On the Obligation toward the Difficult Whole

The interview with Brian McHale, Distinguished Humanities Professor (The Ohio State University).

October 19-December 4, 2008

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1. You are probably best known for Postmodernist Fiction and Constructing Postmodernism*, two works which concentrate on the poetic form of postmodernist fiction. The common undercurrent of those treatments seems to be the relation/opposition between modernist fiction and postmodernist fiction through their own respective formal dominants – modernist fiction raising the epistemological questions about the conditions of the possibilities of gaining knowledge about the world around us, presuming a rather certain "I" and a rather certain "world"; postmodernist fiction raising questions about the disputable ontological status of this world itself, and the rather fragmentary nature of the "I" observing that world. Now, almost two decades later, do you still stand by this distinction and the questions posed therein, or has your present experience of cultural and literary postmodernism prompted to make some changes or additions to it? Does the term "postmodernism" still have a sufficiently dynamic and productive strength for describing the literary and cultural developments of the late-capitalist society today? Or has it become obsolete?*

I take it that this question has two parts. First, you want to know whether I'm still satisfied with the distinction between modernist and postmodernist fiction that I developed in those two books. Here I can say quite positively that I do still stand behind that distinction. Its value was always that you could actually work with it to produce further interesting and valuable distinctions. I still see that as being the case, and am not troubled by counterarguments such as, for instance, that ontological fiction predates the onset of postmodernism in some instances, or the other way

around, that epistemological fictions persist into postmodernism. Neither of those types of counterargument really threatens the model. They would only threaten a model that required a very sharp and leak-proof period boundary, which does not correspond to my understanding of the nature of period categories. However, since working out that distinction in the case of prose fiction I've tried to think about the extension of the distinction between ontological and epistemological poetics into other media or even just into other verbal genres, and I'm not at all confident that the distinction is generalizable very far beyond prose fiction, let alone that it's universal. Some of my work since then has been on poetry. I wrote a book on postmodernist long poems, where I was forced to conclude that the distinction isn't nearly as sound. Instead of a single dimension of difference between modernism and postmodernism in prose fiction, in the case of poetry you have to talk about multiple dimensions. It's a much messier, much less tidy distinction. Moreover, the further we get away from prose fiction the more that's the case: it would be hard to use the same distinction to talk sensibly about visual media, about other art forms, about architecture, music or dance and so forth. So one of my conclusions since those books is that, though the distinction for prose fiction still seems to be workable, its extension into other areas is problematic. There is no necessity for the distinction to hold across media, genres or cultural practices. It would be economical if it did, but I don't believe it does or that it needs to. In other fields other kinds of criteria will be called for and maybe a less sharp boundary will emerge.

The second half of this question concerns the continued productivity of the term "postmodernism" for defining contemporary literary practice. Here I'm not sure I have a good answer. It's certainly still applicable to some contemporary production, but this is an emergent situation and it's not going to be clear for some time whether we are emerging from postmodernism into something else. In any case, even if postmodernism as a concept is rendered obsolete for the description of the contemporary that doesn't threaten its historical value. The term still has use as a period term. The question is whether the period is coming to an end. I don't think we're in a position to answer one way or the other yet. It's a possibility, in which case postmodernism will recede into the historical past, and we'll think of it in the same way we now think of modernism. The distinction will still be viable but as a period distinction valid for the 20th century and not necessarily for the 21st.

2. Could this distinction of epistemological and ontological formal dominants also be used as cultural dominants for describing the prevailing currents of a socio-cultural reality? For

example, in the wake of the events of 9/11 there was a talk about awakening from the liberal-democratic slumber of the Fukuyaman "end of history", about history "re-starting" itself, and about people establishing a more direct, coherent contact between them and (socio-cultural) reality – in other words, a talk about somewhat getting over the epistemological crisis of postmodernism. Do you think this has been the case? Was the once popular notion that postmodernism is irreversibly or irrevocably "here to stay" a symptom of that Fukuyaman slumber - and has there been a change in literary dominants that testify to that? Or is it all quite the other way around – that the late-capitalist society is in a deeper epistemological crisis than ever?

This question, too, concerns periodization, in a certain sense. You want to know whether since 9/11 we've emerged from the period in which the cultural category of postmodernism was relevant, and if so, whether crossing over into new cultural phase changes postmodernism. The question is formulated in a way that posits 9/11 as a kind of wake-up call from the liberal-democratic slumber of the era between 1989 and 2001, an era in which history was supposed to have ended with our emergence into wall-to-wall liberal democracy. My own view of that era is a little different. I have the sense that the era between the fall of the Wall and 9/11 was characterized by a kind of indeterminacy and openness that makes it really a climactic moment for postmodernism. This was not so much the era of liberal-democratic slumber as a moment when the old polarization of the Cold War era was rendered suddenly irrelevant, and the complete reorientation, not just of political and economic life, but of cultural life, became a possibility. Suddenly, instead of two poles, East versus West, we were faced with multipolarity. It was as though cultural postmodernism, which had already been around for several decades, were converging finally with world-historical tendencies. This is the world that postmodernism was meant for, in a way. This is, I admit, a utopian way of thinking about the 90s, but I think utopian possibilities were present. Remember that the early 90s was also the era of the still not fully commercialized phase of the internet – its "communitarian" phase. It was also the era of the emergence of hip-hop culture and consciousness, before its complete petrification. In all kinds of spheres, there was a sudden upsurge of possibilities and pluralization, which at least echoes the geopolitical pluralization. The Fukuyama view is a kind of recuperative one, an attempt to master and subdue plurality, but that's not the only way you could view what was happening. Looking at the 90s in this more progressive and possibly utopian way, the crisis of 9/11 represents not so much a wake-up call from the dream of liberal democracy as a re-polarization of the world, as though that episode of multiplurality was simply so anxiety-

provoking that as soon as the opportunity arose, those who benefit from fear and paranoia re-polarized the world, shutting down the possibilities that had been visible in the 90s. Those other tendencies that I just mentioned – the openness of the internet, the upsurge of hip-hop culture – were also brought under control, commercialized, turned into economic engines, and their utopian possibilities were drained off. All of the various forms of multiculturalism seem to be in retreat now, under that renewed paranoid regime. It now appears risky to entertain multiculturalism in a way that it wasn't before 9/11. That's an alternative way of viewing what happened in the 90s, and one that I find offers a better and more satisfying explanation.

3. Is it possible today, after decades of theoretical contemplation, to talk about postmodernist classics, or of "High Postmodernism"? You have frequently discussed works – e.g. Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow or Umberto Eco's Foucault's Pendulum *– which seem to have become much more "canonized" than others. Could it be that some works have risen and "solidified" – as postmodern High Art – above their presumptive status of a common postmodern work in a consumer-oriented socio-cultural circulation? Would you say that postmodernism, with all its well-known apocalyptic claims on the dissolution of historicity is – or was – itself just another historical era of literary practice?*

This question points in two different directions. First, you are inviting me to speculate about whether there are such things as postmodernist classics. I think there certainly are. Canonization is proceeding, and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, for instance, is certainly one of the canonized texts of postmodernism. (I'm not so sure about Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, which may have receded slightly from people's consciousness.) We could say the same thing about other bodies of work that already seem pretty securely canonized, such as the works of Italo Calvino, and maybe those of Angela Carter, of Salman Rushdie, and a few others. All this is controversial, but I'm sure most people researching and teaching in this field could easily come up with a shortlist of canonical writers, and if we compared our lists we would find a good many shared names on it. In the second part, the question turns around and challenges the canonization process itself, suggesting that if canonization is proceeding, this means that after all postmodernism is just another historical era or literary practice. Honestly I don't find that troubling at all. I take it for granted that postmodernism is just another historical era and literary practice. It would be highly unlikely for it to escape the processes of literary history altogether, and I don't believe it has. So everything that we expect of literary-historical process and literary institutionalization applies to postmodernism as well, despite the overblown claims that postmodernists have sometimes made

about their own exceptionalism. However, there is one development in postmodernist literature that may have longer-term consequences for the way literary history functions and the way we think about it, and that is the erosion or dispersion of the very idea and category of literature itself. Again, this can be overplayed. We've heard time and again that the novel was dead, yet each time it's declared dead it manages to recover. In the same way, I don't want to bet too heavily on the final dissolution of literature as a consequence of postmodernism. Nevertheless, it's certainly the case that the digital media have at least eroded the edges of the literary field, and that literature has suffered a great deal of pressure from competing media. We might envision a long-term process where literature would gradually dissolve into this general mediasphere, and this might be regarded as an ultimate consequence of developments of the postmodern period. But that hasn't happened yet, and even if it does, it will take time, and we won't be sure that it has finally occurred until after the fact. So for now postmodernism settles into its place in literary history with all that that implies, including the canonization of postmodernist classics.

4. In one of his essays, Fredric Jameson, one of the most well-known theorists on cultural postmodernism, pointed to the possibility that in the present late-capitalist culture the high-tech scientific developments have been so smoothly and thoroughly integrated in the perception or understanding of our surrounding everyday that the natural presence, intimacy, and speed of those developments aren't worth mentioning as something novel anymore. On this, he establishes his argument about the "suspension of borders" between realist fiction and science fiction, referring to the possibility that science fiction is dangerously close to becoming – or already has become - "the realism of today", and thereby, due to those scientific and socio-cultural developments, we may have become "culturally aware" that these two genres, despite their apparent differences, have always already yielded the same "poetic arsenal". Do you agree with such an argument? And how do the transformations in socio-cultural reality affect our perception of "canonized" literary forms? How would you – in the background of those transformations – describe, for example, the status and shape of good old mimetic realism today?

The starting point here is Jameson's claim that science fiction has overtaken realism, or maybe the other way around, that reality has overtaken science fiction and we are living now in a condition of technological change so fast that we might as well think of our immediate reality in science fiction terms. That's a very attractive analysis with plenty of good evidence to support it. I'm especially struck by the fact that one of Jameson's examples in making this argument was

the cyberpunk writers of the 80s, William Gibson in particular. Since Jameson said these things about science fiction William Gibson has gone on to write entirely contemporary novels, set in the immediate present, involving no projection of future alternatives at all. Nevertheless, these novels have an entirely science fiction "feel," especially *Pattern Recognition*, Gibson's 2003 novel about 9/11, as well as its sequel, *Spook Country*, from 2007. This can be seen as confirmation that Jameson was right, and that Gibson has reached the conclusion that the only way to write science fiction now is to write immediately contemporary novels. If science fiction really is displacing realism, as this question suggests, so much the worse for realism, and so much the better for science fiction. Science fiction has justified itself by giving us tools for thinking about contemporary experience, as realism once could, but not longer does. "Good old mimetic realism" has actually become retrograde with respect to the immediate contemporary world. Realism is not really well-equipped to deal with change at this pace, and it inevitably lags behind where we are now; it's not paying attention to the right things or looking in the right places. There is, though, a certain danger for science fiction, which is that, in becoming the "realism of today," it might end up losing some of its utopian dimension, which is what many of us, Jameson included, especially value in science fiction. Science fiction has always been a way of thinking about possible alternatives to contemporary reality, projecting alternatives ahead of us into the future, or "laterally" into some distant or parallel space. If science fiction is finally only realism, then these utopian possibilities begin to shrink. Nevertheless, science fiction still serves the critical function of estranging the world, bringing us back to confront the way we are by the roundabout route of estrangement and alterity. Even those William Gibson novels that I mentioned before do the work that science fiction is meant to do – they show us what we already know, but in a way that makes it visible to us again. Science fiction continues to be the literature of cognitive estrangement, even if it's no longer the literature of the future.

5. Your latest book, The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole *analyzes nine postmodern long poems. What is the obligation? – And what is the difficult whole?*

I am very proud of the title *The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole*, which I frankly stole from Robert Venturi, the architect and architecture theorist. It's a slogan from his book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), which in retrospect we can see as the first statement in the conversation about postmodernism in architecture, before that term was actually available. (I suspect Venturi actually took the phrase from someplace else, maybe even a literary source, but I haven't been able to trace its origin.) I seized on Venturi's phrase partly in order to

capitalize on the breakthrough nature of his book. Nevertheless, it's a problematic title for a book about postmodernist long poems, because the key words in it actually have quite a modernist ring. "Obligation" has the tone of high-minded modernist aesthetics, and "difficulty" is certainly a modernist value, while "whole" suggests organicist assumptions about form that are more modernist than postmodernist. Nevertheless, I think it's possible to turn those terms around and reorient them towards postmodernism, and in particular towards postmodernist poetry, which is the topic of my book. As I said earlier, I found that I wasn't able simply to import the distinction between modernist and postmodernist fiction, between epistemological and ontological dominants, to poetry. I had to construct a messier and more complicated set of criteria, different dimensions of difference between modernism and postmodernism poetry, a machine with more moving parts than in the case of my books on postmodernist fiction. It seems to me that the ideas of difficulty and wholeness, of difficult wholeness, were as relevant for these postmodernist poems as they were for the modernist poems that preceded them. So the phrase "the obligation toward the difficult whole" might be understood both as a kind of acknowledgement of my theoretical difficulties in describing postmodernist poetry and also as an acknowledgement of the nature of those poems, which, on the one hand, do have aspirations to a kind of unity, but also exhibit resistance or skepticism toward unity. The language of obligation seems to me to apply, in Venturi's mind anyway, mainly to the architect, the maker of difficult wholes. In his view, it's an obligation of the architect not to reduce and simplify, not to produce purity of modernist form but to acknowledge the messiness of his projects and the programs that he's executing, and the potential satisfactions of achieving a difficult rather than a simple, legible whole. I transferred the obligation from the creator to the describer, the critic and theorist who shares the obligation not to simplify and reduce but to acknowledge the difficulty and the intractability of these objects in front of him or her.

6. You spent a part of your life in Tel Aviv, teaching poetics in Tel Aviv University. What does this period mean to you? Was there indeed such a phenomenon as the "Tel Aviv school of poetics and semiotics" or is it an umbrella term for the work of separate scholars?

This is a question, I take it, about intellectual genealogy, and in particular about my association with the Tel Aviv school of poetics and semiotics. First of all, there really was such a school, and the first generation of people associated with that it really did share a great deal in the way of a common orientation and a common language, one that derives from two main sources, Russian Formalism and the phenomenology of literature, especially in the work of the Polish

phenomenologist Roman Ingarden. The synthesis of these two tendencies gives the Tel Aviv approach its distinctive character as a kind of neo-Formalism with a reader-component that was never so conspicuous in the original Formalist model. This synthesis can be traced to the intellectual background of Benjamin Hrushovski (now called Benjamin Harshav), the founder of the group, around whom the others assembled. In various ways and combinations, and with the infusion of other intellectual sources, each of the other people of the Tel Aviv group – including Itamar Even-Zohar, Menachem Perry, Meir Sternberg, Gideon Toury, Ziva Ben-Porat, and others – took up various aspects of Harshav's synthesis and developed them further. (For details, you could consult the entry on the "Tel Aviv School of Narrative Poetics," written by Moshe Ron and myself, in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*.) The Tel Aviv school was extremely productive for maybe a couple of decades, which is a long life cycle for an intellectual school. Eventually the differences among individuals – personal incompatibilities but also intellectual differences – meant that the school was behaving less and less as a school and becoming more and more divided. I happened to be there towards the end of the life cycle of this group, so I benefited from joining the conversation in medias res, so to speak.

7. In On Deconstruction *(1987), Jonathan Culler emphasizes a special role of semiotics during the structuralist phase and considers poststructuralism as a nonscientific and semiotics as scientific extension of structuralism. Do you agree with this differentiation and is this kind of co-existence of scientific and non-scientific projects, as Culler calls them, in some ways characteristic of the "postmodernist condition"?*

Again, with all respect to Culler (whose work I admire enormously), I don't find this a very compelling formulation. In any case, the varieties of "poststructuralism" that might be construed as some sort of extension of structuralism – Culler is surely thinking mainly of deconstruction – have largely receded from view, certainly in the United States, and have been replaced with a range of "historicist," "contextualist" and "identitarian" approaches. I'm not sure how much these approaches owe to structuralism, except indirectly, via Foucault.

7. Lotman's work on semiosphere has been compared with that of Barthes after The Pleasure of the Text *(1973). Could Lotman's move from the concept of text to the concept of semiosphere be compared with the structuralist transition to poststructuralism and thus the passage from the static analysis to dynamical? Could this transition in semiotics be placed among more general sensibilities and movements in theory and culture?*

I think it would be presumptuous of me to try to offer insights into Lotman's work – especially to colleagues from Tartu – among other reasons because my understanding of his work is entirely dependent on the availability and quality of translations into English and French. However, let me just say that the analogy between the later Lotman and poststructuralism doesn't seem to me very compelling. I would rather argue that in moving from text to semiosphere in his later work Lotman was completing a trajectory that had been interrupted at least twice before in the collective intellectual careers of his predecessors – first, the Russian Formalists, then the Prague Structuralists. In each case, an initial text-centric formalism was beginning to open out into a more culturological perspective – toward literary "life," literary evolution and the literary system in the case of the Formalists, and toward reception-theory in the case of the Prague School – when historical forces beyond their control interrupted the completion of their respective intellectual trajectories. Lotman was fortunate enough to be able to complete the intellectual trajectory from text to what he called semiosphere.

9. You're a co-founder (together with Jim Phelan, David Herman and Frederick Aldama) of the project "Narrative" in the Ohio State University. What is the aim of this project and how is it functioning?

The objective here is really to institutionalize narrative study at Ohio State and thereby to create a model for similar institutionalization elsewhere, we hope. The impulse especially comes from Jim Phelan who has been working for many years to create a disciplinary "home" for narrative studies, which otherwise lacks one. He is really responsible for gathering the rest of us together at Ohio State. When the opportunity arose for us to compete for funding for a project, we made a proposal and won. We have an impact across the university, across departments, and we also give the university some visibility across the country and maybe around the world. In years to come we hope to have an increasingly international dimension and presence, building bridges with others institutions and initiatives, such as the International Society for the Study of Narrative (whose journal *Narrative* is edited by Jim Phelan and published by Ohio State University Press) and international groups such as the Nordic narrative network, the Hamburg group, and so on. This project aspires to give narrative studies an institutional existence at Ohio State and in the United States.

10. There are many new developments in narratology, for example cognitive narratology, rhetorical narratology etc. and as Ansgar Nünning has said ".. narratology has at last managed

to leave the barren ground of structuralism and gone to greener pastures .." ("Narratology or Narratologies ?" In What Is Narratology? Questions and Answers Regarding the Status of a Theory*. Eds Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller; 2003, pp. 255). Since the term 'narratology' itself coined by Tzvetan Todorov has a burden of structuralist connotations there has been some questioning about whether the term itself can refer to these new approaches. How do you feel about these debates around the term 'narratology' and its usage in plural as 'narratologies'? Is there a unified theoretical body of narratology or are there fragmented narratologies without any real possibility or need of synthesis between different theoretical stances and their outcomes? And are all formalist and structural approaches inevitably obsolete or is there a possibility and maybe even necessity for synthesis between the "old" and the "new" ?*

The "new narratologies" – or what my colleague David Herman calls "post-classical narratologies" – are almost all, in various ways, *contextualist* narratologies; they aim to restore the historical, sociological, ethnographic, rhetorical and other contexts that classical narratology systematically neglected in its striving to capture the universals of narrative. The main exception to this tendency is cognitive narratology, which, like classical narratology, strives to capture universals, but in a different way. The narrative universals it tries to identify are biological and evolutionary, rather than the formal and logical universals of classical narratology. I think it is interesting, however, that even the contextualist approaches to narrative seem reluctant to abandon the term "narratology," despite its structuralist associations. By retaining the term, it seems to me that contextualist narratologists acknowledge (perhaps unintentionally) that their historicizing and contextualizing project ultimately depends on certain universal or quasi-universal categories. After all, how can we even talk sensibly about historical or contextual variations in the concept of (say) narrator or author if we don't begin with an underlying transhistorical concepts of narrator and author – categorical constants relative to which historical variations can be measured? The persistence of the term narratology is, in a sense, an admission that these "structuralist" constants continue to function even in contextualist approaches (or for that matter cognitivist ones).

11. Semiotics and narratology are interlaced on many levels. On the one hand, narratology is an interdisciplinary field of study where semiotics is one among the participant disciplines, and sometimes the theoretical contribution of semiotics to narratology is called semiotic narratology or semiotic analysis of narrative. On the other hand, there is an understanding of narrative as an important cognitive instrument for organizing information and knowledge that is particularly

interesting from the viewpoint of semiotics, having many significant theoretical and practical consequences. What would counter as the most essential historical, current or possible cross-fertilization between narratology and semiotics in both directions? Whether and why should narratologist form a dialogue with semiotics and semiotics with narratology?

The narratological and semiotic traditions parted company at a certain point, but for contingent and institutional reasons, not because of any intrinsic incompatibility, or so it seems to me. I don't regard narratology and semiotic as belonging to different, incompatible paradigms; as far as I can see, nothing stands in the way of their reconciliation and unification, *except* for the fact that they have migrated, as it were, to different institutional and disciplinary "homes." This is not an insignificant problem, especially in the United States, where, despite its initial promise and early successes at places like Indiana and Brown, semiotics got elbowed to one side, institutionally speaking. In the States, institutional predispositions and resistances may prevent semiotics from recovering the place it once promised to occupy (just as, in much the same way, they may prevent the recovery of stylistics, another sub-discipline that once seemed very promising). But the fact that the American academy apparently can't accommodate semiotics, for reasons of its peculiar institutional history, shouldn't prevent academic institutions elsewhere, with different histories, from accommodating it and reconciling it with narratology. Look at the continuing success of stylistics in the U.K., and at the ongoing rapprochement between stylistics and narratology there.

12. There has been proliferation of research concerning the question of media and mediality, more specifically multimediality, intermediality and transmediality in recent years. What were the necessary conditions for this kind of shift in the field of narratology and how do these questions influence the central tenets of narratology? How do you feel about the role of semiotics in dealing with medality and complex media? Could semiotics provide the basis for a unified theory of mediality?

Narratology, it seems to me, is in its origins and by definition multi-, inter- and trans-medial in orientation. Unlike, say, the earlier Russian Formalist, Prague Structuralist or New Critical poetics, narratology was never interested in discovering the *differentia specifica* of literature; quite to the contrary, its object was narrative wherever it might be found, in whatever medium – literary and non-literary, verbal and visual, and so on. Recent developments in media research have served to *remind* narratology of its fundamental transmedial orientation, and to stimulate narratological research across media; but such transmedial research is not at all foreign to

narratology, but is in fact native to it. No doubt semiotic insights could serve to enhance and enrich narratological research; but I don't think narratology requires a "unified theory of mediality" – I think it already *is* a unified theory of mediality – or a partial one, at any rate.

13. You have a rich experience of working and teaching in various places around the globe. Has the difference in academic traditions influenced your teaching?

When I was most alien to the local academic tradition, I was also most ignorant and most innocent and didn't realize how out of step I was with things around me, so it didn't really bother or affect me. I was just young and trying to get by, so during my first years in Tel Aviv, when I was a fish out of water, and people around me were no doubt quite puzzled about the kind of teaching I was doing, I didn't particularly notice.

But you had been in the American and British tradition before Tel-Aviv?

That's true. And again, I was, in a way, saved by my innocence. When I arrived in the UK, I hadn't experienced any graduate education in the U.S., so I really didn't think there was anything alien about doing it the British way. When they left me on my own to write my dissertation, I didn't think, "Well, shouldn't I be taking coursework – isn't that what you do in graduate school?" I didn't know any better; I was socialized in the British system of doctoral education, so I found nothing odd about it. Only later on, looking back, did I realize that it was a disadvantage to have been trained in the States as an undergraduate and in the UK as a graduate student; it would have been much better to do it the other way around. The British undergraduate system would have produced a better basis for me to build on and an American graduate school would have professionalized me better. Luckily I didn't know that and didn't suffer the consequences of it at the time.

14. Would you say a couple of words on the Rhodes' scholarship that brought you to Oxford? This is a privileged scholarship: Bill Clinton was also a Rhodes scholar…

The Rhodes Scholarship is what brought me to Oxford in the first place, for better or worse. Oxford wasn't particularly on my agenda, and I doubt I would have ended up there except for the fact that it was suggested to me that I should compete for the Rhodes Scholarship. The Rhodes Scholarship is in a way an anachronism left over from the imperial era. Cecil Rhodes was one of the great exploiters of Africa; Rhodesia was named after him. One of the builders of British

imperial Africa, he drained a great deal of wealth mainly in diamonds and gold out of South Africa and channeled some of that ill-gotten wealth into the scholarship. His vision of the scholarship has been to bring together young men (they was exclusively men at the outset) from across the "Anglo-Saxon" and "Teutonic" world in Oxford to train them as the future rulers of the Empire and to send them out to be governors of New South Wales, or wherever -- "to do the world's work", is how Rhodes himself put it. Over time that impossibly anachronistic imperial project has been gradually converted and modernized; for several decades now women have been eligible, and if you look at the Rhodes Scholars selected from the U.S., you realize they reflect the whole range of American immigrant communities; no doubt Cecil Rhodes is turning in his grave. So, I competed for that scholarship.

The Rhodes Scholarship was a great privilege; it sent me abroad for the first time, threw me into this alternative system, and paid my way for three years, allowing me to travel during my holidays. It was the most transformative thing that ever happened to me, for better or for worse; it changed everything. It sent me in Oxford, where I met Benjamin Hrushovski, who hired me to be a research assistant in Tel-Aviv when I had no other job. I had been studying there with Stephen Ullmann, one of the great old-school stylisticians, but this was at the end of his life and he succumbed to heart disease, so my supervision was taken over by Ullmann's former student, Jonathan Culler (another Rhodes Scholar a few years ahead of me). He took over my orphaned dissertation project and saw it through to the end. This was for me a very formative conjunction. I regard myself as being a faithful disciple of Jonathan Culler as much as I am a disciple of the Tel-Aviv school.

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