

On (Dis)connection between Reading and Writing

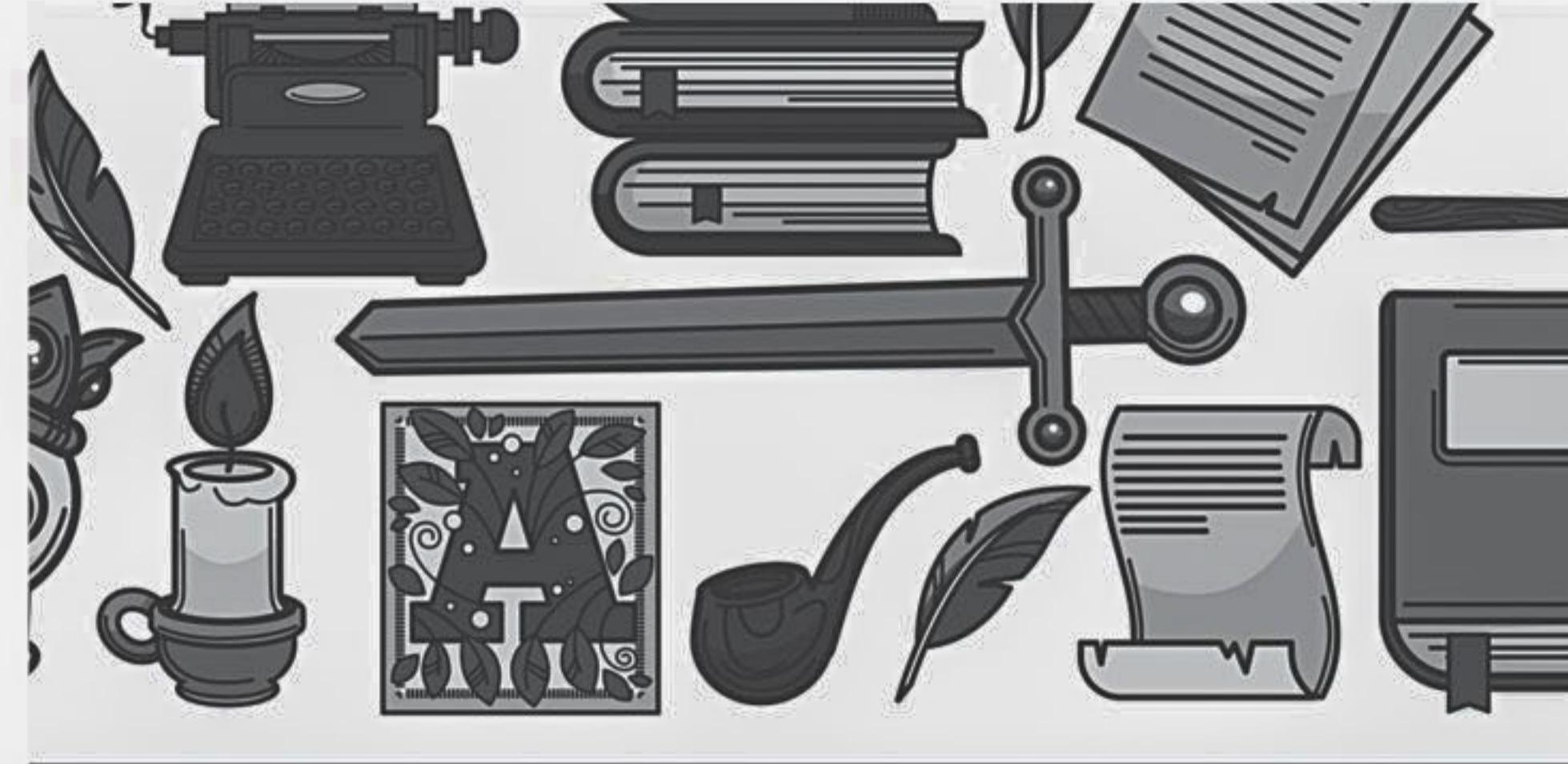
MOHAMMAD SHAMSUZZAMAN

Back in 2005 in California, I was reading Edward Said's *Power, Politics, and Culture*. This book is a collection of twenty-eight interviews conducted over three decades, in which Said fielded various questions on culture, literature, history, politics, and music. One of the interviewers asked, "Who should we read to know about South Asia?" He replied, "Eqbal Ahmad." I knew nothing about Eqbal Ahmad. I immediately checked out his *Selected Writings of Eqbal Ahmad* from the University library. From Google I located the columns he contributed to the DAWN in Pakistan. Reading Ahmad's work, I learned that when he was a child, he met Mahatma Gandhi. Once his elder brother suggested, "Since you can meet Gandhiji, ask him how to become a good writer. He is a good writer." In his next meeting with Gandhi, Ahmad said, "My brother said that you are a good writer. Could you please tell me how to become a good writer?" Gandhi suggested, "Read the King James version of the Bible." So I checked out the King James version of the Bible, but I could put up with it for barely an hour. It cracked my concentration and sapped my appetite for reading. It's archaic, allegorical, and paradoxical. It is studded with gems of poetics, but I wanted to read something lean, direct, and concrete. I discovered no connection between reading the Bible and honing one's writing skills.

Doesn't writing presuppose extensive reading? Yes, of course. The connection between reading and writing, however, is neither inevitable nor automatic. What is eating to the human body is reading to a writer. Good food nourishes the body, but junk food destroys it. Similarly if a writer is on a diet of junk prose, it can destroy her writing mind and muscles. Both in so called creative and critical genres, some writing is just typing. It contains nothing for a reader—neither content, nor language—to emulate. Avoiding insipid prose is often not an option because of academic and professional obligations. While some people have to write without learning about the craft of writing, for others, as George Orwell claims in his essay, "Politics and the English Language," bad writing is a considered option. Bad prose seeps in and survives. Exposure to bad writing provides no model for good writing. Reading under such a circumstance hardly complements writing. Reading mush prose leads to neither writing, or messed up writing.

The production of good prose presupposes savoring sprightly writing. Steven Pinker in *The Sense of Style*, claims that we become writers by spotting, savoring, and reverse-engineering examples from good prose. While his argument proposes that the act of writing is inseparable from the act of reading, it warrants some clarification. If reading is to complement writing, a reader must read like a writer. She must notice the mechanical, semantic, syntactic, and rhetorical options and restrictions a writer chooses or chooses to avoid to transcribe her thoughts. Reading as a means of decoding information adds little to the arsenal of a writer. A passive reader is not helping herself to become a potential writer. Inadvertently or not, reading in academic context is mostly passive. Very few academic readers care about the styles and strategies of writing. While they read, they look only for content. They seldom notice the frequent flashes of writerly flair or the slips and skips in a piece of writing. They come away from reading informed, but not inspired to emulate the magic and music that words embody. Discovering a writer lurking beneath the text is perhaps the first step toward becoming a writer. In order for that to happen, Pinker claims that a writer must have a "sensitive radar" as a reader. Most readers don't have that.

That doesn't seem consequential. Writing in an academic context is subservient to reading. An author is not an authority. A reader is. A writer is intellectually impaired and ethically deficient. She has no value, vision, or philosophy. Money, fame, revenge, and sex drive her to write. She is but what a reader thinks she is. There's nothing in writing. It's all in reading. While such a deconstructionist approach to reading has its rewards, it fails to draw upon the intellectual possibilities of writing. No writer knows exactly what she will write until she writes it. Writing makes fuzzy and formless thoughts clear and concrete to a writer. Every writer wants to answer the question that E.M. Forster asked in *Aspects of the Novel*: "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" Writing is thinking, but writing also disciplines and enhances our thinking ability. Every original writing responds to a unique rhetorical context. A writer must not reproduce what she already knows. She must create new knowledge. She must avoid what is already done and said. When a writer is faced with such a problem—dare I claim that



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writing is problem solving?—she creates a unique world of word and wisdom. A possessed reader is a paralyzed writer.

If that sounds a little off-kilter, we should listen to Toni Morrison. She served as an acquisitions editor for Random House for about 20 years. Having been a professional reader for about two decades, she claims in her "Paris Review" interview, "Reading is not enough for writing." Exactly! Writing has never been simply an adjunct to or outgrowth of reading. Reading plays a facilitative—but non-causal—role in writing. Writing has its own grammar. Composition scholar Ann Raimes claims in her essay, "What Unskilled ESL Students Do as They Write: A Classroom Study of Composing," that for writing, we need two types of codes: linguistic code and written code. By linguistic codes she means the mechanics of writing: grammar, spelling, capitalization, in-

dentation, and punctuation. The mechanics of writing can be straightforwardly learned or taught. The written codes, by contrast, refer to the rhetoric of writing: audience, purpose, presentation, voice, word choice, and sentence fluency. What makes good writing good is its rhetorical elegance and its rhetorical effect on readers. Rhetoric in writing is not as easily amenable to teaching or learning as mechanics. Rhetoric in writing is mostly an area of inductive development. While reading familiarizes a potential writer with the rhetoric of writing, a writer must discover and absorb besides and beyond reading. Reliance on reading might persuade a potential writer to believe that writing is all about renewing some else's rhetorical model. Writing, though, is all about creating a new rhetorical model. Reading might misguide a writer about what it means and takes to be a writer.

Unless reading materials are carefully selected in academic context, reading and writing don't form a continuum. They form a dichotomy. Steven Pinker in *The Sense of Style* claims that academic writing is mostly bad writing. Most academics suffer from a common defect: the curse of knowledge. Academics know their stuff well, so well that sometimes jargon, argots, and technical terms fall out of their mouths automatically. They assume that what they know, everyone does. This disposition begets writing that is stuffy, pompous, and affected. It lacks affect and human interest. It's arid writing that has no potential for absorbing writing skills. Also, good writing requires courage and conviction. But academics hedge. They don't stand by what they claim. Writing becomes impersonal and imponderable, consequently touching and transforming no readers. Academics and their students can't seem to keep themselves from reading and reproducing such prose. How does reading in such a system provide resources for writing?

It doesn't. Nonetheless, I would sound naïve if I claim that there's no connection between reading and writing. Reading is the life-blood of writing. All so-called gifted writers were—and are—voracious readers. No composition scholar has ever claimed that writing can be learned and taught independent of reading. Composition professionals, instead, claim that a teacher of writing is inevitably a teacher of reading. How does a writer discover and augment herself without reading? Reading takes a writer beyond her quotidian self. It gives her a richer and more complex space to grow and learn. Reading renews and recreates a writer. It expands the consciousness of a writer, and connects her to her inner self, the fount of writing. The death of a reader is the death of a writer. However, despite the symbiotic connection between reading and writing, an original writer must deal with—even ignore—what renowned critic Harold Bloom calls "anxiety of influence." A reader must grab something from reading, but that's not the gift she gives the world as a writer. She is not a facsimile of her predecessors. She must write something that carries her signature. Promoting reading as an essential cognate to writing warrants some caution.

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REVIEWS

An Anchorite's Call to Reread Tagore

Rereading Tagore. Amiya Dev. ISBN: 9789386906304. Niyogi Books, 2018

REVIEWED BY AKHTAR HUSAIN KHAN

Tagore is almost a century-old fixation with the Bengali-speaking world. A continual sprightly stream of books, writings and speeches (as well as films) that started with the great poet winning the Nobel Prize for literature back in 1913 has now formed into a big river that shows no sign of siltation. Every year, as we know, during Tagore's birth and death anniversaries, there is in fact a proliferation of this. The birth centenary in 1961 and the 150th birth anniversary of 2011 saw an overabundance of Tagore-related production, a tendency that poet Bishnu Dey had once quipped as 'Rabindra Byaboshba.'

Amiya Dev is not one to participate in Tagore-business; and his latest book on Tagore in English, named *Rereading Tagore*, belongs to a different genre altogether. One can readily find in this book from Niyogi Books of New Delhi published earlier this year an attempt to say something solemn about the great poet; and indeed, it is a testimony to the writer's life-long endeavour to produce something unique both in style and content.

Apart from the Preface, Dev's book contains the following fourteen chapters: My Tagore, Power of Tagore's Words, A Word on 'The Post Office', Muktdhara's Relevance, Ideal and Waste, 'Char Adhay' Re-read, Reading 'Jogajog', 'Gora', 'The Individual' and The 'Universe' in Tagore, 'If my heart's doors are ever shut', Tagore's 'Puja' songs in the Background of 'Bhakti', Nature in Tagore's Poetry, Tagore and Sikhism,

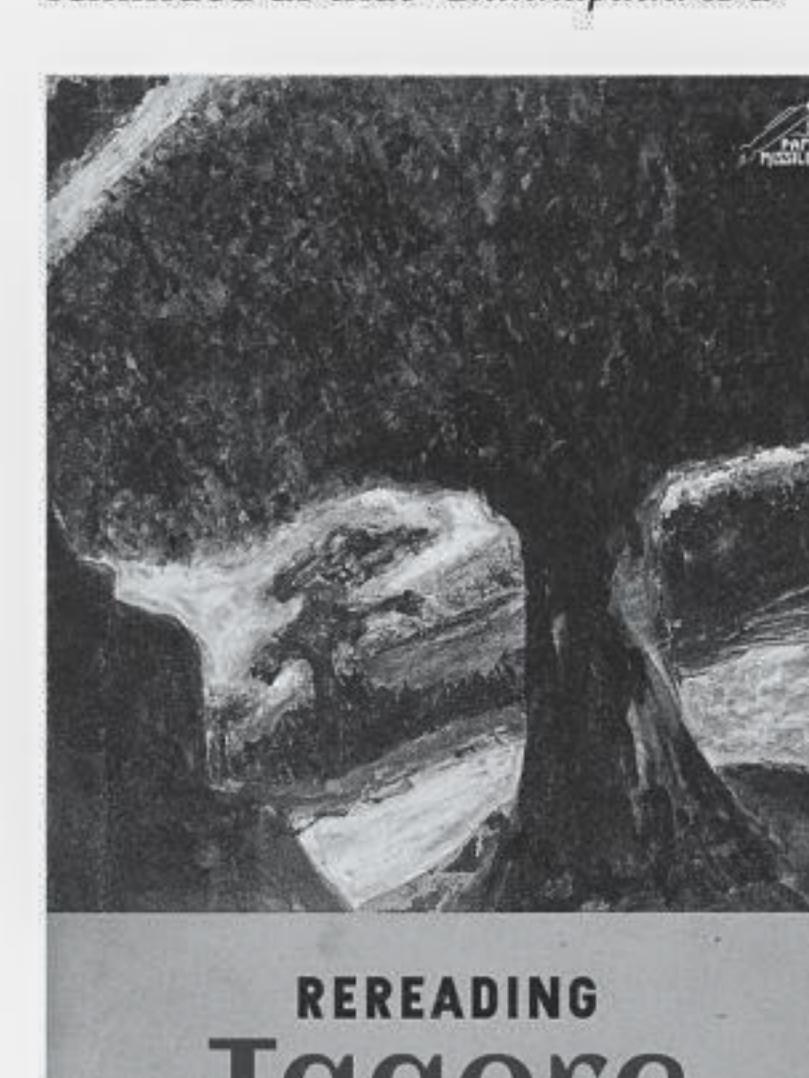
Tagore's Travel Writings, and Tagore's Vision of the East.

This English book along with Dev's two earlier books on Tagore in Bengali, namely 'Ki Phul Jhilar' and 'Bipul Taranga Re' forms an interesting trilogy on Tagore. However, the writer says that those who have read his earlier two Bengali books need not read this one. As a not-so-irregular reader of Dev, I, for one, would disagree. His three books on Tagore came out with write-ups that were mostly composed in his seventies; and surely that is a time when serious writers take up issues that are different from even their own earlier creation. As I read the book, I had the feeling that a sage-like anchorite is spreading his life-long message.

I have followed this former professor of comparative literature of Jadavpur University and Vice Chancellor of Vidyasagar University for nearly the last two decades; and it seems to me that whatever he writes is special discourse. A direct student of two of post-Tagore luminaries, Sudhindra Datta and Buddhadev Basu, at the Jadavpur University, where he studied comparative literature, Dev comes up with issues and themes that send one to reflection, introspection and search. Discussions on 'Post Office', 'Muktdhara', 'Gora', 'Char Adhay', and 'Jogajog' are not written for traditional classroom digestion, whose trail would end once the examinations were over. In Gora for instance, he has brought in his friend the Kananda poet Kubempu's estimation of Tagore's Gora for discussion and contra-

dicted him by saying that he saw in him the 'breadth and wholeness' of Balzac, Tolstoy or Thomas Mann (as seen by Georg Luacs).

Two of the most absorbing pieces of this new book are 'My Tagore' and 'Power of Tagore's Words.' In 'Power of Tagore's Words,' Dev has reminded us that 'Chinnapatra' is a



treasure-house of images,' while he mentions Tagore did not have a single masterpiece like Goethe's *Faust*, but he had *Chinnapatra* that can qualify as a classic. He reminds us of the great poet's strength in imagery and words. His revocation of Buddhadev Bose taking a cue from William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* was based on his desire to write

about seven stairs of Tagore's poetry to illustrate the cycle of progress or variety in the great poet's works. A slightly long quote from the author in 'Power of Tagore's Words' wherein he invokes comments from both Buddhadev Bose and Sudhindra Datta about Tagore is as followed:

"Do we know that when we write a sentence today or a paragraph, we are unwittingly following his deeply entrenched footsteps? Our Bengali would just have not existed without his Bengali. When Buddhadev Bose called him a 'phenomenon,' he was not exaggerating. Nor was Sudhindra Datta when he said: 'For us, however, he remains the supreme man of letters: in forging our current speech, he remodeled our culture too; and when we meet skeptics, let us remember that reality remains in propositions.'

In 'My Tagore,' while referring to Tagore's path of painting, he mentions his moving away from the 'Shantiniketan style' of painting and reaches this non-intriguing observation: 'Shantiniketan did not create Tagore, it was Tagore that created Shantiniketan.'

Dev draws our attention to Tagore's role as a maker of Shantiniketan to not only 'historians and philosophers of education, but also to environmentalists and lovers of nature.' In today's world, where issues relating to nature and environment take on ever greater significance, this role of the great poet appears no less important than his songs.

In writing about Tagore's life stories, he mentions Tagore's two auto-

biographies *Jibansmriti* and *Chelebeli*, while at the same time reminding us about a brief third one called *Atmaparichay*, a letter to the assistant editor of the *Bengalee* magazine in 1910, giving a few bare facts of his life, and an autobiographical talk in China in 1924; besides reminding us about his travels, he talked about his letters, conversation with the world personalities, memoirs of son, nieces, grandson; accounts of literary successors etc.

All this and more is prolegomena to 'My Tagore,' as mentioned by the writer. He says he approaches Tagore as a reader, not as a writer and 'the common recipient of Tagore's creative arts.' And if we read this, 'Of course the bulk of this reception is to the written word, to how it attains its rhythm and makes metaphoric and metonymic tandem with everyday experience. I am not speaking of verse alone, but of prose as well, the whole variety of it. I am speaking of a 'language' where silence and innuendo are as potent as the voice, the oblique as effective as the direct. All this is old hash to the students of style, but having denied Tagore the modernist heights and seeing more pathetic fallacy than synaesthesia in him, maybe a little too long, I have woken up to the power of his words. Better late than never,' we understand why Amiya Dev has become a Tagore-hermit. Although a bit too long, this quotation explains Dev's 'My Tagore' and 'Power of Tagore's Words'; and if minded properly, other entries of the book would provide the reader their logical basis.

In short, for the non-Bengali lovers of Tagore, Amiya Dev's book is one of the very best and most comprehensive; and even for the Bengali-speaking world, it would sparkle as a glittering homegrown gem in a market with endless products.

The reviewer is former secretary of the Government of Bangladesh.

Two of the bigger pieces on the book are 'Tagore's Puja Songs in the Background of 'Bhakti'' and 'Nature in Tagore's Poetry.' While the first of these is addressed at the Sixth Srimanta Sankaradeva Lecture at Tezpur University in 2015, the second one is included in 2011: *Roddam Narasimha*, ed. *Nature and Culture*, PHSC, XIV (New Delhi: Centre for Studies in Civilizations). The great Assamese saint Sankaradeva's reference is welcome in the sense that in these days of Assamese-Bengali rift (NRC is a case in point), Dev has been one of the foremost of Bengali writers to show not only his love for the Brahmaputra valley behemoth, who was as great like Chaitanya of Bengal, but has urged fellow Bengalis to learn to love Sankaradeva. 'Tagore and Sikhism' is another of the long ones.

In 'Tagore's Vision of the East,' we come to know about the poet's close feeling for Japan and China having a special point in the context of colonialism and the west's 'browbeating of Asia.' In 'Tagore's Travel Writings,' Dev has drawn our attention to the poet's taking special note of the Chinese dock labourers that reflected the strength of the Chinese people as a whole.

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