" (*Academic Lives* 1-2).

With *A Scholar's Tale*, Geoffrey Hartman, Sterling Professor Emeritus of English and Comparative Literature at Yale, has written a rather different book: the record of a stellar career as a scholar, critic, and teacher that spans decades of changes in the academy to be sure, but one which insists on the primacy of the intellectual life. Hartman might argue that he has avoided the problems of which Twain warned: he does not wish to do more than chart the ideas, the critics, the books, and the poetry—especially Romantic poetry—that spurred his work. In true Wordsworthian fashion, he wishes to "say something about the growth of a critic's mind" (ix), to be "my own biobibliographer" (39). With the barest of personal detail, he nonetheless packs an extraordinary amount into just under two hundred pages. The reader who soldiers on through the curiously distant, even defended, tone of the first half of the volume, however, will be well-rewarded with details of a life spent amidst crucial critical and theoretical developments of the second half of the twentieth century. Yet for this reviewer, it was the second half of *A Scholar's Tale* that proved the most satisfying.

The career trajectory described here will be familiar to any academic—graduate school, fellowships, publications, the oddly deflating remarks of senior colleagues. Of course, this is no ordinary academic career: Hartman has spent much of his professional life at Yale, as graduate student, early-career professor, and senior scholar called back to New Haven after holding tenured posts elsewhere. He has written landmark books and many articles with which Romanticists and other academics still wrestle; at eighty, he briskly pursues an active publishing and scholarly agenda, with his most recent articles and reviews appearing in *American Imago*, *Critical Inquiry*, and *Poetics Today*. He has left an immutable mark on theoretical discourse as a Romanticist and (in recent years) in the fields of Judaic studies and trauma theory. He has been on the spot to meet nearly every important and influential critic passing through Yale or the academy—including Harold Bloom (a friend since graduate school days), Georges Poulet, René Wellek, Hans Robert Jauss, Paul de Man, Derrida, and Erich Auerbach (the subject of an admiring essay, set as an appendix to this volume). Those he has not met, he has studied, as a deep and perceptive reader who has sought always to productively engage with others' work and to improve his own.

The personal details of this life are initially quite sparse.[1] Born in Germany in 1929, Hartman was evacuated from Frankfurt to England in 1939 as part of a *Kindertransport*. With some two dozen other children, he ended up in a small Buckinghamshire village near Waddesdon Manor, home of their benefactors, James and Dorothy de Rothschild. That sojourn in Buckinghamshire remains a recurrent theme for Hartman, who writes that its "green exile" was a true solace for a "lonely child" (21). "Bucks was my Lake District, though with ponds rather than lakes, and not one significant hill" (21).

The details of Hartman's childhood and emigration are buried within the first several pages (although he will return to these events later). What brief snippets he gives us are constantly interrupted by quotations, digressions, and temporal shifts in his narrative. We eventually learn that Hartman's mother preceded him to America, emigrating just after *Kristallnacht* in 1938. Her son was supposed to join her, but visa difficulties, submarine blockades, and the outbreak of war intervened. By the time they were reunited in New York in 1945, Hartman was an adolescent and his mother a stranger. "I was then close to sixteen and eager to continue my education," he writes. "But she worked all day for subsistence wages and basically I had to look after myself" (6). A few sentences dispose of the rest of the family: the father, "long divorced, managed to emigrate to Argentina" (5); as Claudius would say, so much for him. His grandmother, "already ill," did not leave Germany (did she attempt to escape? Was there no money, no help?) and perished in Theresienstadt (5).

These enigmatic pages set the pattern for much of the memoir, an oddly dispassionate account for which Hartman carefully cites diary entries and journal notes. Despite his achievements and his happy (and well-earned) knack of being in on some of the most portentous developments in American academic circles—the enriching presence of European émigrés; what Hartman terms the "democratization" of universities in the 1960s (55) (surely preceded by the effects of the 1944 G.I. Bill); the growth of new critical and theoretical discourses, from the new philology to new historicism, cultural and ethnic studies, feminism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis—this part of *A Scholar's Tale* is rough going. Hartman can barely frame a sentence without quoting another critic or a Romantic poet; his procedure is selective and idiosyncratic, with some attempt to

follow a rough chronology. But he often loops back on himself, as if following a private train of thought: exploring ideas, sifting conclusions, exhausting all possible readings.

Readers looking for academic gossip will be disappointed. Hartman is a careful writer, who shies away from the specifics of conflicts or attacks, always diplomatic at what must have been painful moments in his career: for example, the unnamed professor at the University of Chicago, where Hartman spent a "trial year," who "made it quite clear he opposed me, at least for the time being. 'We don't believe in young geniuses here'" (29). This anecdote is left hanging, as Hartman hurries on to explain the administrative divisions of the University of Chicago that precluded his hiring, and how other faculty members advised him "to mature another three years before a decision would be made" (29). He never returned to Chicago, however, and his wistful memories are still sharp, of "Chicago's liveliness, its active Jewish community, and my wish to continue helping with the *Chicago Review*," which published his poetry and essays "with magical immediacy" (30). At some point, he evidently mulled changing careers altogether, "to apply my interpretive zeal beyond the world of specifically literary instances." He considered child psychiatry, and mentions an "attempt" to enter law school at Yale (35); but what lay behind these possibilities—and their abandonment—is, alas, never explained.

At times, Hartman's digressiveness is distracting, looking less thoughtful than scatty. For an extended example, the reader may consider the discussion of Peter Balakian's autobiography, *Black Dog of Fate*, [2] a book "I admire but cannot emulate." Hartman is astonished that as even Balakian learns about the Armenian genocide in Turkey and its cost to his family, he does not become embittered (25). Hartman writes,

But as I read about his journey of discovery, and his retelling of cruel episodes that bring back the degradations, spoliations, deportations, pogroms, tortures, burnings, mass slaughters (no one can miss the Holocaust parallel), I realize how difficult for me it still is to look directly at the Medusa. Perhaps, I think reluctantly, something in me parallels the portrait [Balakian] offers of Aunt Anna, a scholar of comparative literature. (I was twice invited by her in the 1980s to teach a graduate seminar at NYU, and she would have liked me to explore becoming the chair of her department.) Anna Balakian claimed, passionate as always, that her affection for both symbolist and surrealist movements in France was such that American literature seemed hopelessly worldly! Mallarmé, she insisted, had done away with the circumstantial in poetry. She would not countenance descriptive detail that filled every space with some concrete image or socially engaged observation, as if poetry had to follow William Carlos Williams's "No ideas but in things." (*Black Dog of Fate* 25)

In the next paragraph, Hartman veers off to his Fulbright year in France in 1951-52 and the museums, churches, and bookstores he visited abroad; publishing in *Yale French Studies*; his relationship with philosopher Gaston Bachelard; and a breathless quotation from Hölderlin.

Elsewhere, his meiotic style can be frustratingly tantalizing, or descend to an academic shaggy-dog-story quality—the coming of feminists such as Elaine Showalter to Yale mostly meant arguments over the political significance of seating arrangements, for example. There is also an account of a visit to Yale by Jacques Lacan in the 1970s, perhaps the funniest moment in the

book. "[T]he exact date remains vague in my mind," Hartman murmurs (95), apparently pushing his journal notes to one side. The "disastrous" occasion requires the unnamed host, surely Hartman himself, to "deal with Lacan's array of idiosyncrasies." The lecture the academic star gives is "at once memorable and unpardonable" (95-96). Lacan shows up late, and yet more time is agonizingly wasted while an assistant pins up incomprehensible diagrams. The rapt, standing-room-only audience remains in place throughout, sitting through a talk given entirely in French. Stuck in the front row, Hartman overhears Lacan "mutter as the applause subsided, 'Only in America would they applaud so irritating a lecture.'" Ever the scholar, Hartman adds helpfully, "The word used for 'irritating' was 'emmerdant'" (96).

Perhaps because of his emphasis on the development of his own mind and the dependence of this portion of the book on his notes and journals, Hartman gives the impression of being something of a loner, a man whose life was only occasionally interrupted by the appearance of like-minded acquaintances, almost all men, some of whom become friends. There are few women in Hartman's world in these early years. (His wife is mentioned, unnamed, only once in the first half of *A Scholar's Tale*, as the recipient of the gloved social call from the department chair's wife that was *de rigueur* at the time. His unnamed children appear once as well, beneficiaries of Hartman's youthful camp counselor training, when bedtime stories are told.)

Some of these masculine friendships, sadly, do not become fully realized—encounters with Georges Poulet and Erich Auerbach, for example, are cut short by their deaths. On his more controversial allegiances with Paul de Man and Hans Robert Jauss, Hartman spends important time carefully puzzling out how he failed to understand either of these men as they successfully hid, or simply elided, their wartime pasts—de Man's collaborationist and anti-Semitic journalism and Jauss's German army service. At times, his efforts seem overly strenuous, if accurate: on de Man's journalism, he writes, "The historical fact does not excuse de Man's participation, even though it happened, nontrivially, only this one time" (81). Explaining how he had been "mistaken about the image I held of him: it had not entered my mind that he might have passed through a phase of collaboration," Hartman first blames de Man's friendship with Jacques Derrida for blinding him to reality, and then decides that "the main reason for my mistake was a reluctance, rather common at the time, for bringing one's personal background into the field of study" (82).

Hartman met Harold Bloom in 1955, at Yale. It was clearly an important friendship for him, as Bloom, something of a force of nature even then, shared many of Hartman's own interests and reading. "To this day," Hartman writes, "I remain astonished at the closeness of my early thinking and that of Bloom. I say 'early,' for the later Bloom is, as the expression goes, 'something else'" (45). The early Bloom jumps off the pages here—he is a "street fighter," "a formidable man of war" (45). After analyzing Bloom's work on influence, his headlong love of the poetry he loves, his "gift of intuiting a poem as if he had composed it," Hartman concludes, somewhat obliquely:

Who can escape the torment of creative jealousy? How few in each generation overcome it, especially among scholars and critics. They kill the thing they love, through pedantry, resentment, reductive judgments. Let us resolve, then, to tolerate the genius of others. As Blake wrote: "The most sublime act is to set another before you." (47)

A crucial shift occurs some sixty pages in, when in reviewing his responses to various academic and critical developments, Hartman turns to his work of the past two decades. He explains how he sought to find common ground as cultural studies, feminism, popular culture studies, and other changes came to the academy. Holding fast to an Arnoldian notion of culture as the "study of perfection" (64), trying to "mediate between literary critics and society's careless, even contemptuous attitude toward literary academics" (62), he tries to write back with *Criticism in the Wilderness* (1980), which "attempted to revise and revive Arnold's legacy" (65). Yet he is stung by the response to the book: "The flak that came my way, the charges of self-promotion and puffing my profession, can be imagined. That my argument served a new and stronger alliance of critical prose and major literary works was overlooked" (67).

This second half of the book, presenting Hartman's involvement in Judaic studies, his work in preserving Holocaust testimonies, and his interests in the narrativization of traumatic discourse, begins the liveliest portions of *A Scholar's Tale*. These new interests allow him to move past the disappointments he clearly felt by the 1980s, and the passion and immediacy of his writing surely owes something to the simple fact that these are recent efforts, not documented by journal entries some decades old. Nonetheless, these projects also permit Hartman to revisit important, even vexed, issues about his identity as a Jew, a poet, and a critic.

His involvement began with his efforts toward founding a Judaic Studies program at Yale. Rather benignly, he recalls that at the beginning of his teaching career in 1955, "even a purely cultural interest in Judaism was merely tolerated by Yale's distinctive, if quietly assumed, Christian ethos. In some quarters, there were doubts as to whether a non-Christian could really appreciate a literary tradition so strongly based on Christian faith and symbolism" (104). It is a testimony to Hartman's discretion and evenness of tone (or his ability to sublimate) that we do not know who held these opinions, how Hartman heard of them, and what he felt about them. He describes the odd position in which he finds himself in those years, "[instructing] undergraduates about the basic symbols of their faith so that they might understand such canonical authors as Spenser, Donne, and Milton" (104)—undergraduates who, I suspect, would not have invited their Jewish teacher into their homes, private clubs, or offices. He regards his own brushes with prejudice and discrimination as slight and easily dismissed: Hartman insists that he leaves Yale for positions at Iowa and Cornell "because of signs that my work did not interest senior colleagues at Yale" (105). Years later, back at Yale, a colleague tells him that a proposed appointment for Lionel Trilling in the 1940s had caused a "fuss." The same colleague also reveals that Hartman and Harold Bloom had been passed over for a faculty fellowship, in favor of two junior, less-productive colleagues. But even this, Hartman assures us, was over the support and recommendations of the English department. "I never encountered any overt sign of prejudicial behavior during my first appointment at Yale," he says. "Disinterest, yes, but not overt discrimination" (105). *Interest* and *disinterest* are loaded words here, and I wished at this juncture, at least, that Hartman would have allowed us to see more. Nevertheless, he maintains that his motive in the establishment of Judaic studies at Yale "did not come primarily from the frustrated sense of community"; instead, he is moved by "a growing impatience to have the university curriculum enriched [and] by a strong sense of what was missing" (107).

And it is in the second half of the book that we hear more of his wife Renée, a poet and a child survivor of the concentration camps. Hartman joins her in a grassroots movement dedicated to

videotaping and preserving testimony of Holocaust survivors and witnesses. He is a cofounder and project director of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, which has gathered well over four thousand entries to date. His report of this work, and of himself, becomes increasingly personal; he recounts one of his dreams and his analysis of it—it symbolizes his regret at "my feeble understanding of Hebrew and of Jewish ritual" (115). He "fidget[s]" restlessly in synagogue with his wife, only able to find some level of engagement in analyzing the prayers and *midrash*. Without self-pity, he writes, "I lack childhood associations with prayer services or communal ceremonies" (146). His responses are still Wordsworthian, but increasingly poignant. Trying to understand synagogue rituals, he says, "I try to become the child I never was, or rather a poet, who responds to some original, faint residue, like a remembered scent that comes to you revisiting a city you have known in bygone days. Listening to the prayers of the congregation a feeling arises that here, even if the meaning remains half-hidden, are heartfelt cries that need the unison of a community to be heard. Yet I hear only the void shouting back" (147).

He now returns, frankly, to his near-orphan state in childhood, deprived of parents, grandparents, "indeed all family except a mother I had grown apart from after close to seven years of separation" (147). Regrettably, we will learn nothing else of his relationship with his mother, or what sort of woman she was. His orphanage now appears to be a totalizing, permanent state: "I adopted myself out to words blowing in the wind and insights that detached themselves from what I read promiscuously in the little tomes of the Schocken Verlag or whatever book I carried around like a talisman" (147-48). He gives us an unforgettable picture of his lonely teenaged life.

Because of poverty, I could not take advantage of New York's cultural offerings except for an occasional movie at the Thalia or an oldie at the Museum of Modern Art. The city as such became imagination's focus, its blatant neon lights surprising me after years of a blacked-out England, and tall buildings with innumerable windows hinting at intimate dramas . . . . As for the "celestial ennui of apartments": what was celestial about the roach-infested cubbyhole I lived in, an adolescent among three ancient (in my eyes) tenants sharing a railroad corridor leading to a small kitchen and grungy bathroom? Every night I had to fumigate against cockroaches and go to sleep in a mist of DDT. (135)

The ending of *A Scholar's Tale* is sober and reflective. Hartman is seventy-seven, and the world is full of "terrible news that comes unbidden, especially via the media . . . . I open the morning paper listlessly or anxiously" (154). He labors to keep up his intellectual curiosity, which "remains strong, yet not as strong as before" (154). He is bolstered by the affection and regard of his students; this, augmented by the enjoyment he derives from meeting teachers and students in his public appearances, feels "like a kind of love" (155). He recalls the pleasure he took in teaching, the "give and take of a seminar discussion" where "the noticeably brilliant individual seemed only as important as a collective reading effort that produced insights on the part of even the less brilliant." He suddenly adds, "Was I too distancing at times?" (155).

Hartman's closing comments are heartbreaking. "Perhaps, though, I remained more of a loner than this account implies," he muses.

My turning to the interpretive daring of psychoanalysis and trauma studies . . . intimates a personal need. One pretends, retrospectively, to be part of a collective movement, less out of modesty than in order to think of oneself as having been at the crest of a gathering wave. There I hover still, as friends and colleagues die, disenchanted by the waning force of a once self-defining, now vague generation, whose coherence may never have existed except for the very branding it no longer acknowledges. (139)

He is a published poet who traces his interest in criticism and textual interpretation to his longing to "unlock the poetry within me" (160). He is a Jew who does not feel very Jewish, an orphan who still feels lost. "What haunts a memoir that does not have the excuse of a significant personal conversion, revelation, exculpation is the nexus of the life and work," Hartman writes. "I strive to discover that link, even if it is reductive. Without such a link, is there realism?" (157). Hartman is too honest to permit himself an easy answer to this question, or to any of the questions he poses throughout this work. He keeps asking and searching: even his ending is not really an ending, for the last pages in the book are not his own conclusions, but his warm appreciation of Erich Auerbach. And perhaps that is where Hartman is most comfortable in his ongoing inquiry—in the relationship of teacher and student, "patiently appraising" texts and their meanings, in which "the *delectare* always accompanies the *docere*" (180).

## Notes

[1] For more on Hartman's childhood and upbringing, see the opening essay in Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 15-26.

[2] Peter Balakian, *Black Dog of Fate: A Memoir. An American Son Uncovers His Armenian Past* (1997; rpt., New York: Perseus Books, 2009).