REVIEWS

Dan Disney (ed.): *Exploring Second Language Creative Writing. Beyond Babel* (John Benjamins, 2014)

DANIEL SOUKUP

Though the honing of writing skills has always been part of foreign language instruction, creative writing in a foreign/second language is a relatively recent academic discipline. Rather than claiming to survey a wholly new field, it purports to introduce novel teaching strategies and objectives; it leaves behind the unworkable ideal of "writing like a native speaker", as well as the sceptical notion that non-native learners cannot attain the level of truly creative writing, and may only, at the very best, become proficient producers of journalistic or technical texts.

The ideal which embodies this paradigm shift has been designated variously, but, arguably, Michael Byram's term "intercultural speaker" sums up best what is at stake, expressing as it does also the returned emphasis on the connection between language and culture. As is usually the case, pedagogy (and its conceptualization) has followed, with a certain time lag, creative practice and theoretical debate: the themes and approaches which postcolonial writers and thinkers have been developing for several decades are now eventually gaining ground in classrooms.

The volume *Exploring Second Language Creative Writing*, edited by Dan Disney, comprises seven essays by various teachers,

scholars, writers and translators; most contributors combine several of these roles. It is particularly valuable to European readers, because four of the essays make use of the authors' teaching experience in various East Asian countries: this confrontation with unfamiliar linguistic and cultural issues can question our presuppositions and yield fresh insights.

Despite the diversity of topics and approaches, the essays, for the most part, adhere to what can be labelled as a shared orthodoxy. The editor himself suggests this in the introduction: "All contributors to this book resist imposing a hegemony of canonized themes, styles, and forms in order to colonize L2 imaginations with a pantheon of unimpeachable texts from the Occident or elsewhere." (p. 3) Notice the loaded language of this rejection; phrases like these read almost like passages from a creed or a manifesto.

Positive formulations of this shared attitude can also be found in Disney's introduction: "Within Creative Writing (SL) interpretative communities, linguistic **playfulness** is facilitative of the **liberation** of newly-possible L2 identities, freed to perform no less than **difference** and **divergence**." (p. 6) – "Creative Writing (SL) is a creolized discipline incorporating **difference**, **experimentation, hybridity, invention and intervention**, and rather than a normative suite of cultural values, this emergent field allows for – indeed, demands – **novel** and **authentic** linguistic **individualizations**." (p. 10) (emphasis DS)

This shared conceptual framework gives a welcome sense of coherence to the volume. Nevertheless, there is a certain irony to it, consisting primarily in the fact that what started off as resistance to hegemony, normativity and the canon seems to have become a (more or less) "normative suite of cultural values" in

its own right, with its own (more or less) canonical authors and concepts – B. B. Kachru's "bilinguals' creativity", Mikhail Bakhtin's "heteroglossia" and "dialogue" or Paolo Freire's "liberation", to name some of the more conspicuous ones.

As a consequence, the theoretical introductions to the essays appear somewhat repetitive when one reads the volume as a whole, though some of the contributors do manage to outline intriguing theoretical concepts. But in the main, one tends to agree with Dan Disney's observation that "as yet, the emergent Creative Writing (SL) field remains largely unsupported by interdisciplinary theoretical discourses" (p. 55). To me, the chief value of the volume lies in the manifolds ways it reflects on teaching practice in various institutional and cultural settings, which also provides the core of most contributions.

The first essay in the volume, **David Hanauer's "Appreciating the beauty of second language poetry writing"**, presents what the author admits to be "a very personal view" of the subject (p. 11). This caveat should be borne in mind throughout, because some of the author's claims – about the autobiographical nature of poetry, for instance, or about the "relationship between form and content" (p. 14) – might seem somewhat shaky if taken at face value.

However, as a personal account of one possible way of teaching writing, the article is definitely stimulating, not least because of its honesty: Hanauer notes that most of his students have "hated learning to write", because "they assumed that [his] class would be another exercise in the humiliation and failure to match first language models" (p. 14). This is linked with the fact that "issues of aesthetic appreciation and emotional engagement" are ignored by "the majority of practitioners and researchers" in the field of second language writing (p. 11).

Hanauer's teaching approach (tested over 10 years on numerous students) consists in making each student write a short book comprising ten autobiographical poems in English. What seems particularly important is the non-classroom-like genuineness of the exercise: the student is required to produce three typed and bound copies of the book, and read the poems at a poetry reading event.

Nevertheless, Hanauer's key point regarding the beauty of second language poetry is not altogether convincing. On the one hand, Hanauer – in line with modernist aesthetics – associates beauty with "the unusualness and strangeness of the writing" (p. 12); on the other hand, he repeatedly stresses its intimately personal character. Thus he seems to want to have it both ways, claiming both linguistic defamiliarization and hands-on authenticity for his students' poems. However, such perfect unity of experience and expression is too high a pedagogical goal – even too high as an ideal goal.

In fact, Hanauer's descriptions of his classes (as well as the poems he quotes) make it clear that the primary objective is authenticity; or, to be more precise, *accuracy* – not in the narrowly grammatical sense, but in the sense of making words carefully match the recollected experience. Beauty – a fresh turn of phrase or unusual expression – seems to arise as an occasional by-product. This is not meant as a criticism: though not attaining perfection, these well-written poems are remarkable achievements.

Jane Spiro's practically oriented contribution **"Learner and writer voices"** offers useful insights about the ways language learners can draw inspiration from the writing of experienced authors. Spiro acknowledges that the analysis of literary texts written by established authors "may lead to a sense of awe and

alienation from the possibilities of self-creation" (p. 24). Nevertheless, the outcomes of various international writing projects indicate that this experience may also work in the opposite direction, and provide learner writers with both the necessary encouragement and useful ideas.

Spiro charts a four-part cycle of the writing process, ranging from the student's **choice** of a short text (usually, but not always, by an experienced writer); to the **articulation** of the reasons for choice; the **application**, that is, writing their own text in response to the one they chose; and, finally, **reflection** on what the students "learnt about themselves and one another" (p. 29).

Again, a slight egocentric slant and realistic bias is evident throughout: as in Hanauer's contribution, here, too, writing is seen as primarily an exercise in autobiography. The students are taught to "share real and meaningful messages about their life" (p. 26), and the work of other writers is there for them first to "identify" with (p. 31). However, the process does not stop at this inward point; the actual writing task is dialogical in nature: "How might I draw on these ideas to describe one aspect of my life experience to my partner?" (p. 31)

The reflections on students' texts offered by Spiro are not always completely convincing; her list of devices used (metaphor, personification, monologue and dialogue, and so on) seems somewhat random, and rather too general. But this is not much of a drawback: these broad categories serve simply as slots to order the many well-chosen examples from students' texts and personal comments. Spiro's contribution provides a useful summary of rich classroom experience, and it can be read also as a valuable outline of literary communication, of the way we appropriate, alter, and share words which are, in one

way or another, always already there.

Dan Disney, the editor of the volume, introduces his own view of "poetry as a radical technology" in the contribution entitled **" 'Is this how it's supposed to work?' "** which is, to my mind, one of the highlights of the book. One of the reasons for this is the thoroughgoing vigour of the language, including the theoretical passages. Some other contributors seem, now and then, to handle theoretical concepts not so much to meet a meaningful need, but in order to fulfil the scholarly duty to review the state of the art; but Disney manages to make theory work even in what is (as in most other contributions, too) primarily a pedagogical context.

One particularly valuable aspect of the essay is the way Disney re-contextualizes traditional elements of literature classes, such as the close reading of canonical texts, which he sees as "exemplary works in which histories of poetic imagination are enshrined" (p. 45). This may come as a surprise, since some passages in Disney's introduction to the volume seem to advocate a departure from the literary canon when teaching writing. But in fact, his methodology is a sophisticated blend of traditional techniques from both literature and foreign language teaching (such as "vocabulary-building exercises", p. 47), and elements drawn from the new paradigm of "bilinguals' creativity".

Disney's brief description of one of his classes at Sogeng University (Seoul) gives an inspiring illustration of how "sometimes poems happen not only when we don't expect them to, but when we expect they won't." (s. 49) This is linked with Disney's nuanced view of self-expression: he notes that "an emergent English-language identity does not speak 'naturalistically'." (p. 45) He does see self-expression (in a broad sense of the word) as the ideal, but acknowledges that the gradual shift

"from silence and nothingness into drafts" (p. 46) can be quite laborious; what may help is the emphasis on "*serious* playfulness which foregrounds risk-taking, mistake-making, and coincidence" (p. 44).

Disney give three examples of poetic techniques which he uses in his classes, always grounding them in the literary tradition: the art of observation (Rilke's *Dinggedichte*, "thing-poems"), the use of the line-break (drawing on Ezra Pound and Denise Levertov), and the use of image and figuration (haiku by Basho). Frankly, haiku are such a favourite in foreign language teaching that one might wish for a less familiar example here. Nevertheless, Disney's three examples are valuable both pedagogically and theoretically; in particular, the passage on the line-break demonstrates how a very simple device can be put to complex uses.

The next contribution, by **Eugenia Loffredo** and **Manuela Perteghella**, introduces **"Literary translation as a creative practice in L2 writing pedagogies"**. The authors' main argument is that "translation cannot be reduced… to just a linguistic 'skill', but must be understood as an experiential, transformative, explorative creative writing practice." (p. 67) The two theoretical sections on creativity count among the less stimulating passages of the book: they are somewhat too lengthy and laborious (comprising about half of the essay), and they draw quite heavily on a single source (*Creativity and Learning in Secondary English* by Andrew McCallum). At times, they seem to be dwelling on the obvious – but also, occasionally, lapsing into oversimplifications, such as McCallum's table outlining "the changing nature of creativity": "Creativity in English was elitist, mystical, individual" and so on – "Creativity in English is democratic, practical, dialogic" etc. (p. 61) But there are il-

luminating insights, too: about the use of different kinds of creativity (exploratory, transformational, and combinational) in translation (p. 62), or about how "the degree of creativity can be obtained and measured against the conscious change of familiar elements." (p. 66)

The subsequent section provides a useful checklist of different kinds of translation which can be employed in foreign language teaching. The authors stress the importance of intralingual translation: students can translate an L2 (foreign language) text into another L2 text, by changing, for instance, its dialect or sociolect (*dialect translation*) or genre (*transgeneric translation*). Other techniques include intersemiotic translation (work with drawing, photography, music, and so on), and collaborative translation, understood not as "peer review", but as "co-writing" (p. 68–69). The ensuing descriptions of two types of creative translation workshops (live and virtual) are, somewhat unfortunately, very brief, and give the reader only a general idea of their content and drift. An interesting tool is the use of journals and logs, which help to establish a "self-reflective mood enabl[ing] the learning and refinement of one's own writing skills." (p. 72)

The last three essays in the volume are all deeply rooted in a particular cultural environment (Macao, Hong Kong, and Brunei Darussalam) which shapes the author's approach.

In the essay **"Process and product, means and ends"**, **Christopher (Kit) Kelen** offers what he calls "a personal account of one teacher's efforts to establish a Creative Writing pedagogy for non-native learners of English" at a university in Macao (p. 75). Like some other contributors, Kelen stresses the necessarily interdisciplinary nature of such an enterprise, encompassing literature, language study, translation, intercultural

understanding, and philosophy. This might seem too challenging; however, it is not meant as an enumeration of topics to be covered in the curriculum, but as a checklist of contexts to be borne in mind so that Creative Writing does not become the exclusive "prisoner of any of [these] disciplines" (p. 79). By bridging these divergent areas, Creative Writing highlights the importance of imagination ("inspiration, innovation, lateral thinking") which, as Kelen rightly insists against popular prejudice, is part and parcel of the academy, as a necessary counterpart of critical thinking (p. 79).

The emphasis on imaginative self-expression goes hand in hand with the communicative, task-based and student-centred approach towards language learning which has been dominant in the West for several decades. However, this attitude clashes with the values of the Confucian Heritage Culture, prevailing also in Macao, such as "book learning" and "the leadership of the teacher". (p. 80) Kelen's brief description of whether – and how – these opposing orthodoxies can be harmonized is, at least to me, the most interesting part of his essay.

Kelen argues that, despite the obvious differences, one can also make use "make use of commonalities", such as "deep respect for student, teacher and the process of learning" or "the centrality of texts and models" (p. 87). Admittedly, this might seem quite a low common denominator. But Kelen shows that setting off at this starting point can lead us to discover more interesting analogies – for instance, between the Confucian figure of the sage, and the active writer in the role of the Creative Writing teacher (both are seen as "exemplary models", p. 89). Kelen also appropriately points out possible intercultural misunderstandings: when, for example, a Western teacher in a Confucian Heritage Culture classrooms misreads respect ("an

unwillingness to assume the expert position of the teacher") as passivity (p. 87).

One would wish to learn more about such intercultural encounters, but after this section, Kelen's essay loses focus somewhat, moving on to touch on several quite diverse topics. He briefly introduces the community publisher called Association of Stories in Macao, retells the contents of four works of fiction published by them, offers a few thoughts on the translation of Chinese poetry as a suitable way of teaching poetry writing, and presents the complete (and uncommented) texts of a bilingual (English, Chinese) poem involving self-translation by a Macao poet. The essay closes by Kelen noting the irony of the fact that "the word 'creative' has been hijacked by some of the most banal, authoritarian and money-driven forces the university has known." (p. 101) Each of these passages half-opens a door without really venturing in; and though Kelen's essay abounds in interesting observations, it is sometimes left to the reader to connect them to a whole.

Eddie Tay's contribution **"Curriculum as cultural critique. Creative Writing pedagogy in Hong Kong"** is, to me, another highpoint of the volume. Though, as noted above, Paolo Freire's concept of liberation is almost ubiquitous in the book, Tay's essay is unique in providing a consistent analysis of how this concept operates amid the interplay of specific cultural, social and political forces.

In the first section, Tay introduces the complex collective identity of Hong Kong as "a nation without citizenship" (p. 106), encompassing the ironic in-betweenness of a place which "has never been in command of its sovereignty" (p. 106). The very administrative labels applied to Hong Kong hint at its paradoxical character: with the "British National (Overseas)"

passport, "one could travel anywhere, yet one has no right of abode." (p. 106) And the current official status of Hong Kong as a "Special Administrative Region" expresses both its connection with and its distance from mainland China.

This sense of displacement is linked with cosmopolitism, transnational mobility, and pragmatism, including the attitude towards English, which is "regarded as instrumental to academic and career prospects rather than a language that is at the heart of one's identity," as opposed to Cantonese and Mandarin (p. 108). Consequently, as noted by Ackbar Abbas, "it takes a certain kind of determination for someone in Hong Kong to persist in the project of writing poems in English" (quoted on p. 108).

It is at this point that Freire's critical pedagogy, with its key elements of authenticity, autonomy, agency and dialogue, becomes relevant. For Tay and his students, playfulness is important, too. Whereas learning functional, academic English (often under the guidance of immensely well-paid private tutors) prepares one for a career in business, writing (and learning how to write) poetry gives one a sense of liberation and dissent. Tay shrewdly notes that "this is a false dichotomy on a few counts", and points out that "creative writers in institutions of higher learning operate with a degree of irony", fitting into (and being determined by) authoritative power structures while striving for consciousness-raising and openness (p. 113–114).

As a creative writing teacher, Tay responds to this by "externaliz[ing] the creative writing process": rather than asking students to "express themselves", he gives them "exercises that take them outside of themselves"(p. 115), and make use of themes taken from the culture of Hong Kong. The student poem he quotes from, with the refrain "NO MONEY NO

TALK", provides a suggestive example of a genuine creative appropriation of those pragmatic forces which threaten creativity. Writing, for Tay, takes one "outside of oneself" in its outcomes, too: he emphasises the importance of public readings, poetry journals, and other ways which connect the writing community, and provide the best budding authors with career opportunities in the culture sector. On the whole, Tay's excellent case study gives a multifaceted picture of creative writing in Hong Kong, while offering also a number of stimulating generalizations.

In the closing essay of the book, **Grace V. S. Chin** offers another intercultural perspective, focusing on **"Co-constructing a community of creative writers. Exploring L2 identity formations through Bruneian playwriting"**. Drawing on the theories of Lev S. Vygotsky and Michel Foucault, Chin reflects on her experience with ESL learners at the University of Brunei Darussalam. The section summarizing Foucault's views is somewhat less helpful; for instance, the term "discourse" is so ubiquitous in the humanities that it does not seem productive to use it as a starting point of an analysis. Consequently, the whole passage is rather too general and manifesto-like (reminiscent of Dan Disney's introduction to the volume) – identity is "a dynamic, complex, and changeable construct" (p. 123), it is "multiple, unstable and mutable, always 'in process'" (p. 124), and so on.

Vygotsky's views on social learning are more directly linked with the analytical part of the essay. Especially relevant is Vygotsky's observation that "all the higher mental functions originate as actual relationships between people" (quoted on p. 122) and the consequences this has for teaching and learning; for instance, the very "learning space should be physically structured

in such a manner that it facilitates social interaction and peer collaboration among students." (p. 122)

Chin provides a succinct outline of the Brunei culture, emphasizing its ethnic plurality (encompassing the dominant Malays, but also Chinese and indigenous groups), the importance of group identities, the ideal of social harmony, and the tension between conservative state ideology and pragmatic oil and gas economy. Another crucial aspect is Malay-English bilingualism. However, English is perceived and promoted as a purely functional tool enhancing career prospects, whereas Malay is seen as the "language of the soul" (p. 130).

This resembles the position of English in Hong Kong as described by Eddie Tay; and, like Tay's, Chin's teaching strives to make use of the very social forces which would seem to prevent English being used as the vehicle of creativity. Chin is the only contributor to the volume who presents a playwriting workshop. Drama is, of course, dialogic and collaborative by its very nature, and thus seems excellently suited for a socioculturaloriented writing course. The social dimension is further enhanced by teaching techniques such as role-play, by the physical make-up of the classroom drawing on Vygotskian ideas, and also by the fact that students are encouraged "to bring food and drinks, as well as mats and cushions, to class." (p. 132)

Consequently, the scripts written in the class employ characteristic Bruneian themes, for instance, the family with "character types such as the authoritarian parental figure, the wise father/grandfather, the gossipy wife/mother, and the obedient child." (p. 133) Like Tay, Chin sees a socially relevant outcome as an essential part of the writing workshop: the best plays of her students are regularly staged, and a selection of plays has been published in an anthology which "represents one of the

few local publications in English" (p. 137). Chin also provides brief excerpts from dialogues produced during role-play which tellingly demonstrate code-switching (between English and Chinese, or English and Malay) and clashes of different cultural values. Moreover, they testify to the genuine joy of play, thus appropriately closing this stimulating volume of reflections on playfulness and creativity.

Thanks to the unity of approach, soundness of theoretical foundations, wealth of topics covered and sharpness of observation, *Exploring Second Language Creative Writing* provides a significant contribution to both research and teaching practice, and will undoubtedly stimulate further theoretical and pedagogical explorations in this exciting and increasingly important field.