

Demystifying the Work of a Writer: A Conversation About Literary Communities and Strategies For Productive Writing

Conversation with Dan Vyleta & Steven Karl

Research Division: Transdisciplinary Research for Creative Writing and Translation

Report Date: November 30, 2018

Event Date/Time: November 26, 2018, 10:40 - 12:10

Location: Toyama Campus, Waseda University, Building 33, Floor 16, Conference Room 10



Dan Vyleta, a novelist and Reader at the University of Birmingham and Steven Karl, a poet and Lecturer at Waseda University, were invited to lead a conversation hosted at the Toyama Campus of Waseda University on November 26, 2018. The event, titled “Demystifying the Work of a Writer: A Conversation about Literary Communities and Strategies for Productive Writing,” began with a brief introduction of the two speakers, including their works and careers, before proceeding into the billed discussion for the first half of the event. The second half

consisted of a Q&A session, in which Karl and Vyleta responded to questions participants had submitted in advance. Lastly, the two panelists opened the floor and questions were taken directly from the audience for the remainder of the event.

The conversation opened with a question posed to both speakers concerned with the accuracy of the image of a writer as an entity locked away in an ivory tower, isolated from the world and slaving away over their typewriter. The consensus between the panelists was that this stereotype did not reflect the reality of the majority of literary creatives as people with separate responsibilities. Writing in the pockets



of time when you are able, jotting down inspiration as it comes, and minding the hours at which your productivity is at its peak is a fair approach that has proven reliable for other writers. On the subject of engagement, and working within a community, Karl and Vyleta shared their feelings on working with an editor, receiving feedback, and having trusted readers with whom a writer can discuss their work as it is produced. Differences between the genres were highlighted here, with poetry lending itself to the formation of literary communities due to the non-commercial nature of the literary form and the ubiquity of small press publishing, whereas novelists tend to work more independently and rely on their agents and publishers for critical feedback and building their readership.



The Q&A session included questions that addressed such topics as: (1) the speakers' habits in terms of whether they prefer to plan out their work or allow their narratives to form organically; (2) whether the speakers have set writing schedules; (3) whether "objectivity" is important in their work; (4) what the speakers draw upon in real life and how to determine the tone of a story; and (5) the speakers' childhood reading habits and aspirations. Karl and Vyleta agreed that they have had a mixture of experiences in their careers, in that some creations have clearer plots than others, which may take some more work to discover the purposes that govern a character's voice or behavior. The value of a work's singular momentum was also deliberated; Karl noted that there exists a fine line between what he may

be trying to do as a poet and where a poem seems to be trying to go. In this sense, "listening" to the work and adjusting your own aspirations accordingly are important processes of writing.

An audience member asked Vyleta the following question: Does writing in a language that is not your mother tongue affect your writing in any way? Vyleta answered that he has differing relationships with each of his languages, and more a systematic understanding of a language that is not his first by virtue of not having learned it orally. He continued to say that his subject matter is certainly affected by the language he writes in, but additionally that he is confident the language also influences his work in ways of which he is unaware.

Finally, Karl was asked to further define the type of poetry he refers to in saying that he has a fondness for "experimental" poetry. He responded that, rather than labelling himself, he prefers to simply write what he wants to write, and in turn others might categorize him or his colleagues as "experimental" poets. Karl added that poetry is often drawn from different forms and structures within the various styles that exist within poetry, and as such he does not like to oversimplify. The event concluded here conversationally, in the same informal manner as it had begun.

