

Radio Tel Aviv

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לאנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

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Aims and General Description

Radio Tel Aviv is a novel that functions as the confession of the lead character, Professor Matti Shine, in the hours after he finds his wife dead on the kitchen floor. Told in the first person, the story ranges from his childhood in the Galilee in the early sixties to his school days in Haifa, to fighting on the Golan in '73, to Tel Aviv after, and finally to his work as a lecturer in Radio Science at the Kibbutz Seminar. His failed attempts at marriage, his failed marriage, the loss of his friend in '73, his daughter's Down's, his presumed infertility, these are the salient emotional traumas in his life story as he tries to piece together the past and how he has got to where he has. As he looks back, he realizes how intertwined the critical events of his life were and how, along with his inheritance, they make up who he is. As he pieces together his life, the layers of self-delusion slip away and we begin to discover, just like Matti, what makes someone who they are.

Conceptual Background

The novel is a confession and, as such, draws on the confessional literature that historically blossomed at the beginning of the twentieth century in the wake of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), the watershed that led to the highly personal, stream of consciousness narrators that came after the First World War, such as Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* (1918-22) and the character of Marcel Proust in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-27).

Where Joyce foregrounds thought, I am inspired to emphasize memory, like Proust, yet I am inclined to adopt Joyce's seemingly chaotic and episodic structure rather than Proust's more chronological one. Importantly, however, as Freud psychoanalyzed, literature had already taken on the form of confessional narration. I am specifically thinking of Charles Marlowe's accounts of his adventures in Conrad's *Youth* (1898) and *Heart of Darkness* (1899). My novel will not have any omniscient narrator, as in these works. My protagonist, Matti Shine, speaks directly to the reader through the imagined medium of radio, a device that will have some use in making the novel's form more contemporary.

Perhaps Conrad himself was encouraged to invent Marlowe by another genius – and I would like to emphasize this section is a historical background, the literary traditions of confessional writing I have taken into account – Leo Tolstoy in his novella *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889), in which the narrator meets a character called Pozdnyshov who relates why he believes he finally killed his wife. Some of the themes examined in *The Kreutzer Sonata* will act as leitmotifs in *Radio Tel Aviv*, prostitution for instance, and the narrator Matti Shine is familiar with the work itself. A quotation from it, "Everything is reversed, everything is

reversed!' is used at the outset of the novel as one of two epigraphs, for the reader to consider the traditional idea of what is individual madness when the individual is resisting what he deems as collective madness. Previous to *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Dostoevsky had written *Notes From Underground* (1864), the memoirs of an angry, alienated narrator that will have some resonance, although my protagonist, Matti, is a far more witty, affable man, intended to engender in the reader a sense of moral uncertainty at the end of the text. The other epigraph is the nonsense sound of a typewriter sung by Etty Ankri in her song "Go Practice with Her," and appears in Hebrew.

Most importantly, like *The Kreutzer Sonata*, *Radio Tel Aviv* amounts to a confession by a protagonist who we eventually discover has killed his wife. However, the style of the novel and the way it is written, though structurally episodic like *Ulysses* is far more directly influenced by modern American writing, particularly the masters of first person narrative fiction, J.D. Salinger, in *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) and *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). This kind of confessional writing might seem old hat to some more modern writers, however the above mentioned are exemplars of a conversational style I would be blessed to be able to imitate, Roth's above all.

Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), written in the third-person, explores some of the themes I will engage with, for instance the false promise of modernity in the aftermath of the Holocaust, as well as having an equally intelligent, bright and erudite protagonist that will allow me to play with these ideas.

A last mention on influences has to take into account autobiographies I have revered, J.B. Priestley's *Rain upon Godsbill* (1939), Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man* (1928) and Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* (1929) as well as the recent fictional biography of Jacques Austerlitz by the peerless W. G. Sebald, in *Austerlitz* (2001). *Radio Tel Aviv* will directly borrow from Sebald the occasional use of images

within the text, as projected to the reader by means of radio waves, as well as the syntactical style Sebald employs, most notably unbroken text. This is in order to make sure the story moves at a relentless pace but with visual aids providing respite.

Aristotle described literature in his *Poetics* as consisting of plot, character and music, in order of vitality. Clearly, in confessional writing character becomes pre-eminent; however, I have structured a fragmented plot with the twists of a detective story, something the novel can, in some ways, be considered to be, and the music that first-person stream of consciousness, if used well, lends itself to. As Nabokov gives Humbert Humber to write in *Lolita* (1955), "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style." I will endeavor to give as much attention to the music of the writing as possible because, as in *Lolita*, I have to make the reader trust a narrator they should not like.

The non-linear structure fits the fact that the story is told as a confession. I am going to research famous examples that employ this structure: *Catch-22*, *Slaughterhouse 5*, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, *The Time Traveler's Wife*, *Austerlitz* (I have mentioned), *The Sense of an Ending* as well as in films such as *Irréversible* and *Eternal Sunshine of a Spotless Mind*. The structure is central to the telling, but also to the theme of the story itself: memory, identity and self-discovery.

I will research the novel historically (hoping to sketch a journey through the Israeli past) also through interviews and testimonials. I will undertake to further study the psychology of memory (see bibliography). To hold all of this together we will have the 'soundtrack' to Matti's life. His obsession with radio, which he teaches as a lecturer at the Kibbutz Seminar,

showing us how technology changes over his lifetime, and his growing frustrations with feelings of redundancy.

Other than the novels and films already mentioned, I am going to use all the creative writing resources available dealing with the role, efficacy and methodology of non-linear narrative fiction to make sure that the structure works. I am also going to look closely at memoir and how the form functions as I will adapt it for the confession. It is essential to both the tension and suspense within the plot. I need to feel comfortable that I am in control, as the reader will then benefit from the full immersive experience of being with Matti as he sinks deep into the songs of his life that will make the novel not only a journey of self-discovery for him, but also the template for how we might evaluate our own lives. In terms of the two writers whose style I believe will most influence me in putting together this novel, I aspire to combining the arch irony and flow of Nabokov with the accuracy, honesty, and seriousness of W.G. Sebald's reportage, in general, but particularly in Austerlitz.

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