

研究部門「創作と翻訳の超領域的研究」主催
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RILAS Research Area “Transdisciplinary Research for Creative Writing and Translation”
Report of Inaugural Event “Writing Beyond the Mother Tongue”

The Intersection of Creative Writing and Active Learning for Non-Native Writers

~*Writing Beyond the Mother Tongue: A Workshop by Dr. Dan Vyleta*~

Steven KARL

Introduction

Dr. Dan Vyleta, a writer and Senior Lecturer at the University of Birmingham, visited Waseda University on May 28th and 29th to present a workshop and lecture under the umbrella title, *Writing Beyond the Mother Tongue*. This visit marked the inaugural event of the newly founded research area Transdisciplinary Research for Creative Writing and Translation. On the first day, Vyleta conducted an undergraduate workshop titled “Possibilities for Creative Writing” for the students of the Global Studies in Japanese Cultures Program (JCulP). On the second day, he gave a public lecture titled, “Why write?, and other questions for the wee small hours,” that was attended by about thirty audience members including students and faculty.

This report will give an overview and analysis of the workshop, “Possibilities for Creative Writing.” While many carry the image of creative writing as an individual task where one thinks and writes in isolation with the aim to find the perfect expression, creative writing can in fact, be a dynamic pedagogical tool to enhance active learning in classrooms. Since more and more universities in Japan and elsewhere contain a large number of students studying and writing in a language that is not their mother tongue, this workshop provides an invaluable snapshot of how incorporating creative writing into our pedagogical practices can stimulate rigorous critical thinking among non-native students.

Observations on Vyleta’s Workshop: “Possibilities for Creative Writing”

As second period is about to begin, the undergraduate students of JCulP shuffle into the conference room filling it with an atmosphere of nervousness, anticipation, and excitement. We are about to welcome the first guest speaker for the 2018 academic year, and there is a real sense of enthusiasm from both students and faculty to not only have a break from the familiar routine, but also to welcome an exophonic writer—Dan Vyleta, born to Czech émigré parents, who has lived in Germany, Canada, United States of America, and currently resides in the United Kingdom.

Before discussing the workshop, it is necessary to give a brief overview of the students participating in the workshop. JCulP is an English-language based degree program that consists of a mixture of Japanese and overseas students studying Japanese culture from a global perspective. The students’ levels of English are high but also quite varied, ranging from near native to academically trained. Some had already taken several college-level writing classes in English, while others were just beginning. For all the students, it is their first time taking a creative writing workshop. As their academic writing instructor, I am curious to see what kinds of collaborative learning opportunities creative writing can facilitate among our students.



As the title of the workshop appears on the screen, I see concern on some students' faces as it already contains terms they are unfamiliar with, "On Taking Sides and Filling in Gaps: Some Thoughts about Focalization and Interiority." Rather than front-loading the class with a lecture and defining these highly specialized terms, however, Vyleta opens the class by guiding the students to read and discuss a short passage together. This exercise immediately encourages students to engage in reading and discussion (active learning), rather than settling into the mode of listening (passive learning).

Active learning is often about setting the tone and establishing the expectation of the class from the very beginning. Students intuitively know the difference between a traditional lecture format and a discussion-based classroom where they are expected to play an active role. Although the hurdle is higher for visiting lecturers who are unfamiliar with the students, Vyleta engages the class by gesturing and smiling, moving through the classroom and making eye contact with the students. Between his body language and conversational tone, the JCulP students look visibly relaxed and ready to participate.

The short passage is from the Christian Bible, the First Book of Moses, Genesis 12: 10-20:

Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down into Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you."

When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that Sarai was a very beautiful woman. And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace. He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants, and camels.

But the Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai. So Pharaoh summoned Abram. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!" Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had.

Many students are unfamiliar with the passage as they come from a non-Christian background. Without

explaining the context, Vyleta poses to the class the first question: Whose story is this? A student raises her hand and states that it is Abram's story. Another offers more evidence by pointing out the repetition of Abram's name. Joining the conversation, Vyleta agrees that the question could be a purely grammatical point of whose name appears most frequently—and yet, the story strangely feels like no one's story. But why? What is missing? A student suggests that there is no emotion or feeling in the text. It feels very superficial, just a mention of facts. Vyleta takes the student's point and compares the passage to the great 19th century European novels—by Balzac, Tolstoy, and George Eliot—in which emotional and psychological life are deeply explored. Although the students are unfamiliar with the term “psychological realism” that Vyleta uses, I notice that they are engaged. I see them writing down the names of the authors perhaps for their summer reading lists.

By asking the students a seemingly simple question, “Whose story is this?” Vyleta gives students the opportunity to directly engage with the text. When students feel that they are on equal footing with the material presented to them, they are more receptive to interpreting it critically by building upon their preexisting knowledge and strategies for analysis. It is important to remember this with all students, but especially for non-native learners—front-loading a class with too much information can lead to anxiety and fear of failure, which can make a student feel overwhelmed and paralyzed.

The simplicity of the question, on the other hand, allows students the freedom and confidence in their interpretation. If we examine their answers, we would notice that the students are already engaging in methods of “perspective” and “point of view,” without being aware of these critical terms. Much to my delight, the students are also collaboratively thinking with one another, since the follow-up answer serves as further evidence to support the initial claim. The discussion allows the students to not only engage with the professor, but also to think and contribute to the content of the class with one another.

From the initial question, Vyleta moves the conversation to the subject of investment, explaining that this is a key element in any given story. That investment could shift within a short story or a novel, and there are moments when the narrative feels purely observed—but there is always a yearning on the part of the reader to have an investment in one character or another. So for the modern reader, the passage from Genesis feels frustratingly flat. We tend to resist the flatness. Students nod, seeming to agree that Genesis does indeed seem rather flat.

Vyleta then suggests an exercise: Let's do an experiment. Let's take Sarai's side for a moment by adding a sentence. This sentence appears on the screen:

Sarai said no the first time Abram asked this of her, and she said no again when he asked her for a second time. But when he asked her for a third time, she said yes.

A student quickly raises her hand and succinctly summarizes what the additional sentence means, “Sarai objects, then concedes.” Many students seem to enjoy the sudden change of effect that a single sentence brought. Even though the original text repeats the names of the male characters, Abram and Pharaoh, and implicitly reads as Abram's story, the insertion of a single sentence suddenly shifts the focus of the passage to Sarai's perspective. We are given a glimpse of her inner turmoil—first a shock, then reluctance, then a gradual wearing down. It is now Sarai's story. What is interesting furthermore is that this emotional depth is achieved purely through a description of action, staying true to the mode of Genesis.

It is at this point in the discussion that Vyleta explains the two key terms of the workshop, “focalization” and “interiority.” These are discipline-specific terms that even native English speakers would likely not have familiarity with, especially those who have not studied literature. When you are introducing new terminology or concepts to a classroom full of students, your impulse might be to first define the necessary terms. A better strategy, however, is to guide the student to figure out the meaning of the terms themselves.

For instance, let's imagine that Vyleta decides to begin the workshop with a lecture that defines the term, “focalization.” He introduces the term, provides background on its historical origin, and explains how it is more nuanced than the terms “perspective” or “point-of-view.” Since the students are still in the early years of their college education, a lecture on narratology would perhaps be informative for the students, but the abstract concepts

may possibly leave them unmoored and confused. Defining the terms *after* students have had some hands-on practice allows the students to understand the concepts and terminology in relation to the work they have already produced. Many non-native learners anticipate a sense of failure because they think they have to acquire *both* a new language and a new skill. This is often an unnecessary learning obstruction that can be avoided if we shift our focus to active learning.

Now that the two key terms of the workshop have been discussed and understood, the students spend some time with the exercise of writing and inserting sentences that change the focalization of the passage and introduce interiority. Some work independently, jotting down ideas; others bounce ideas off of one another, engaging in collaborative thinking. Several students are so absorbed in writing that they ask for more time. When everyone is finished, the students share what they wrote. Several students raise their hands and offer their ideas. Vyleta reacts positively and thoughtfully to each student, drawing out the implications and possibilities of each example.

After spending a sufficient amount of time with the student examples, Vyleta offers several other possible sentences to read together and discuss:

Let us look at some other sentences that we could add:

The Pharaoh asked Sarai why she had agreed to become his wife. "My husband ordered me to," she told him. "I was afraid, and felt insulted, but I obeyed."

The only thing she took along when she went to meet the king was a present Abram had given her on the night of their wedding. It was small clay pot.

When Sarai returned to Abram, he welcomed her heartily. But she lay stiffly in his arms and pleased him not.

And some other options (including one we have already seen):

Sarai hated Abram for what he asked of her. But she obeyed.

Sarai looked at her husband, at his large, handsome face, at his tanned, calloused hands. How simply, how naturally had he asked his question; how joyful was he when she agreed.

And she thought to herself, Why is he doing this to me? Have I been a bad wife to him? Am I growing old?

This prompts a discussion of which sentences work best and why. One example seems too straightforward, while another may be too obscure. We discuss the efficacy of symbols (e.g., clay pot) in conveying character's inner thoughts. The core of the discussion seems to center around the notion of "clarity"—whether a text can be thought of as most successful when the meaning is clear, or whether a text can be more nuanced because it lacks clarity. Vyleta explains that when you overwrite interiority, it leaves little room for the imagination. When something is left unexplained, the reader is required to participate in the text and take an active role in creating meaning. We then discuss the effect of direct speech, dialogue, and free indirect discourse, all of which are effective ways to open up interpretive space for the reader.

After discussing the merits and demerits of each example, we look at the whole passage to see how the insertion of three sentences might change the text's focalization.

Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you." Sarai said no the first time Abram asked this of her, and she said no again when he asked her for a second time. But when he asked her for a third time, she said yes. When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that Sarai was a very beautiful woman. And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace where she lived without joy or complaint. [...] But the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai. So Pharaoh summoned Abram. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!" Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way. When Sarai returned to Abram, he welcomed her heartily. But she lay stiffly in his arms and pleased him not.

The students marvel at how the added sentences invite the reader to delve into the interiority of Sarai, transforming the understanding of the entire text. Now that students have understood the technique, the next exercise is to shift the focalization back to Abram, who is almost as absent psychologically as Sarai is. Vyleta asks the students to "find their Abram" by inserting three sentences that will explore his psychological and emotional life. The students become immersed in the new writing exercise, using new methods they learned in the previous example.

Overall, the students enjoy working with the Biblical passage, a text which seemed so foreign to them in the beginning. They learn a vital lesson—that readers are active participants in the creation of meaning. The Bible is a great example because it seems to lack psychological depth on the surface, but the text also teases and leaves it up to the reader to fill in the gaps. A writer's job, Vyleta explains, is not to "write characters," per se, but to provide a sufficient number of clues so that the readers can give life to the characters themselves. If you overwrite or are too clear, then you might squeeze the reader out. Finding that balance is the most difficult part of writing. Vyleta concludes the workshop on an interesting paradox: Narrative fiction's ability to capture and depict the inner lives of strangers is its most magical and unique features, and yet what allows the readers to slip into other people's lives is often facilitated by a certain coyness on the side of the writer, a restraint from spelling out the characters' thoughts and feelings.

Concluding Thoughts:

How Creative Writing Can Enhance an Active Learning Pedagogy

Creative Writing can be helpful to students at all learning levels, as it invites students to create content and gives them confidence to write freely and openly. While there is often some structure in the classroom writing exer-

cises (such as the insertion of a select number of lines into a Biblical text in Vyleta's workshop), the instructor can use low-stakes creative writing exercises to urge students to come up with new ideas and content by using their imagination. When students are encouraged to think and write creatively, even while learning from existing models, they can shift their focus away from searching for correct answers and move into the territory of exploration. Frequently, when a student's writing falls flat, it is because they are too eager to follow a generic model without exploring new ideas and expressions on their own. Creative writing can temporarily shift (or destabilize) the authority away from professors and the text, and provide a transformative classroom experience that is student-centered.

This is especially true for second-language writers who tend to be sensitive to errors and cede too much authority to the text. It is not a coincidence that many of the students' responses in Vyleta's workshop directly related to how *they saw and processed* the Genesis passage firsthand—not how they've been instructed to read and interpret the passage. This distinction is paramount if your desire as an instructor is to help your students move away from intellectual codependency to a point where they can begin to establish their own intellectual independence. All too often classroom discussions falter because the students spend too much time worrying over the basic comprehension of a text or intention of the author. Once students feel comfortable with getting inside a text, the instructor can facilitate productive discussions by using student responses as a foundation to build a more complex and critical understanding of the text.

Most of Vyleta's writing exercises took 5-10 minutes, and they served to ignite a short burst of energy among the students that gave him immediate access to the students' ideas, interests, and concerns related to the text. The students were also able to experience the creativity of their peers since they were not under the burden of trying to conform to the "correct" way of thinking and writing. Although the workshop was a singular event, we can build on these creative writing exercises by having the students revisit their own writing and think more critically about the process of writing itself—that writing doesn't just exist in its finished form, but that the process of revision is essential.

This is perhaps the most important aspect of writing that the students learned through the workshop—that a text is not a fixed artifact or a frozen museum object, but that it is a living work whose sentences and expressions can easily be rearranged and reimagined. Creative writing gives students permission that they don't know they have; it introduces a sense of play, where students can insert themselves in the process of writing and actually enjoy the experience. Going through the exercise, furthermore, allows students to go back and appreciate the original text on its own terms, even if they disliked or didn't understand the text at the first reading. This aspect often gets lost in a traditional literature or academic writing classroom, where students tend to see reading and writing as a challenge. Creative writing changes the dynamic and power structure of learning and puts the student first. This is what makes creative writing a great pedagogical tool in creating an active learning environment.