University of Sydney and New York University

Ravi Shankar and Tim Tomlinson in conversation

Dylanesque gibberish and cloud gates: an epistolary essay

Abstract:

This epistolary essay captures a conversation between two writers of poetry and narrative prose, both of whom have extensive experience teaching creative writing in Asia and the US. The discussion engages that experience through example, anecdote, and comparisons of Asian/US classrooms and students. An informal curriculum emerges, referencing key texts and methods of global utility.

Biographical Notes:

Ravi Shankar is the author, editor or translator of over a dozen books, including most recently *The Golden Shovel: New Poems Honoring Gwendolyn Brooks* (University of Arkansas Press, 2017) and *Andal: The Autobiography of A Goddess* (Zubaan Books/University of Chicago Press, 2016). He has won a Pushcart Prize, a Glenna Luschei Award from Prairie Schooner, appeared on NPR, PBS, the BBC and in such publications as *The New York Times*, *The Paris Review* and *Caravan*, and been awarded many fellowships, including from the Rhode Island Commission on the Arts, the MacDowell Colony and the Corporation of Yaddo. He founded Drunken Boat, one of the world's oldest electronic journals of the arts, and he teaches and performs around the world, most recently for the New York Writers Workshop and as the Writer-in-Residence at Sun Yat-Sen University in Guangzhou, China. He holds a research fellowship from University of Sydney and his memoir-in-progress is entitled *Correctional*.

Tim Tomlinson is co-founder of New York Writers Workshop and co-author of its popular text, *The Portable MFA in Creative Writing*. He is also the author of the poetry collections *Yolanda: An Oral History in Verse*, and *Requiem for the Tree Fort I Set on Fire*. His short story collection, *This Is Not Happening to You*, appears in September 2017. He's offered workshops and given talks at many international locations, including Guangzhou and Shanghai, China, and numerous locations throughout Southeast Asia. He's a member of Asia Pacific Writers & Translators. He teaches writing workshops and seminars in New York University's Global Liberal Studies program.

Keywords:

Creative writing workshop – Global workshop – Pedagogy – Asia – America

***Ravi Shankar*:** Tim, the two of us spent time in China last fall, visiting Guangzhou for the APWT conference and then going onto Shanghai where we taught a multi-genre workshop at NYU-Shanghai. As the founder of the New York Writers Workshop and the author of the 'Portable MFA', you have a ton of both pragmatic and theoretical teaching experience and I'm curious in your estimation – and if we might allow ourselves to generalise a little – what differences you have found between the Chinese students you've encountered and their American counterparts, particularly when it comes to literature and creative pedagogy? Do you think those attributions are applicable to other students you've taught in Asia or do you think growing up in a closed society like China might affect the process of critical inquiry and creative expression?

Tim Tomlinson: I remember a Robert Stone reading from the early 1990s. *Outerbridge Reach* had just come out. In the Q&A he identified Marilynne Robinson author of *Housekeeping* as one of his favorite writers, but he felt the need to add an explanation about how little she'd produced. (The gap between *Housekeeping* and her next book eventually grew to twenty-four years). The problem, Stone said, was that she was too smart—that she resisted the needs of story, which are the needs of the reader. And, as her friend, he'd told her, over and over, you have to dumb it down, you have to tell a story. Stone might have phrased it more delicately, but you get the point. E.M. Forster makes the same point in *Aspects of the Novel*. So does Janet Burroway in *Writing Fiction*. The first job of the writer, she says, is to orient the reader on the simplest level of reality.

I think the same is true in workshops. It's important to establish a common critical vocabulary, and it's important to ground critique in the fundamentals: exposition-development-drama, scene dynamics, progressive complications, and so on. And here's where I often find a difference between American and Chinese students—speaking generally, as you say. Americans resist 'rules', Chinese embrace them. Americans cling to the idea of 'first word, best word' (even if they don't consciously have that idea). They resist exercise, practice, and revision. They protest that they don't want anything to tamper with their style. I tell them that they have habits, not style, and that there's a big difference between the two. Chinese students come to the table with the sense that in English they don't have a style, that when it comes to style they're handicapped. (As you point out elsewhere, we know that that's not true, that their struggles with English often lead to startling and memorable syntactic effects that native speakers are nearly always incapable of.] Instead, they come with a sense that they want to learn the "rules" of the art, the same way they'd need to learn rules to make music from a violin.

Early efforts reflect the two predispositions. With Americans I see stuff that resembles the liner notes on *Another Side of Bob Dylan*: gibberish. And with Chinese I see the emergence of moving, meaningful stories. But here's the rub: early Dylanesque gibberish might lead to a Nobel Prize, and if you believe, as I do, in the process over the product, you have to allow, you have to support, you have to find a way to encourage the writer to make her own mistakes and her own discoveries.

In the Philippines I find something different—again, generally speaking. There, I've worked with young writers who are under the sway of two influences: Wattpad, or other fan-based social media, which circumvent conventional routes to publication, and critical theory. The first gains the young writer an audience, sometimes a huge

audience, but little encouragement to develop, and certainly no encouragement to read, stretch, grow, to punch above their weight, as it were. The second makes the young writer feel superior to the reader, to story, and instead of the beat-influenced Creeley-esque gibberish of the young Dylan, you get this glib erudition that's the literary equivalent of an art installation in a downtown gallery. This is the crux of Edmund White's short story, 'Watermarked' in which the narrator, an aspiring dramatist, learns the hard way that his plays better contain a MDQ (Major Dramatic Question), or else a) they won't have an audience, b) they won't get produced.

RS: Love that you reference Robert Stone as his *Dog Soldiers* was one of the seminal books for me during graduate school. Stone once wrote, 'the great thing about literature [is] it makes the world less lonely'. That's always been part of the appeal of teaching in Asia for me, making my own world, which as an Indian-American, has always been a bifurcated one, more social and integrated. I believe strongly in the process of cross-pollination and also believe that navigating multiple cultures helps us strengthen our cultural gene pool.

Like you, last fall I taught a group of students at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, China – and this might be the place to acknowledge Professor Dai Fan who is doing such interesting work incorporating creative writing into the general education curriculum there – and I was struck by a few differences between my students there and those I've taught in America. For one thing, the sensibility of my Chinese students seemed more innocent and prosaic; indeed, of the dozen or so short stories I workshopped, over half of them expressed anxiety about having had to take the *gaokao,* the rigorous national college entrance exams that goes a long way towards determining someone's place in Chinese society. Another third dealt with unrequited love between desk-mates in high school and in nearly every one, elders (such as parents, teachers, and ancestors) were venerated. Reading these stories, I was struck by how similar, thematically, many of them were, even while there was an obvious difference on the level of stylistic sophistication and grammatical proficiency in their respective writing.

When I spoke to these students individually, however, I found that they were not nearly as naive as I had imagined them to be. Many of them had access through VPNs (Virtual Private Networks) to Western mass media and spoke to me about watching *The Sopranos* and *The Big Bang Theory*. They were nearly as frank as my American college students in discussing family and sexuality. A few were openly gay. And while they were not overtly political, they seemed to feel that it was just because they were not interested in the government, as it was such a boring subject, but they could have spoken about it, if they were to so chose. With mischievous irony, some of them used Chairman Mao's emoji on WeChat, and indeed most of them felt quite free, possessed of an optimism that exists in rarer frequency among their American counterparts; they didn't seem to have the confusion and anxiety that feels symptomatic in post-millennial American society. It took me some time to disentangle the vivacious personalities of the Chinese students I was meeting individually from the 'group-think' prose I was being called on to workshop and I came to understand that creativity and questioning were just not as highly valued. The drive to become better writers was related to the fact that proficiency in English might help them in their later careers.

In a review of John Updike for *The New York Times* in 2006, the aforementioned Robert Stone wrote, "the term [Americanisation] invokes the transformation of the landscape into unnatural mechanical shapes, of night into day, of speed for its own sake, an irrational passion for novelty at the expense of quality, a worship of gimmickry." This is perhaps what I was hoping to impart to my Chinese students – more gimmickry, more alacrity, more irrational passions – just as it's often the very opposite principles, such as substance over style, that I find myself stressing with my American ones.

TT: I'm remembering something you said a while back concerning a difficulty you and your co-editors Tina (Chang) and Natalie (Handal) encountered when putting together *Language for a New Century*. I'll paraphrase (and approximate, and probably miss the point all together). You said that the predominant aesthetics from some of the traditions you were considering didn't match your own. A more judgmental way to put it would be: they didn't live up to your own, and so work you might consider problematic if it turned up in your workshop became exemplary when viewed through another (an editor's, an other's) lens.

This is something I'm on the alert for whenever I have international students in my workshops, and I'm especially on the alert for it when leading workshops abroad. I don't want to miss the point, and I certainly don't want to discourage. On the other hand, I want to respond honestly and constructively to work I'm asked to assess. Do you encounter this problem in your work overseas, and if so, how do you handle it? I write this while listening to Kronos translate Bill Evans's 'Peace Piece' into string quartet, and it's both thorny and appealing—a sense I often experience when two aesthetics rub up against each other.

RS: Great question. I'm writing back to you seated inside the great domed atrium of the Chicago Cultural Center, looking out at Millennium Park where Indian-British artist Anish Kapoor's seamlessly reflective sculpture 'Cloud Gate' (or 'The Bean' as Chicagoans call it) gleams in the periphery. Somehow this juxtaposition (like the Kronos piece) seems an appropriate metaphor to answer your question, for the ornate Tiffany dome could not be more different than the liquid mercury kidney bean across the way and yet each, in its own way, articulates a version of aesthetic harmony. I try to keep that in mind when responding to art and letters outside of the Anglo American tradition, to remind myself that just because I believe in certain ideas of necessary form and beauty, it doesn't mean that those principles are universal.

When we had that conversation, I think I had certain Arabic poets in mind particularly. We found many translations of even the great figures like Mahmoud Darwish or Nizar Qabbani to be over-flowery, suffused with polemic sentimentality, and we realised in putting the anthology together that we had to suspend certain inherited notions like 'no ideas but in things'. As the protests of the Arab Spring would later demonstrate, poetry in certain cultures is meant to have a slogan-like embodiment. Who can ever forget or not be moved by the sound of thousands of voices chanting '*al sha'b yurid isqat al nazim!*' (loosely translated as 'the people want the fall of the regime!') Is that poetry? On the page, in a writing workshop, perhaps not, but in the throats of thousands of protesters? Indubitably.

So I guess when I work with international students I begin by respecting their traditions and where they are arriving from, then I try to deepen their relationship to their own language by introducing rhetorical devices and figurative language. I always try to make the point that paradoxically the more specific they are, the more universal their work becomes. I encourage their unique perspectives, the flavors and musicality of their native tongues, but show them, often through the use of literary examples, how they can harness their subjectivity to even greater ends by honing their imagination.

I think it's important to be encouraging – and indeed non-native speakers often have an advantage, even in their ungrammatical utterances, of a fresh syntactic perspective – even while showing them how the work, taken on its own terms, can be made more effective through distillation, cutting out abstractions, being consistent with temporality, etc. I think it's important for me as a teacher to broaden my perspective to accommodate alternate worldviews but equally important for my students to broaden their idea of what the most effective forms of communication might be. As long as it's symbiotic and they feel met at least halfway, my students are often willing to challenge their inherited ideas about what good writing might be. It's a challenge to be sure but a satisfying one. How do you deal with this?

TT: One way I demonstrate my commitment to the work of non-native speakers is by using models of prose or poetry by writers from their own cultures: Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart*, Wang Ping's 'Syntax,' Xiaolu Guo's *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth,* Neil Garcia's *Poems from Amsterdam*. Your book, *Language for a New Century*, is an invaluable resource on that score. Yu Jian, Ko Un. So many writers, new to me, are now in the workshop rotation.

Then, for examples from native speakers, there's nothing like a Junot Diaz story to make aspiring writers believe in their own syntax. Diaz mixes it up, he shows the energy of the hybrid, and that gives license to other hybrids like Taglish and Singlish. Among older Filipino workshoppers, there's often a reverence for English, which can come off on the page as overly formal. I liken it to Americans acting Shakespeare, pouring on the Thespian ornamentation and treating the English as if it's a museum piece instead of just mucking about. It's important to bring in alternative Englishes. I like Chris Abani for oracular, James Kelman for vernacular, Lionel Fogarty for spectacular. I make an effort to de-privilege white mainstream English, but of course great writing is never 'mainstream'—that's what makes it great. I'm thinking of people like John Cheever, Frank O'Hara, Flannery O'Connor.

Translations are often useful in defusing the fear button on non-native speakers. About six weeks ago I returned to Guangzhou and offered a workshop at Sun Yat Sen University to the undergraduate and graduate students in the creative writing in English program. To ground everyone in basic story structure and terminology, I began with Chekhov's 'The Lady with the Dog.' I think I reached the second paragraph forty-minutes into the session. There is so much to say, and so much for non-native speakers to learn, about storytelling, and poetry, that's outside the specific purview of English, of language.

I wonder how India and Pakistan fit into this discussion. As you know, New York Writers Workshop will be offering a conference/residency in India in 2018, and that excites me. What what should we be looking out for in order to provide the best

service to our conference participants? What poets and writers might we consider as we map out an India approach?

RS: Your method makes me want to become one of your students. India is a special case in a lot of ways, because it's really a subcontinent and not any monolithic entity, given that the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution lists twenty-two official languages, not including Hindi which is the national language and English, which is a kind of lingua franca. Each region varies immensely in terms of cultural and linguistic heritage. The one constant, however, might be the legacy of British colonialism on the education system there; I went to 3rd and part of 4th grade in Chennai as a young boy and I remember how different the experience was than going to school in the US. In India, we were actually *discouraged* from asking questions and I remember ending up having my knuckles rapped with a ruler on more than one occasion for having the temerity to query something I didn't understand. The legacy is one of rote memorisation and regurgitation, a dynamic that is still manifest, even in the creative arts. Couple that with a society biased against the humanities (indeed traditionally to admit that you are studying art or writing is tantamount to admitting you are a dunce, for if you have any aptitude or ability, surely you would go in the direction of engineering, medicine or the sciences!) and you have a difficult field to hoe to create fertile ground for creativity.

The emphasis on process that you referenced is a hard sell for many students who are product-oriented, who want a formula into which they can plug variables, whose families want an assurance that the fruits of their studies will be ready to eat. This might be why there traditionally has been no graduate study (and indeed very little undergraduate study) in creative writing as a field of inquiry. But that's not to say that we are lacking in models to bring to the students. On the contrary, India has a wealth of brilliant writers to bring into the classroom. From Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore (who influenced W.B. Yeats, and whose reputation rivals that of Shakespeare or Dickens for Bengali-speakers) to the Booker Prize winning novelist and brilliantly incisive political activist Arundhati Roy, there's an embarrassment of riches available to us. Vikram Seth, Kiran Desai, Salman Rushdie, A.K. Ramanujan, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpha Lahiri, Jeet Thayil ... I could go on and on.

I agree translation is key. One exercise I often do with my poetry students, regardless of where they hail from, is homolinguistic translation, that is English-to-English translations. I'll have them take a poem or a prose passage and translate that into their own words. This simple exercise is a great way to see how important diction is, how form and content might interrelate. I might have them do homophonic translations, ask them to take a poem in another language they don't understand and translate it into English, purely on the basis of sound. I also love to use collaborative forms, like the Japanese *renga*, to break down some of their calcified sensibilities of how a piece of writing should be structured. Joining all of these exercises might be the foregrounding of principles of play and experiment. For many Indian writers, this often feels frivolous initially and they might resist it, and I think that resistance can actually be pedagogically useful, for once they undertake these exercises, they are often amazed at what comes out, often indirectly or unintentionally. The Victorian strictures of their language loosens, and they evolve beyond a poetics that is stilted, rhyming or anachronistic.

I don't want to ignore Pakistan here, or indeed any of the other South Asian countries, and would love to teach the radical formalism of someone like Faiz Ahmad Faiz or the identify politics of feminist Urdu poet Kishwar Naheed. One of the best plays I've watched in recent memory was *Disgraced*, written by Pakistani American playwright Ayad Akhtar; the discussion of Islam in that play is rich and complicated.

Indian culture is also replete with gargantuan works of literature. So even if the students are not avid readers, they will have been exposed to the tales from the Ramayana or the Bhagavad Gita. They may be able to recite prayers from the Vedas and slokas from ancient Sanskrit. They will certainly know the latest Bollywood songs and I've had a class sing *'Tujhe Dekha Toh Yeh Jana Sanam'* or '*Kal Ho Naa Ho'* in unison. Indeed, historically, poetry was so admired that at Kanyakumari, the very southern tip of India, there's an immense statue of the Sangam-era Tamil poet and philosopher Tiruvalluvar. So the legacy of art and letters is profound and reminding students of that often helps them delve into their own writing with even greater joy and assiduousness. So I'm quite excited about the possibility of bringing the New York Writers Workshop into India and think we will find a really voracious appetite for creative writing once we are there. Indeed, the world's largest free literature festival in Jaipur regularly gets over half a million people passing through over the course of a week and I have a feeling that the time is right to bring the tools we have at our disposal to the writers there who are really eager to excavate new territory.

TT: What you say about the richness of India's literary culture, and the certainty that Indian students would know at least some of the Ramayana or the Bhagavad Gita, starkly contrasts with the cultural impoverishment here in the US. As Spike Lee says, if it didn't happen in the last two years, US students don't know it (two years is generous). I identify with that. Growing up in suburban Long Island as I did, until the age of fourteen I thought Walt Whitman was a shopping mall. Between Flagg Brothers and Sam Goody's my own leaves of grass were mown, or trampled, or smoked, as the case may be.

That background might not seem germane to our discussion, but it informs every decision I make in workshops, from the planning to the feedback. I remember arriving at Columbia University feeling as though I were an interloper. There was University culture, and my own, which is to say none. In undergraduate classes, I was as afraid to raise my hand as many of our Asian students studying in the US are now. Later, in the MFA program, one of my colleagues said that I had this uncanny ability to make myself invisible in the workshop. But I was petrified about revealing how little I knew, how little I'd read, or how poorly I'd understood what I'd read, or how my understanding might reveal that University culture did not come naturally to me. If only Wang Ping was around to say, 'What difference it make?' I needed to fit in with that culture, even though the literature that had ignited my passion to write came from well outside, and critiqued, that culture: *Soul on Ice*, *The Motorcycle Betrayal Poems*, *Tropic of Cancer*.

Two things saved me from losing myself to the dark side. First, I was fortunate to have M.G. Stephens as an early workshop instructor. Nearly everything we looked at was outside mainstream dominant culture. Two books, in particular, really lit me up: *Sunflower Splendor: Three Thousand Years of Chinese Poetry*, and *Catullus's Complete Poetic Works*, translated by Jacob Rabinowitz. Here were poems about sex,

debauchery, love, bitterness, revenge—stuff right out of my personal jukebox. No daffodils, no raptures about busts in a museum, and you didn't need *The Golden Bough* to understand them. What was revelatory was that there was a tradition in literature, going back centuries for expressions the likes of which I was feeling. Literature was a place, Catullus and Li Po showed me, where transgressive behavior wasn't judged, or contemplated from some lofty perch, but simply represented, or more accurately, embodied.

Second: toward the end of my undergraduate years, I began to consider law school as a logical next step. One night, I borrowed a car and drove like a madman down some of the back roads of my youth. Patti Smith's version of 'My Generation' turned up on the radio—miraculously, I have to say in hindsight, given the changes she makes in the lyrics, substituting snarling obscenity for The Who's tepid figures. (How her version made it past FCC guidelines I'll never know.) Hearing her spew her righteous venom shot chills through my body and every hair stood at electric attention. I felt like she was speaking through me, for me, and in spite of me.

And this circles me back to something you said earlier in reference to the work your Chinese students did on the page, in contrast with the interests they revealed conference. The 'page' Chinese revered authority figures and worried about the *gaokao*. Face to face they revealed that other things occupied their minds, they were capable of irreverent gestures, they broke or circumvented rules. No wonder they tune into *The Sopranos*. Tony Soprano straddles two cultures. He's a fireball of forbidden impulses. That's the Patti Smith place in these young writers, and that's the place writing instructors need to tap. And that should be relatively easy, at least in the workshop space, because we're already respected authority figures.