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'Teaching Creative Writing in Asia': Four Points and Five Provocations

Abstract:

This paper, part of a series of 'provocations' delivered at a symposium in Hong Kong, covers some of the broader issues in Creative Writing programs within universities in Australia. While higher institutions in Asia are introducing this new discipline, Australian universities need to be vigilant in terms of monitoring how this growth area has affected two substantial fields of knowledge: creative research and literary translation. Before Australian programs try to engage with those in Asia, they need to address some of the systemic uncertainties within their own institutions, such as regarding creative writing as research.

Traditionally, universities and their national governing bodies have viewed Creative Writing as something outside their disciplinary structures. There is still no real definition of how a novel, for example, is considered as 'research'. The exegetical component therefore, has been formed as a 'research arm', giving some critical analysis to what is essentially a literary enterprise. Understandably, this shifts the focus to the cognitive side of the brain, and this entails losses such as framing a reception which may have been much wider without academic self-analysis and referential 'authority'.

My argument is that 'creative writing' is essentially a publishing practice *avant la lettre* and, as is the case of literary translation, creativity cannot be separated out from the multi-tasking processes of reading, writing, and producing a published work. The new push from Asian universities in introducing this discipline provides a litmus-test in Australia for the grudging acceptance of this very ancient field of the production of literature. The work of art, which has always been the subject of university disciplines, has now become a living practice within a self-contained discipline, combining self-translation, reflectivity, and analysis. When I speak about 'translation' therefore, there is a metaphoric translation in the literary process (for instance, how the text is being perceived by an imaginary reader), and a literal translation in the linguistic process, the latter being more relevant in the teaching of creative writing in Asia.

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Biographical note:

Professor Brian Castro is the author of nine novels, including the multi award-winning *Double-Wolf* and *Shanghai Dancing*. His novels have been translated into French, German and Chinese. He has also published a volume of essays. His latest novel is *The Bath Fugues* (Giramondo). He is currently the Chair of Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide.

Keywords:

Cultural exchange – translation – cross-disciplinary – transnational perspective

Firstly, let me say that I have always regarded Australia as being part of Asia. Paul Keating, one of Australia's previous Prime Ministers, seemed to me to be the first Australian leader to state this rather obvious insight. Unfortunately, politics have cruelled the pitch to such an extent that there is a danger Australia may be losing sight of its closeness to Asia in terms of mutual artistic and cultural enrichment. Australia has mainly focussed on the economy as something worthwhile generating between the so-called 'Asia' and itself. For this reason, I'm not interested in 'plundering' any opportunities in the region. I'm not interested in gleaning hapless overseas students so they only learn how to put commas between phrases and write letters for employment.

And for this reason I don't see the teaching of Creative Writing in Asia as a commodification of skills which will sell mobility as an industry package, dangling fame and fortune before every aspirant like a lottery ticket, with just as fat a chance of winning.

I am interested though, in cultural exchange, cultural enrichment, good writing and stylistic difference. I am a writer who happens to be an educationist, and not the other way round. Therefore, let's say I am in it out of curiosity. I am in it partly as a talent scout, partly because of my dedication to literature and partly because there is nothing finer in the world than the development of some kind of artistic greatness one can encourage from the wings.

Consequently, I know very little about teaching Creative Writing in Asia. I know something about creative writing as a practitioner. I know something about gauging talent and guiding writers towards publication, but I'm not sure creative writing can be taught because talent can't be taught. And finally, I know something about the so-called 'Asia', since I was born in Hong Kong and travel there quite frequently from Australia. So I have an investment in the region and Hong Kong has the good fortune of being multi-lingual.

Secondly, what do we mean when we say we teach Creative Writing?

I know what I don't mean. I don't mean teaching basic expression, teaching grammar and syntax, teaching rhetoric and composition, although all these things are very important. When one gets to become a published writer, however, all those things should be taken for granted and it should be understood that the writer has a knowledge of them and that what is now demanded is a level of skill beyond the ordinary, and a level of imagination far surpassing the ordinary, and a level of intelligent thinking moulded by good reading and an ear for style, tone, language and more language. The Creative Writing professor is not a copy-editor.

My first point, then, is that many people just don't read good literature. Many people just don't read. What is good literature? The word 'good' of course is problematic. It can be a matter of taste. It can be a matter of identification with characters or narrators. It can be a plot that generates wonder. In my opinion, it's mainly language and more language. As James Wood commented: If prose is to be as well written as poetry—the old modernist hope—novelists and readers must develop their own third ears (Wood 2008: 137).

The third ear is attuned to language and more language. And no, I'm not repeating myself. Language is something most creative writers overlook. It is supposed to be natural, but it is far from that. By language I do not mean English, Chinese, French or Russian. I mean a command of a language. This command can only come through reading. It is about sensitivity, rhythm, poetics and insight. Like music, literature is not reality or mimicry. It has a language of its own. Of course, having other languages in one's third ear also helps.

Everyone thinks he or she can write. Of course they can. But there is a distinction between the drawing of a stick figure of a horse and a painting by Picasso. The differences are subtle, but they come out of a huge context and an even larger history of reading. Without that context, without reading, without a conceptual lift in the recognition of what creative writing is, we cannot possibly judge what is good and what is bad. That is why there are PhD programs in Creative Writing. By understanding the huge range of contexts, histories and cultures, students are able to critique their own work. Tearing up one's own work because it cannot stand up to the best writing in the world is the single most important lesson in learning how to write.

This is my second point: self-critique is as rare a talent as great writing.

Let me now turn my attention to Creative Writing in 'Asia'.

I suspect this particular pedagogy is a pretty new field of study and a new focus of knowledge within institutions in this region. It is also reflected in the scarcity of Asian students in creative writing programs throughout Australia. The reasons are obvious: why would they go abroad to study creative writing when their careers are based on things which will earn their living, provide them with opportunities and look after them when they are old? So one treads the usual pathways of doing computer science, engineering or medicine. Yet, within these faculties, I have met with, and spoken to, students who feel they have lost their creativity. People who say they have misunderstood the strands of life woven tightly around them, strands which they cannot unravel because the skills of reflection are now lost in the hurly-burly of shortening time and bitter-sweet ambition. These strands form a noose around their necks. Writing is a way of cutting themselves free. It is a behaviour. It is a practice that translates us to ourselves. It is a way of crossing cultures, not the cultures of Asia or Europe or America, but the cultures of tunnel-vision, professional obsession and material acquisition; crossing over to the cultures of wisdom, reflection and expression. Creative thinking is a crossing. It is a form of translation. To make a work of art is to translate the ordinary into the extraordinary.

In his monumental work *After Babel,* the critic and writer George Steiner had this to say about translation: 'translation is formally and pragmatically implicit in *every* act of communication … to understand is to decipher. To hear significance is to translate.' (Steiner 1998: xii)

While translation is not just about translating between languages, it does help to negotiate complex communications. In a recent Presidential Address to the Modern Language Association, Catherine Porter made a somewhat standard joke. She asked: If a person who speaks three languages is tri-lingual, a person who speaks two

languages is bi-lingual, then what do we call a person who only speaks one language? The answer was, of course, an American. Although I could quite easily substitute an Australian. In fact, the last government in power in Australia famously stated that English was to be enforced as the official language. One wonders how a public idea of language could be built out of such short sightedness. Surely one language is necessary, but hardly enough to provide thinking skills which can efficiently bridge the gaps between what Edward De Bono called 'rock logic' and lateral thinking? Porter went on to point out how monolinguals are always at a disadvantage. She says:

> they risk violating social taboos, tend to miss subtle verbal and non-verbal cues, cannot follow side conversations and in general are far less equipped than their bi-lingual or multi-lingual interlocutors to put themselves in the other person's place, to figure out where the other is coming from (Porter 2009).

I would suggest writing is therefore also a translating practice. It mirrors our gaucheness, shows up our lack of picking up cues, tests us with side-stories and flashbacks, and it forces us to put ourselves in another person's mind. Writing, as I keep telling my students, 'is not about you'. Personal experience is not interesting unless it is given aesthetic shape and form, is couched in a competent language and is inspired with the courage to betray inhibition through intense critique.

This is my third point: all Creative Writing programs should look at some form of literary 'translation' as a possible adjunct to their courses, because in familiarising oneself with another language, in seeing the impossibility of 'pure' translation, in envisioning the cultural impasses and misinterpretations, one actually becomes a better writer, if not a better person. It tunes the third ear in the background, after the second ear—that of stylistic self-analysis—is brought to perfect pitch. Now, I do not mean that every student has to be bi-lingual or tri-lingual. A very successful session on literary translation can be conducted by writers and linguists without their students even being familiar with another language. The encounter with 'foreignness' enables one to become acculturated, to become adulterated even, with increased tolerance and civility. One realises that 'it is not about you.'

My fourth point is about research. Surely a kind of 'multi-lingual' skill, a 'language of the mind' which operates within and across cultures, must make new discoveries? I am not talking formally about 'foreign or native languages' but about awareness of language itself. How it works. Virginia Woolf, for instance, understood this language of the mind, the language of relationships, of the family, of social class, of men and of women. She understood the tensions within her language and she made them foreign, the better to glimpse them in their awkward spaces and elastic time-frames when reflected upon. This may sound intuitive, but it is research nevertheless. Research through circumstance, through observation, through interlocutory practices... every bit as scientific and ethical if one wanted to cast the issue under an empirical light. As Sandra Berman and Michael Wood point out in the introduction to their study *Nation, language and the Ethics of Translation*:

> If music for [Theodor] Adorno is a 'silent witness to the inhumanity all around,' then for [Edward] Said the intellectual is the unsilenced translator, the person who lends voice to the unvoiced and half-voiced needs of the oppressed (Berman & Wood,

2004: 11).

In the Creative Writing program at Adelaide University, we have close on forty-five PhD students, some of whom come from several different countries. It is imperative to understand where the other is coming from. One of these students you may have heard of. He is Miguel Syjuco who, in 2008, won the MAN Asia Literary Prize with his novel *Ilustrado*. He is published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux and I suggest he will be a best seller in the literary marketplace. I would also suggest his career is now made. So writing can get you fame and fortune. But his novel, which was part of his PhD degree, was guided, mentored, massaged and critiqued by experts in the field. Its sweeping and fragmented narrative possessed a high degree of multi-lingual word-play, historical research and abundant self-irony. The narrator was filled with a willingness to betray country, family and society. His manifesto, if you like, was to prick the consciences of his fellow *ilustrados*, the 'enlightened ones', and to ask them what they were doing to garner the reputation of literature in the Philippines.

When I look at the region, at China in particular, I see a wealth of talent emerging. I see the making of big-name writers who will go on to win more Nobel prizes and Booker prizes. But they will also need the encouragement of literary appreciation at home. Let us not see the English-speaking world as the be-all and end-all of creative writing.

Which leads me to sum up by issuing a manifesto of my own. My provocations centre on five key issues. I do not have the time to go into great detail here, but I have provided a list of 'dos and don'ts.'

Do not be defensive about Creative Writing as an art form:

In the 21st Century, creativity will make the region more artistically interactive. Knowing what is going on in different literatures and cultures will increase the dialogue between nations. The word 'creative' should be stressed, not 'professional' writing. Do not let the two be merged. 'Creative' carries prestige. It has the potential to predict social and cultural change. 'Professional' is merely professional. 'Creative' opens doors. 'Professional' slams the doors against innovation with a lame 'best practice'.

Do emphasize the fact that reading is superior to writing:

In any Creative Writing course, the active part of the practice is in reading: reading the Greats; reading others. Without superior skills in reading, *writing*, which is an emulatory art, cannot transcend mere 'communication'.

Do not underestimate the osmosis effect:

Visiting writers, particularly international writers, teach apprentices how to be writers-in-the-world. Even at the level of non-politics, writing and the encouragement of writing frees up repressive regimes. I think we have ample examples of how films,

for example, have led to greater communication and closure over problematic issues between countries.

Do stress that teaching Creative Writing can become a career:

It helps support writers. Anglophone countries seem to offer little help in the way of patronage, so institutions need to come forward. But there is also a need for more philanthropy and partnerships. The T.K. Wong Fellowship, set up by a writer from Hong Kong, instigated at the University of East Anglia, is a superb example of encouraging creative partnerships and writing programs in Asia.

Do not assume the hegemony of English:

The art of literary translation is a form of 'creative writing'. Translation classes should run side by side with Creative Writing. Language and Linguistic departments should workshop writing together, as cross-disciplinary activities will be the future of Creative Writing programs within and across institutions. By being proficient in the language of a particular culture, by understanding its sensitivities, a creative translator is a purveyor of emotion and a diplomat of knowledge.

The lack of translation is a problem right around the world. In a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, Esther Allen (Center for Literary Translation, Columbia University) writes that:

> There is a problem with the coverage of Herta Müller's Nobel in today's Times.
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> The Times articles consistently mention the fact that Müller writes in German, and even bemoan the problem of the paucity of literary translation published in English. But never once is any (one) of Müller's translators named or alluded to, not even when those translators' words are excerpted extensively.
>
> In last year's coverage of Le Clézio's Nobel, translators were credited; their omission this year becomes all the more inexplicable.
>
> Herta Müller is not really so obscure—she's one of the lucky ones, with at least four books published in English. That has happened because a number of literary translators have championed her work and brought it to an English-speaking public. Their names are Michael Hofmann, Martin Chalmers, Philip Boehm, Michael Hulse, Valetina Glajar and André Lefevere.
>
> These are not clerks or copyists—these are dedicated, skilled performers whose insight and erudition make it possible for literature to move from one cultural medium into another. They should not be condemned to operate in total obscurity, especially not at a moment like this one.
>
> Müller herself, like Imre Kertesz and a number of Nobel winners in previous years, has been a translator—her writing involves movements between cultures and languages. Translation is integral to this story, not an incidental inconvenience or annoyance to be suppressed or overlooked.

> As a daily reader and supporter of the New York Times, I would hope that in the Times's ongoing coverage, translation and the work of translators can be given their rightful place in this story (Allen 2009).

Now all that speaks for itself.

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