

Legacy-Robert Alter.mp4

Ron Hendel: Hi. I'm Ron Hendel. I'm a professor of Hebrew Bible in the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Cal. It is my great privilege to interview and to introduce you to Robert Alter, who until 19 -- excuse me, until 2011 -- was the 1937 Professor of Comparative Literature. So he's been here for about 100 years.

Robert Alter: Only 97.

Hendel: OK, only 97. Bob is the author of almost 30 scholarly books, almost 200 scholarly articles. I would say that some of the books are works of genius; the others are merely excellent. Bob and I have taught about eight courses together.

Alter: I think so, yeah.

Hendel: And it's been one of the joys of my Berkeley career...

Alter: And mine, too.

Hendel: Oh, and his, too.

The following video interview is part of the UC Berkeley Emeriti Association's Legacy Project, which preserves the recollections and reflections of Berkeley's emeriti. In conversation with a colleague of their choosing, emeriti are invited to discuss their academic careers, including contributions, accomplishments, and challenges -- especially as they relate to campus history. This recording is intended to provide a personal record of value to the family, friends, and colleagues of emeriti, and to document the history of the Berkeley campus as it pertains to the individuals, departments, school, and college.

Hendel: In the trajectory of your academic career, you started out getting your degrees at Harvard, at Columbia. Your first job was at Columbia in Comparative Literature.

Alter: No, in English.

Hendel: In English?

Alter: Yeah.

Hendel: Okay, in English. And then you moved to Berkeley in 1967, just in time for the Summer of Love.

Alter: Right.

Hendel: And during the course of your career you moved from the modern European novel to include modern Hebrew literature and ultimately to include the Hebrew Bible within this field of literature. So I want to ask you how you would describe your movement from the modern European novel, expanding the circle of comparative literature to include modern and then ancient Hebrew, and how the move to Berkeley affected that.

Alter: Well, I was keenly interested in modern Hebrew literature. I still am; I still write on it. And it was actually my third literature in a PhD program in comp lit at Harvard. Unfortunately at that

time in Harvard, the only person on the faculty who knew Hebrew was a very dour man who did medieval philosophy. So he wasn't much help to me.

Hendel: And he was also a charismatic rebbe in the Hassidic community in New York City.

Alter: He was not a charismatic teacher. When I went to see him, he asked if I really knew Hebrew. And I said "Yes, I really knew Hebrew." He said "OK, go write an explication of a Hebrew poem that you like." So I took, diabolically, a pagan poem. He was a very pious man. And a sonnet and explicated in perfectly good Hebrew, and he read my explication and said "OK, I see you know Hebrew, now don't bother me."

Hendel: To him you were an epicurus, an epicurean.

Alter: So it was something I did on the side. When I got to Columbia I continued to do it on the side -- that is, while I was working on a book on Henry Fielding, I was publishing articles in *Commentary*, and the now-defunct magazine called *Midstream*, and elsewhere, on modern Hebrew literature. And I'm pretty sure that my senior colleagues in the English department at Columbia looked askance at this, because that's not why they had hired me. But that's what brought me to Berkeley. That is, Comparative Literature had just been founded as a department. And this very energetic, somewhat zany founding chair, Alain Renoir -- the son of the filmmaker Jean Renoir...

Hendel: Grandson of the painter?

Alter: That's right. He wanted to build a department that would span the wealth of literatures. So they wanted somebody in Hebrew literature, and several people here at Berkeley had read my articles and liked them and they gave me a terrific offer. So I came. And that made a huge difference, because Columbia is very hierarchical, and at the time -- maybe it's not that way now -- it was kind of very rigid; they put people in slots. Because my dissertation had a lot on the 18th-century novel, they labeled me an 18th-century man. And I began wearing those funny hats and so forth.

Hendel: The collars.

Alter: Right. But the sedan chair was nice! So when I came to Berkeley, I suddenly discovered "Hey, I can do whatever I want here." And so I started concocting a variety of courses. I was teaching Hebrew literature alongside the European novel. And then what happened was I had always had a sneaking, but passionate, interest in the Hebrew Bible. And something like 15 years into my career -- which would have been, say, roughly a decade after I came to Berkeley, I thought, you know, I never could understand what's so great about Biblical narrative. It seems so simple, so parsimonious in the words it uses. But it's great. And then at that point I think I have a couple of explanations. So I wrote one article; this is for *Commentary* -- I was writing regularly for them at the time. And I was convinced it was going to be a one-off. And it was kind of provocative, I'm sure as you remember.

Hendel: Oh yeah.

Alter: I was a young guy. And so...

Hendel: -- Full of piss and vinegar, one would say.

Alter: Right. So I scolded Biblical scholars for spending all their time hunting down supposed Acadian loan words and not knowing how to read a story. And then I took a story from Genesis and showed them how to read it.

Well, what happened was I got an outpouring of letters – so I thought gee, people are interested in this, and I have a couple of more ideas about Biblical narrative. So I wrote a second article and then a third and a fourth. And by that time I was definitely on my way to writing a book on Biblical narrative, and that was the beginning of the slippery slope.

Hendel: Once you started writing these things for *Commentary*, you put them together in a book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, which I cut my eye teeth on, when I was my first year in graduate school. It was a very dangerous book for Biblical scholars to read at the time, because it was challenging the paradigm of what Biblical scholarship was and ought to be. But correctly so, in my view. The hierarchical aspect of the study of the Bible was to some degree carried on here by my predecessor, Jacob Milgram. So how did you get away with teaching courses on the Hebrew Bible at Berkeley?

Alter: At first, of course, I didn't teach courses on the Hebrew Bible at all. And just about the time that I was writing those articles, before the narrative book came out, one of my students of Hebrew literature -- modern Hebrew literature -- a lovely woman named Nitza Ben-Dov, who since has had a distinguished career as a literary scholar in Israel -- she came to me and she said “We understand that it makes sense to require two seminars on Biblical Hebrew for students of modern Hebrew literature, because there's this continuity. But two seminars which are on nothing but on the Book of Leviticus, in which you do one chapter of Leviticus per semester, seems a little unreasonable.

Hendel: And I understand I could get extra credit if you went to the butcher shop and I saw how they cut up the animals.

Alter: That's right. Jacob Milgram footnotes his students for doing this. So I had a twinge of conscience here (and I was getting interested in the subject) and I devised a course on Biblical narrative -- a graduate seminar, which the first time met in the evenings at my home. Maybe that was to **avoid the campus police**. In order to give the course some cover, I gave it a different course number from the regular seminars on Biblical Hebrew, and I gave it a phony description. I called it Ancient and Modern Hebrew Texts, but we never did anything modern.

And as you vividly remember, there was one point a few years after you came to Berkeley, where you said “Hey, Bob, why don't we really do this?” And you and I began to teach this series of graduate seminars, where we would take a particular Biblical text -- say it could be Job or the Song of Songs or Isaiah or Psalms. And I would put together a little reader of modern Hebrew poems -- in the Hebrew, of course -- that responded to the texts or related to it in some way, and then we'd spend a good part of the afternoon analyzing the Biblical text and then we would talk about the poems. And it turned out to be an often illuminating process.

Hendel: Oh it was a great course, a classic course, and the students loved it, as did I. Now after trespassing in my field for many years, you started translating some of the books of the Hebrew Bible. This culminated this last year in your completion of this project, which is an astonishing -- it's a ridiculous project to begin...

Alter: I agree.

Hendel: Astonishing to finish -- your translation of the entire Hebrew Bible. So how did that slippery slope get you into being a translator and eclipsing the King James version?

Alter: Well to be fair, I had no notion I would translate. And in fact the ad hoc translations I did for the Biblical narrative book pretty much hewed to the general model of the Jewish Publication Society translation that started off in the 1960s. When I revised that book -- in I guess around 2011 -- I was horrified with those translation, and I revised all of them radically. So I wasn't thinking much about translation, and then a very amiable man during a year I was spending -- a visiting year at Princeton -- made an appointment to come down to see me. He was an editor at W.W. Norton, named Steve Foreman. And he said we would love you to do one of our Norton critical additions -- and those, for those viewers who are not aware of it, they're very neat teaching texts. Like you have a Norton critical *Moby Dick*, with an introduction, some footnotes by way of explanation here and there. And then in the back of the book all kinds of ancillary material like Melville's letters, excerpts from the books on whaling he consulted, and so forth. So he, Steve Foreman, said "You could do either something from Kafka, because I had just written a book involving Kafka then -- I'm all over the ballpark..."

Hendel: *Necessary Angels?*

Alter: Yeah, right.

Hendel: That's a good one.

Alter: Or I might do something in the Bible. So I said "Well, it would be possible to make a really neat Norton critical edition of The Book of Genesis because now that there there's lots of good material to stick in the back of the book." But I'm not a person who's always prudent about what he says. The problem is there's something really wrong with all the translations. So if I did this, I would have to do my own translation. Well, he then engaged in a conversation with my agent.

And for whatever reason it emerged that I should do a straight-up translation, rather than a Norton critical edition. And I viewed it, to begin with, with skepticism. I said "I love the stylistic brilliance of the Hebrew. And I would like to get a lot of that in English, but it couldn't work because the structure of the languages is so different. And when I finish everybody's going to hate it and I will hate it, too." It turned out to be not that hateful, and it got some good critical responses. So I thought "OK, I'll do one more book of the Bible" -- and from one book to another. And then I think when I was talked into doing the Five Books of Moses -- which I hesitated, because sticking in the middle of it was the book of Leviticus, the happy hunting ground of your predecessor in Hebrew Bible at Berkeley. But I decided I would do it.

And then it turned out to be -- not by my calculation at all -- a great career move. Because people regarded the Five Books of Moses as the foundation of the whole Bible -- maybe of both Testaments. So when it came out, all of a sudden I found myself being reviewed in places I'd never been reviewed before, like the *New York Review of Books* -- well, I had been reviewed in *The Times* but I got a ecstatic review in *The Times* -- and *The New Yorker*, where I got a somewhat grumpy review by John Updike.

Hendel: He didn't want any commentary.

Alter: Well, he did two things. First he said "Why do we need another translation of the Bible? We have the King James version." Then he said "Why do we need a commentary? It makes this book so heavy to hold." And he said "the King James version didn't have a commentary." What he didn't know was that the predecessor to the King James version was the giant of the ...

Hendel: The Geneva Bible.

Alter: The Geneva Bible, which was done by Protestants who had fled from England under the reign of the fanatic Catholic, Bloody Mary. And they included commentary -- not at the bottom but in the margins -- which was anti-monarchic, not too surprisingly. So King James at first wasn't having anything -- you guys stay away from commentary.

Hendel: So you left out the anti-monarchic commentary in your margins.

Alter: Right.

Hendel: You've mentioned that at this point you became a more public figure. But prior to this point you'd been writing for *Commentary* and other magazines. You seem to have honed your art in a broader setting than just academic contexts. How do you -- how would you address your engagement as a -- not just a scholar, but in a sense as a public intellectual, as a scholar who speaks to a broader public? And is that something that you see lacking in academia today?

Alter: OK. Being a public intellectual -- that's really been a very important part of my vocation, as a critic and a scholar. And I think there are two reasons for it. One was I was an undergraduate at Columbia in the heyday of the New York intellectuals. A couple of them were my teachers at Columbia -- like Lionel Trilling and F.W. Dupee. And others were not -- there was Irving Howe, for example, with whom I became quite friendly rather later. And this was a very appealing model to me. That is, these were writers who were addressing a broad literate audience and not a small group of academic specialists. So that's one reason.

The other reason has to do with my relation to writing. That is, if you read almost any article in an academic journal, the best you can say about it is that it's serviceable, if it's not clotted with academic jargon, which it often is. That is, a writer for a learned journal has in mind to communicate maybe -- I don't think I'm overstating this -- to an audience of a few hundred or maybe twelve hundred.

Hendel: Or maybe 12.

Alter: Maybe 12, right. The writing is simply a vehicle for communicating his or her scholarship. I discovered right from the get go -- actually while I was writing my dissertation -- that I love to write, that I love to shape sentences to find exactly the right word to make it lively, to craft metaphors, and so forth. So all this went to my addressing a large audience.

Hendel: So in your move from the East Coast to the West Coast, you hinted that there was a different kind of atmosphere of what one could do, what one couldn't do. In the WASPy world of English studies at the time, in Harvard and Columbia, was there a lingering, gentlemanly anti-Semitism that was affecting your interest in Hebrew literature?

Alter: That's kind of a touchy subject. Yeah. I didn't feel anything directed at me, at least at the time, but I was the kind of unconscious young man. At Harvard my mentor was Harry Levin, who was an eminent figure of his generation in comparative literature. Now, Levin is Lavin, Levy, so his family heritage was Jewish. But Harry didn't like to own up to being a Jew, and I think he said he was a Christian Scientist or something like that.

Hendel: Really!

Alter: And interestingly he was in comparative literature. Now he had made his debut with a brilliant short book on Joyce's *Ulysses*, in the late '30s, or maybe around 1940 at a time when very

little yet had been written on *Ulysses*. The logic --- and he was interested in Shakespeare. The logical setting for him would have been English, but the English department at Harvard did not hire Jews. So they found a comparative literature slot for him.

Now at Columbia, I think there were there were actually three Jews, which was a lot. There was Lionel Trilling, who have been the first and only for many years. There was Robert Brustein, the theater guy, who eventually went to Yale, and Schilling's disciple, Steven Marcus, who was a Victorianist. I had the impression that my senior colleagues -- I hinted at this before -- were rather uneasy about the fact that I was writing not only in Hebrew writers but on Jewish American writers. They thought that wasn't quite appropriate, maybe it was a little unseemly. But I don't have any more information than that about that.

Hendel: Yeah, OK. So Berkeley was the Wild West at the time. You could anything you want, and this sharp shootin' Renoir guy gave you all sorts of freedom.

Alter: Oh, and interestingly when I came to Berkeley, faculty used to eat at a restaurant called the Golden Bear; they stopped doing that after a while. And the first time I had lunch there, with Zev Brenner, who had grown up in Berkeley, and was chair of ... studies, he pointed to a table full of people -- I think they were all male, as I remember, from the History Department. And he said "See that table over there? Almost every one of them is a Jew." And he said "Fifteen years ago there wouldn't have been Jews in the History Department." So Berkeley, too, went through a change -- earlier than other places.

Hendel: So Berkeley was going through other changes in 1967.

Alter: Oh yeah, the Troubles.

Hendel: And so did the wafting tear gas affect what you were doing?

Alter: Not really. I mean it was it was shocking. There was a day when National Guard helicopters descended on the campus, spraying something called CN gas, which the wind immediately carried to Oakland Children's Hospital. And there was another day when I approached Dwinelle Hall, where my office is, and there were a lot of young National Guardsmen with fixed bayonets, preventing the rowdy masses from overthrowing the university, supposedly. But I think that I only missed one class because of the demonstrations. I thought that my responsibility was to stay committed to teaching the things I thought were important.

Hendel: Now you've mentioned to me that in those days, when people weren't taking over the administration building, there was a lot of interest in literature.

Alter: There was. Now when I first came to Berkeley I taught a course, in rotation with one other person, on trends in contemporary fiction. And it met in a really large lecture hall and regularly had 250 students.

Hendel: Wow!

Alter: Then what happened -- and we never went back after this -- was that in the early '70s, the prosperity of the late '60s evaporated. And all of a sudden students were worried about getting jobs. And practically overnight of course with 250 dwindled to 25. And I think that was true across the board in the humanities.

Hendel: Yeah, well you've seen from the flowering of the humanities to its near demise.

Alter: Yes.

Hendel: Nowadays a course like that is lucky to get double figures. So is this just an accelerated process of economic difficulty? How do you how do you diagnose the decline of the humanities?

Alter: Yes, well it certainly has a lot to do with economic difficulties and then the culture -- and maybe this has been accelerated by the explosion of high tech over the last two decades, I guess -- the culture has been become heavily oriented toward what's called STEM, right? Science, technology, engineering, and what's the M?

Hendel: Oh, math.

Alter: Math, right. And so that's what students are lining up for. That's where the funding is going. And Berkeley actually is not quite as bad as some other universities. I mean there are universities where whole departments of foreign literature have been eliminated. I'm told that at Stanford -- which of course is very close to Silicon Valley -- it's basically become an institute of technology; there's just little pockets of the humanities.

Hendel: I've heard that even Harvard is aiming now to become the second best science school in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Alter: I see.

Hendel: Now one of your books, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*, takes aim at what came to be called postmodernism -- at the ideologies that go on in literature departments.

Alter: Right.

Hendel: So at the center of this change in the humanities was also a change in how literary studies was conceived of and practiced. You were on the other side of this. How would you describe how that culture war played out?

Alter: Well, it's still around. I would say that is the thing that has not changed. Is really a politicization of literary studies. So maybe in the first phase it was more Marxist and post-colonialist -- the post-colonialism continues to have legs, and it's feminist and it's gender equality, sexual orientation equality and so forth. Now I'm willing to concede that many of these are good causes. I don't agree with all their position. But OK there are certainly things to be said in defense of giving women their due in so long it was denied, to take one example. And there are many sins that colonialism has to answer for, and so forth. But what's happened is a kind of instrumentalization of the study of literature, where literature is seen as a way to get at these issues or to promote these issues.

Hendel: Do you see a decline in the high theory in these areas?

Alter: Yeah -- now that was a phase -- that was a phase that came out of Paris, as we know. And it was maybe motivated in part that -- it wasn't exactly political. It was motivated in part by a sense that the study of literature was a little bit too chatty and too old boyish. An eminent professor from Yale gave some lectures here at that period in the 1970s and said that the English language discourse on literature was derived from what was acceptable to talk about in the coffee houses in London in the 1700s. Which I think is a little bit of a simplification. So this man, and many like him, then admired the fact that heavy-duty metaphysics, looming conceptual categories could be

brought into the study of literature. The leading edge of all that was a movement called deconstruction, which for a while swept the field and I don't think has much of a presence now.

Hendel: You mentioned that you had a separation from *Commentary* over political issues. Tell us what that was about, and to what extent political issues have been on your mind while you've been teaching at Berkeley. This is a political place.
OK.

Alter: OK. The *Commentary* thing is easy to explain. There's politics and my separation from *Commentary*. When I began writing for them, as a graduate student at Harvard toward the end of my graduate studies, *Commentary* was a left liberal publication.

And it was also kind of, at that moment, it was central in American intellectual life. I mean it was *the* intellectual monthly. Then over the years -- mainly steered by its editor, Norman Podhoretz -- it evolved into neoconservatism, and then a very rigid kind of party-line neoconservatism. Now I probably should have broken with them a little earlier than I did, because I was a paleo-liberal, not a neoconservative. I was reluctant to break with *Commentary* because it was such a good audience.

I mean I used to get wonderful responses -- not necessarily from academics -- from, you know, a lawyer in Baltimore or a brain surgeon in Philadelphia, making smart suggestions about something that I -- you know "Why did you miss the allusion to Shakespeare in that line from T.S. Eliot that you were writing?" That's sort of thing. That was great. You don't get responses like that when you publish in an academic journal; you get zero responses. I'm sure you know from experience. So eventually -- first I wrote a couple of articles in *The New Republic*. I think we have to say "of blessed memory" now, after the hostile takeover. And a couple of articles that were very critical of *Commentary* party-line writers (I suppose I shouldn't go into that). So that then mutually, I think, *Commentary* and I felt that I shouldn't be a contributor anymore.

Now as far as the Berkeley atmosphere. It's of course by and large -- by no means as exclusively as people think -- it's by and large a leftist atmosphere. And I have some sympathies with certain positions of the left, but I'm more of a centrist. But I don't really pay much attention to the politics around here. I mean, I love teaching literature; I love teaching the Bible. And that is what I focus on.

Hendel: So what do you -- what's your view of the current state of literary studies, Biblical studies -- all these things to which you've contributed so much?

Alter: Well, Biblical studies. It's hard to say. There is certainly some interesting things going on. I don't think it has been an intellectually vital field -- maybe not for a long time. It could be that in the mid-20th century, literary studies was regarded as the crown jewel of intellectual work. You know that's the resonance, for example, of the criticism of Lionel Trilling. That's not going to happen again. But it seems to me that there's something about the brilliance of great literature that has a perennial appeal, because we're language-using animals. I mean people, even students, are not -- some of them -- are not going to stop loving Shakespeare, loving Yeats, loving James Joyce.

I mean I like teaching undergraduates as well as graduates here at Berkeley. And I remember once I was teaching a course on modernist fiction. And a young woman -- maybe she was 19 years old -- came to talk to me in my office hours. She was Asian American, and we had just read the first volume of Proust, in translation of course. And she came in to tell me how much this spoke to her life. And I said "Gee, all is not lost when a 19 year-old American girl feels that Proust speaks to her."

Hendel: So your interest and attention and love of style, of literary style, goes both in your own writing and in your scholarly discourse about stylistic literary productions and stuff. You've known a lot of the writers -- not from the Hebrew Bible as such, but writers that you have written about. Tell us some of your favorite writers, characters, eccentrics that you've written about.

Alter: OK, the writers that I know, about whom I've written, they're actually mostly Israeli writers. Maybe that's because Israel is a small country with a small culture. Here, you know, I never met Philip Roth, for example, although I wrote about him a couple of times. I did meet Saul Bellow once and he was very genial. But I haven't had that much contact with American writers.

On the other -- for example, shortly after I came to Berkeley, the young Amos Oz (recently deceased) and the young A.B. Yehoshua, had published their first volumes of fiction. And I got ahold of them -- in Hebrew; they were not yet known abroad. And I was really excited; these are fascinating writers. So I wrote a piece for *Commentary* -- at the time I was supposed to deliver three or four articles a year under the rubric of Jewish life and letters. So I was constantly shopping around -- maybe I'll diverge on this for a minute. I was constantly shopping around for topics and it was a great education for me. That is, I wrote about certain things which I probably otherwise would have never written about. Like German Jews, and a museum show at the Jewish Museum in New York, on the Lower East Side back in the era of immigration, and so forth. So I thought this is a great topic for an article and I wrote it; maybe they called it "New Israeli Fiction," I'm not sure. That would have been sometime in the late 1960s, shortly before I came here. And A.B. Yehoshua and Amos Oz both read it and they were quite pleased. And they both got in touch with me, and said "You have to look this up when you come to Israel."

Or again -- a maybe even more intriguing episode: One summer I didn't have much to do and a New York publishing house got in touch with me. They said "Would you read a novel in Hebrew for us and tell us whether it's worth translating?" And I had not heard of the writer, though. Maybe you heard the name but I didn't know anything about it. It was David Grossman and the novel was *See Under: Love*. So this big package arrives in the mail -- about five, six hundred pages in dot-matrix print. I don't know if many of the viewers will remember that; it was very hard to read. I said "Oh my God!" Because the odds are a writer you don't know about, it's not going to be great. So I started reading and I said "My God, this is one of the most brilliant novels I've read in any language in years." So I wrote an ecstatic reader's report for the publisher, and they did publish it. And what happened then, given the dynamics of Israeli culture, when the Hebrew edition came out, they quoted from my readers report. And then certain critics got their backs up: "Some smart aleck from Berkeley is trying to tell us what we should think about our writers!" But I then -- a few months later I came to Israel and David Grossman said "I would love to meet you." And we made a real connection and we've been close friends ever since. And he's just a lovely man.

Hendel: And you've hung out with Yehuda Amichai.

Alter: Yeah, well with Amichai, we became bosom buddies, really. The story is he was spending the year in New York in 1966, '67 -- this was just before I came to Berkeley -- with his future second wife, Hannah. And Agnon, the Israeli writer, got the Nobel Prize. So Yehuda Amichai were invited to speak at a little college in Philadelphia; it was a Hebrew College. Yehuda was invited to speak in Hebrew, and I in English, on Agnon. And naturally we took the train together; by the time we got to have a fast friends. And we -- you know he's stayed in our home several times. The first time I went to Israel with my future wife we stayed in their home for a few days before we moved into an apartment. And I vividly remember one particular experience: he happened to be staying with us the day that Sadat flew to Israel. And he and I got up at 5 in the morning to watch it on TV.

Hendel: That's great. Another aspect of your multifarious life that I want to address: like many Jewish intellectuals -- like many New York Jewish intellectuals -- you are an accomplished athlete when you were young. You were a racer. You ran in high school and in college. Is there any connection between that aspect of your life -- and you still play tennis and ride your bike. Is there any connection that you see between your athleticism and your athletic scholarship?

Alter: Well I think there is -- at the time I didn't think so. That is, I ran the sprints in high school. And fortunately for me I grew up in a relatively small town -- Albany, New York, which is the capital of New York. And by my senior year I was city champion in the -- we still ran yards and meters in the 100 and the 220. I also as a halfback on the football team I decided when I got to --

Hendel: I think Kafka had a similar idea.

Alter: Right, right.

Hendel: Well he would have said except for the tuberculosis.

Alter: Right. I decided not to play football in college -- prudently...

Hendel: Good choice.

Alter: Because I weighed about 153 pounds; I thought I would get massacred, which is probably an accurate assessment. But I did run track -- much less successfully in college than in high school. But I did it through college, and afterwards, when I started graduate school, I said to myself "I've wasted all this time on sports! I mean I could have been reading books. After all, I'm headed for an intellectual career and I shouldn't have squandered all this time at workouts and competitions." But as time went on I thought that I'd actually internalized something. For example, when you're training for competition in track -- in college if you're a sprinter that means you run a leg on a mile relay. You have to run a quarter mile, which is a very challenging distance, because it's almost a sprint but it's too long for a sprint. So it could be very punishing. Now the workout that we had consisted of running a quarter mile under 60 seconds, then dog trotting a quarter mile, and running a second quarter mile under 60 seconds, which is quite demanding. And what you strive for is to get your time down almost with every workout. And what happens is that you see after a while that your body is capable of things that you didn't think your body was capable of, to begin with. And I think that devoting yourself to big intellectual challenges has something of the same mindset. I remember speaking once with a historian friend of mine who had a certain -- not at Berkeley -- who had a serious writer's block. And I said "Look, what you have to do, it's like training for the quarter mile." But it never worked for him.

Hendel: So I understand that you not only sprint when you're writing -- when you're running -- but when you're writing. You write out in longhand and you never revise. How does that work?

Alter: Well it's crazy. How does it work that I don't revise? I think it's a kind of neurological quirk that doesn't have anything to do with intelligence. It's like having double-jointed thumbs, except it's more useful than double-jointed thumbs. That is, as you said, I like to write in pencil -- with a Lacrosse mechanical pencil. I'm waiting for them to give me a lifetime supply -- although they do have a lifetime warranty. Anytime it breaks down, you send it to this little town in Rhode Island and they will send back a new one.

Hendel: My kids don't even know what a pencil is.

Alter: I'm sure they don't. So writing in pencil, I have this sense of almost bodily connection with the act of writing. That is, I read a sentence – I'll erase a word here and there, and put extra words in between lines with a caret (c-a-r-e-t; I never write with carrots, I only eat them). And the -- I just find that everything clicks. That is, most people who write, for example, move paragraphs and whole passages around. And I almost never do that. Once, in the years that I was writing for *Commentary* (I eventually separated with them on political differences), I -- maybe it was an article on Gershom Scholem, the great historian of Jewish mysticism. And my editor there was a smart guy named ... said "You know, Bob, you have to put in a little bit more biographical information." But he said "I can't figure out where to stick it in, because your writing is so tight that there is no room to make changes." So it just happens.

Hendel: I think being a sprinter is part of it -- that's all connected and there's one linear pattern.

Alter: Yeah, I would add that, that writing, you know at times it can be frustrating. But mostly it's fun. So it just goes along.

Hendel: Well, this has been a great pleasure to talk to you. We've talked on other occasions, sometimes with alcoholic beverages. Let me ask you – yeah, in the long-term trajectory of the things that you've been doing. You're now retired. So now I expect you can be finally productive.

Alter: Yeah.

Hendel: Write some real books. So what are you working on now, and what do you plan to do in the near future?

Alter: Well, first I have to say about retirement, that it's not that different from teaching. First, as you know, I continue to teach one course a year, because I'm attached to teaching. And otherwise I am free from the burden of departmental meetings and admissions committees and so forth. But otherwise I'm lecturing around; I'm doing a huge amount of lecturing now because of my translation of the Hebrew Bible. And I'm writing all the time, because, as I said before, I love to write. I'm now finishing a book. I hope finishing. on a writer whom I have loved through most of my career, Vladimir Nabokov. I would love to call this book *Escape from the Bible*, but I don't think it will resonate with general readers. So I'm -- but I did feel the need to break loose from the Bible, which has preoccupied me for the last few years. I guess that the last full-scale book not having to do at all with the Bible -- that I wrote was about ten years ago called *Imagine Cities*, which is on the representation of the city in the modern European novel. So Nabokov -- not everybody likes him, some people find him affected or coy or whatever...

Hendel: *Lolita* is a little edgy.

Alter: It is edgy, and actually – well, I should explain this ...

Hendel: Pedophilic.

Alter: Yeah, well the protagonist is the pedophile; the writer isn't. And in fact even the protagonist repeatedly says that he's a monster. So I wrote one essay for the book called "Lolita Now" – which is basically how do we think about *Lolita* in the age of MeToo? The book itself is -- more than half of it is essays that I've published over the years, some going back decades, on Nabokov, together with new material. Maybe the new material is a little over a third of the book, maybe 40 percent of the book. And when I reread the old essays, I found actually I hadn't changed my mind much. That there is something, I would say, enrapturing about -- if you love language and you love literature, there is something enrapturing about reading Nabokov. He does such wonderful things (I cannot

read him in the Russian) -- he does such wonderful things with the English language. And many of the characters are so deeply engaging. And this is what literature is all about.

I'm put in mind something I identify with my former Berkeley colleague Stephen Greenblatt, who taught in the English department here until he had the bad judgment to move to an inferior institution, Harvard. A number of years ago he wrote an excellent book called *Hamlet in Purgatory*. And in the introduction to the book -- one should keep in mind that Stephen was the pioneer in America of what's called the new historicism, which was heavily influenced by the French theoretical thinker Michel Foucault. And it's a very politically driven trend in the literary studies, because literature is conceived as one instance of discourse. And discourse in any culture is what the powers-that-be use to manipulate the consciousness of the general population. So you see this scenario there.

Now in the preface to *Hamlet in Purgatory* -- without quite saying it in so many words, Stephen Greenblatt really renounces the New Criticism. And he says something like "If you write on Shakespeare and you don't respond to the magic of his language, there is no point in writing about Shakespeare at all. Which also makes me think of something Nabokov said about Shakespeare. He said "You can't just read Shakespeare with your mind; you have to read him from the base of your spine." And so I find myself now, in writing about Nabokov, trying to offer an explanation and a celebration for a writer whom I read from the base of my spine.

Hendel: He writes like a butterfly collector.

Alter: Right.

Hendel: And after Nabokov?

Alter: Oh, one step at a time.

Hendel: One step at a time? More tennis? More biking?

Alter: Definitely not.

Hendel: OK.

Alter: I even played not badly today, which doesn't always happen.

Hendel: Good. Well you're invited to come back to the Bible after you're done with Nabokov. Well it's been a pleasure.

Alter: It's been a pleasure. It's always a joy to speak with you.