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Roald Hoffman is Professor of Humane Letters at Cornell – a glorious designation for anyone – and a particularly marvellous title for a person whose life’s work stems from an intense belief in the power of language (letters) to convey our shared humanity. That he is a Nobel Laureate, winning the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1981 for his work concerning the course of chemical reactions, only adds to this sense that here is a man for whom the world is a place of wonder.

Nations have etiological myths – stories that tell and retell how the country or city or culture came into being. This concept of etiology is used in anthropology and sociology to understand how a people explain a name or create a mythic history for a place or family. In a New Zealand context, this might be illustrated by the story of the beautiful Ruapehu, who left her husband Taranaki for the exciting Tongariro, resulting in Taranaki exiling himself to the western side of the North Island. Ruapehu regrets her infidelity, and occasionally sends plumes of smoke and sighs when she misses him.¹ People too, have foundational myths – stories they tell about themselves. I asked Roald Hoffman how he came to write himself into the science story.

But he pushed back – what was important for Hoffman to express was not why or how he chose to become a scientist, but more how he came to be a Professor of Humane Letters. Age eighteen, at Columbia, his undergraduate degree required a core curriculum that included Introduction to Western Civilisation. It was in those classes – History of Art, Shakespeare, Classical Japanese Drama – that Hoffman found himself surrounded by a culture of ideas, of conversation and debate that he loved. “I might have studied history of art, but that would have been too much for my parents.”²

So we have a semi-reluctant chemist who goes on to win the Nobel Prize; a man who describes his most difficult period as being when the science was going the best – between the ages of 30-35, when he was becoming established as a scientist and starting a family – this being difficult as it was when he had the least time to spend on the arts and humanities. “But I read good books, not genre fiction.”³ Age 40, he started to audit classes in areas of interest at Cornell; literature and the languages of his past – German, Russian. And he began to write.

The poetry, prose, and drama Hoffman has written since that starting point have permeated his attitude towards his academic or scientific writing too. As we chatted, he wondered if one of the traits of his journal article writing is pedagogical or poetic – his use of repetition. In poetry, as in teaching, repetition is used for effect, and to cement the concept in the memory of the student or reader. Hoffman, untraditionally, likes to use repetition, particularly of drawings, in his journal articles so that the combination of text and image at the right place is shown in the narrative of the article. Similarly, he

¹ See <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/1966/ruapehu-mount/page-3>

² Roald Hoffman, interview with the author, 11 February 2013.

³ Hoffman interview.

advocates using the active voice – both in teaching and in writing – to draw the audience in, show the audience that you (the speaker) care about you (the implied audience). This patterning of strategies from poetry and teaching into his academic writing is intended to remove barriers of understanding.

For Hoffman, it is to this issue of understanding that we must return. Commanding the wisdom of years, he's of the opinion that his undergraduate experience, at Columbia in the 1950s, should be the model. The American ideal of a general education prior to specialisation has, at its heart, a kind of American egalitarianism – a notion that all who make the college grade should share a body of knowledge. Hoffman knows there are problems with this: who decides what is canonical and what is not? How do we develop core curricula that are adaptive to change without being faddish? But, like me, he wonders if, in getting rid of the notion of a core curriculum, we have lost more than we've gained. There is the European model that has students reading the classics at high school, but, as Hoffman says: "to read *Madame Bovary* at sixteen and to read *Madame Bovary* at twenty are entirely different experiences. At twenty, you should have had at least one love affair." ⁴

And there's a love affair that can start at university with the arts – not because one is planning on working in that area – but because it is the arts – art, literature, music – that tell us what it is to be human. Hoffman is insistent that it was not his parentage – a civil engineer, a school teacher – that drew him towards bridging the gap between art and science, but what he experienced as a young man at university in New York. "I wish we could communicate to young people the importance of this", he said to me. ⁵

Hoffman's history often seems to predicate his achievement; he's described as the 'Holocaust-surviving Nobel Prize winner.' And I guess at heart my question to him about his etiological myth – the beginning of his story – may have been a question about that history. But he is adamant that while the story started in what was then Zloczów, Poland, and is now Zolochiv, Ukraine, key moments of denouement took place at Columbia in the mid-1950s, at Cornell in the '70s, in his study now as he thinks about returning to one of his early loves – classical Japanese drama – and trying to write a Noh play. He is someone who has always looked forwards.

The Zloczów Yizkor book⁶ might tell us why. Hoffman was hidden, with his mother and other relatives, in the attic of the village school, by the teacher, Mikola Dyuk, between the beginning of 1943 and the liberation of the town by the Red Army on July 18, 1944. The Zloczów Ghetto was liquidated on April 2, 1943. Hoffman's father, Hillel Safran, was

⁴ Hoffman interview.

⁵ Hoffman interview.

⁶ A Yizkor Book is, literally, a Memory book. These Holocaust memorial books were compiled by ad hoc groups of survivors to write back into history the Jewish communities that the Holocaust had tried to destroy.

<http://www.yivoinstitute.org/index.php?tid=46&aid=254>

leader of a group of Jews who escaped to the forest and joined the partisans. He did not survive the war.⁷

“Safran's group continued its preparation for opposition, but its members also were caught by the Germans, possibly because of informers, and were executed. During the execution Safran attacked one of the Germans, and wrenched the pistol from his hand. But during the fight he was shot in the back by a Ukrainian policeman and was killed on the spot.

The remnants of Zloczow's community continued to hide, but the majority of them were discovered and murdered. During the liquidation of one of the bunkers where the Zuckerkandel family and other were sheltered, a gunfight broke out, and according to one of the sources, there were also German casualties.

The Red Army freed Zloczow on July 18, 1944. After a few days a small group of survivors was concentrated there. Almost all of them left the town after a short time, moved to bigger cities in the area, and from there to Poland and from there to Israel and to other countries.”⁸

Reading that history, it is testament to Roald Hoffman that he has chosen to look forwards, to run towards life. He was given opportunities at Columbia in the 1950s that germinated in him a life-long interest in the arts – particularly history of art and literature – and he has chosen to marry that passion to his career as an eminent chemist. One of his recent conference papers is titled ‘A little bit of lithium does a lot for hydrogen;’⁹ “I could have called it something else, but as science language is inherently complex and rather boring, I try to be colloquial.”¹⁰

Another article is, also colloquially, called ‘Solid Memory.’¹¹ I told him this reminded me, in the rhythm of the words, of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov's memoir of his life in Russia prior to immigration to the USA in 1940. Finding, later, Hoffman's 2008 poem ‘Code, Memory’, alternative title ‘Mnemosyne's Trail,’¹² the echo becomes stronger. In ‘Code, Memory’ you (the implied audience, the implied narrator):

“see the blues flit, conjure up

⁷ The Zloczow/Zolochiv Yizkor Book is available here, fully digitised.
http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinkas_poland/pol2_00217.html

⁸ Zloczow Yizkor Book, as before.

⁹ <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2764941/>

¹⁰ Hoffman interview.

¹¹ Available here: http://www.roaldhoffmann.com/sites/all/files/521s_0.pdf

¹² Nabokov had wanted to call his memoir *Speak, Mnemosyne*, but had been dissuaded from doing so by his publisher. Mnemosyne was the personification of Memory in the Ancient Greek pantheon, and mother to the Nine Muses.

a young Russian with a net.”¹³¹⁴

Hoffman takes the reader through a collection of etiological myths; a series of vignettes of foundation points of science. We have

“The way lit up in ’53,
two young men just willing
a model into being. Walk

toward them, past a monk
tending peas ...”¹⁵

Giving us Watson and Crick, and Mendel. The poem continues, mixing, lyrically, beautifully, both Hoffman’s own past – “the butterfly/that lights on torn up earth/in Srebrenice and Zloczów...”¹⁶ – and the history of science – “the genes turned off/as we came out of water”¹⁷ – to an ending that encapsulates both:

“The word sings, in alp
and alkaline phosphatase
and DNA, in nuanced refrain:

this side of memory, or a world
that was; and one that will be.”¹⁸

Roald Hoffman, Professor of Humane Letters, indeed.

¹³ Roald Hoffman, ‘Code, Memory,’ *The Sigurd Journal* 1 (3), 2008. Full text available here: <http://www.roaldhoffmann.com/sites/all/files/code%2C-memory.pdf>

¹⁴ Butterflies were a passion of Nabokov’s, and feature as a repeated motif in *Speak, Memory* and his other works.

¹⁵ Hoffman, ‘Code, Memory’, 2008.

¹⁶ Hoffman, ‘Code, Memory’, 2008.

¹⁷ Hoffman, ‘Code, Memory’, 2008.

¹⁸ Hoffman, ‘Code, Memory’, 2008.