

Special Lecture

That Spirit of Inquiry

Liesl Schwabe



‘গাহি কাম্যের গান’

**Nazrul Centre for Social and
Cultural Studies**

**Kazi Nazrul University
Asansol, Paschim Bardhaman**

That Spirit of Enquiry

On the Necessity of Writing in the Humanities and the
necessity of the Humanity in Writing

By

Liesl Schwabe

Introduced by **Anindya Sekhar Purakayastha**

Writing as the Audacious House of Being



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Fore-reading as inscriptions of a Dialogue

Writing as the Audacious House of Being

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And, to be honest, I wanted a break. I wanted to step away and live in India again and teach different students and ask myself why this work matters. I got worn out from being on the defensive for so long... my teaching load has gone up and my students sometimes write on Rate My Professor that I'm a "man hating feminist." So I came to India asking myself not only if the Humanities could survive the 21st century, but, more accurately, if I had it in me to keep trying to make sure they did. – (Liesl Schwabe, 2019)

To fore-script, as I have written elsewhere, is to foreclose, and fore-navigate for the reader before she allows herself to feel the breeze and the smell wafting across the semantic order of the text. A foreword most of the times, prefigures the textual horizon, restricting in that way the autonomous spree of the reader. Fore-wording, therefore, is an act of transgression and intrusion into the sovereignty of the reader. It disallows sometimes the pure rendezvous with the text, which is a coveted personal experience bordering onto the spiritual. Given that, the best way to begin an apologetic foreword is to begin with the author herself and the above lines quoted in the beginning, to my mind, captures the thematic kernel of Liesl's invited lecture which she delivered at the Nazrul Center for Social and Cultural Studies, Kazi Nazrul University, West Bengal in early 2019. Let me clarify right at the outset that this is a humble attempt on my part to pay homage to Liesl's concise but brilliantly drafted talk. Her talk was dense and philosophically provocative, inviting the reader or audience to decipher through a process of reading-

writing (encountering), if I may say so. This fore-script is a curtain raiser, a tribute to what ensues for the reader-in-the-making. In the process of writing this, I learned, re-learned, re-thought, and that is how, I guess, writing evolves. It was in that way, a silent and invisible conversation with Liesl's thoughts. Liesl came to India as a distinguished Fulbright Visiting Scholar, teaching as part of her Fulbright assignment, in the prestigious and historic Presidency University, considered to be one of the landmarks of Humanities education in India. If we keep in mind just two luminaries (leaving aside the names of large numbers of other excellent scholars produced by this institution over the years) like Amartya Sen and Abhijit Vinayak Bandopadhyaya (both of whom were alumnus of this educational institution, were awarded the Nobel prize for their contribution to Economics and poverty alleviation research) – then we get an idea how this college has contributed to global humanities studies and global thinking on social justice. By her own testimony, Liesl decided to embark on this Fulbright project with a challenge, that was, to inquire through an exposure to a non-US academic experience whether the Humanities can survive the twenty first century. Evidently, this quest emerges within her through a sense of crisis and she did not restrict this hunt for an answer merely within the boundaries of passive thinking or mere inquiry but also through a self-imposed exercise of personal endeavour to examine whether she can equip herself to confront the complete commercialization of life in the twenty first century. Her entire lecture is an attempt to come to terms with this question and a dialogue with the self to unearth the possibilities for a way forward. The very title of her talk is enlightening and provocative enough to encourage the reader to think. I think one can summarize her lecture by the title of David Grossman's essay, which Liesel has referred to and has anchored on to establish her argument. David Grossman's essay titled "Writing in Dark Times" is quite interesting as he situates the act of writing as a form of purgative exercise. One may recall here Jaques Derrida's famous essay "Plato's Pharmacy", in which the dual meaning of the Greek word pharmakon has been discussed. Pharmakon may signify both 'poison' as well the 'curative' and Derrida, we all know went against Plato's fascination for speech as opposed to writing, the venerated Greek ascribed to writing the negative signification of the poison. Derrida in contrast, prioritizes *writing* over *speech* as for him

all binaric hierarchies are to be reversed for the constitution of a creative pluriverse. Writing or what Derrida calls ‘arche-writing’ is that actualization of plurisignification which is key to all critical thinking germane to Humanities education. Monological reading of the world leads to dogmas, resulting in coercive closures. Writing on the other hand involves the amplitude of vision, it expands the act of interpretation, resulting in liberal views. Writing, as opposed to speech allows that democratic process of counter-reading(s) possible. Writing as an act involves that continuous wrestling with words and signification. The plasticity of writing legitimizes dis-bordering and heralds the gossamer audacity of a nomadic self. It transcends all border patrolling in the domain of thinking and expression. Liesl’s own lecture title, “That Spirit of Inquiry : On the Necessity of Writing in the Humanities and the Necessity of the Humanity in Writing” (2019) inscribes the act of writing within the act of ontological inquiry, or within the act of critique itself and she will argue that writing is that very smithy of critique, through pen-pushing we actualize our thinking being.

Liesl begins her lecture with the primacy and involved-nature of writing as opposed to lecturing. Then she moves to the idea of Humanities education which coronates the act of thinking and subsequently embeds the splendours of thought in the semantic cavalcade. Humanities as a discipline is under attack everywhere in the world as its utilitarian values are being questioned in a world determined and governed by the logic of global laissez faire that focuses merely the vocational forms of education and skill oriented education training, an ideology that mocks all claims of epistemic enrichment through education or what in simple words we call value education. She refers to the infamous ‘Wisconsin Idea’ of 2008 in which the Wisconsin Governor in America notoriously proposed that the public university system is to be done away with in favour of a system of education which will exclusively focus on producing skilled workforce, rendering redundant the age old idea therefore, of Humanities education generating thoughtful individuals. Liesl rightly argues that as in the scientific laboratory scientists produce things, in the Humanities too, we generate minds. If higher education is fully monetized as is being done today and if there is a complete vocationalization of education, then parents and students are confused by this process as students are deprived of the larger experience of life

and their engagement with history to expand their cognitive horizon and to rethink history. Democracy, in this corporatized climate, becomes a ‘precarious endeavour’ if citizens are not educated to think and engage with critical questions of governance and citizenship issues.

Liesl refers to some thinkers who pinned hope in the humanities as hope is traditionally inscribed in an act of passive wait, relying on others to do what we expect things to do. This passivity and banking on others to pave the way for us in this hour of crisis can be replaced by Humanities education which promotes thought-action on our own part. Liesl quotes from the Israeli author, David Grossman whose own son was killed during compulsory military training in his own country and his despondency and quest for a way out is articulated through his hope on the act of writing or humanities

“But writing, he claims, can serve as the antidote, providing not just emotional catharsis, but a much more universally necessary ability to engage with complexity. While writing, Grossman says, “I am not condemned to this absolute, fallacious and suffocating dichotomy – this inhuman choice to be ‘victim or aggressor,’ without having any third, more humane alternative.” (as quoted by Liesl)

I shall end by engaging with what Liesl says about her own experience as a teacher of writing, a rare vocation, a function fast becoming extinct as writing argues for a non-productionist paradigm. Writing cannot be generated or manufactured, it exfoliates through our ontological strivings and Liesl wonderfully captures this through her own experience as a writing teacher – “Any strength or clarity or even interest in the writing process, particularly for undergraduates sitting in a required composition class, I’ve since learned, cannot come from what a professor talks about or even from thinking about important ideas. The value of writing comes through the encounter with your own sentences and the exchange with your own beliefs. Through navigating your own experiences by putting them into words. The power of writing comes with the moment-to-moment awareness of unspooling your own logic without relying on any prefabricated language.” This is a brilliant rendition of the ‘in-scape’ of writing that generates the *dasein* of writing itself. Our encounter with the self, our encounter with the world produces writing and in that way, writing bridges the self and the world. The

world of politics has caused a lot of pain and it continues to cause devastating conflicts, and all these are happening because of our deficiency in the thoughtful encounter with the *labenswelt* of our everyday living. This honing of micro-living, or the micro-political is to be prioritized as the particles of Being are determined through our nuanced dialogue with the intricacies and deeper predicament of life and writing involves or necessitates that conversation with the self. Liesl is absolutely right when she says, “But as a writing teacher, I do not emphasize the inherently political nature of the speech. Instead, in class, we talk about writing and rewriting. We talk about how we learn as we write. We talk about what we couldn’t have understood without writing. And we talk about why that matters in our own day-to-day lives and in the world we share. And for my students in particular, many of whom do not often have access to Jewish voices expressing consideration of the Palestinian experience, such claims, like writing itself, open up the world.”

Martin Heidegger talked of the *aletheia*, the unconcealment or the process of disclosure, the opening up of the world that Liesl mentions and worlded as we are in the deeper matrix of life, writing helps us to attempt this disclosure, helps us to see the face of the Deep. We get closer to ourselves through writing. The spirit of inquiry begins and the world, the self and the text are beaded together, enabling the splendor of thinking to radiate. The productionist paradigm recedes, the Grass becomes the ‘handkerchief of God’. Writing enables us to ‘see the world in a grain of sand’, holding ‘eternity in an hour’. We think, we write, we inscript, we engrave our active minds, and therefore, we are. Writing en-souls the self, activates the budding of the audacious horizons of life. Thanks to Liesl for taking us to the house of Being that writing unveils.

That Spirit of Inquiry

On the Necessity of Writing in the Humanities and
the Necessity of the Humanity in Writing

Liesl Schwabe

*The following essay is based on a lecture
originally delivered at KNU on June 28, 2019 in Kolkata, India.*

Writing as writing.

Writing as rioting.

Writing as righting.

On the best days, all three.

– Teju Cole

By training and by belief, I don't really lecture. I teach writing, a subject for which lectures are often useless. Writing is active, something you do, like riding a bike or rowing a boat. Something for which someone else talking at length serves little purpose. And yet, that's not to say I don't believe in the utter necessity of teaching. But I see that work as an encounter. An exchange.

For as necessary as specialized scholarship in all disciplines remains, it's also evident that, particularly in the Humanities, we have to work especially hard not just to share our creative and intellectual work but to engage in the public discourse of that work. In my mind, that means not only defending what we do, but exposing its intrinsic value. If we were all biologists and I was here to talk about something in my lab, I think – I hope – it would be understood that that work in the lab is essential because of its larger human value. If we were all trying to cure cancer, obviously we would have time in our labs and then we would share our data and our methods and all the rest of it. We would make that data and those findings useful. We would use our research to save lives.

I see the work of the Humanities to be as essential, as life saving, as if this were a medical college. And so, for that reason too, I thought we would all benefit a lot more from what we might share – and learn from one another – rather than from what I alone might have to say. That said, there is some important context and common ground that I think it's worth establishing.

In the United States, since the 2008 financial crisis, almost every single major within the Humanities has seen a dramatic decrease in enrollment. As was reported last year in *The Atlantic*, History is down 45%, since its highest enrollment in 2007, and the number of “English majors has fallen by nearly half since the late 1990s.”¹ These drops have happened across different kinds of institutions, both small private colleges and big, public universities, as well as across the country – East coast, West Coast, and everywhere in between.²

In one of the most egregious examples, Stevens Point, a public university in the rural state of Wisconsin, abolished its degree offerings in many Humanities majors including History, French, and other Foreign Languages.³ These cuts came after an already controversial move, in 2015, when the governor of the state, Scott Walker, attempted to change the 100-year-old mission of the state-wide public university system. Known as the “Wisconsin Idea,” the mission had always been to “improve the human condition” and “to search for truth.”⁴ But the governor rewrote the state code, saying the universities would prepare students instead to “meet the state’s workforce needs.”⁵

At the time, there was an uproar, and the Wisconsin Idea and State Code were left in place, with the original wording. But that hardly seemed to matter, as before long, the Humanities themselves were largely removed from Stevens Point.

As extreme and as recent as this one scenario is, trends like this are not new – especially not in the U.S. This shift certainly didn't begin in 2008, but since 2008, there has been a crystallized kind of anxiety among young people, their families, and all kinds of institutions.⁶ As a result, college is increasingly seen solely as a place for pre-professional training rather than sought out for the knowledge, the history, and the capacity for inquiry and critical thinking that the liberal arts provide.

On one hand, this anxiety is understandable. In the U.S. and here in India, higher education is expensive. As families sacrifice and save for college tuition, it's reasonable for everyone to expect the expense is worth it; that young adults will graduate from college ready to live and work independently. But at the same time, that anxiety has also sparked the tendency for parents and students alike to act like consumers being sold a product they are entitled to possess rather than an experience for which they must work.

This misunderstanding – between what students, their parents, and, increasingly, political leaders demand from college vs. what many of us in higher education actually know how to do and what we do and why we teach, especially in the Humanities – this misunderstanding has indeed created a crisis. A crisis of job security for faculty. (It's hard to make a living wage as a professor, especially if your department doesn't exist anymore.) And a crisis for young people who, at 17, 18, 19 years old, believe their ambitions and curiosity should be limited to preparing for a job they don't yet have.

But there's also a much deeper consequence.

As long as higher education is monetized in this way – every endeavor weighed as worthwhile or worthless based on the trends and misperceptions of vocational training – then we're undermining the entire experience of college. We're denying students the importance of exploration and the access to history in order to reimagine the future. We're failing to engage them in the encounter or the exchange through which they might take responsibility for their own learning and thinking, to question what is in order to reimagine what may be.

For young people preparing for college, one consequence of this reasoning is to see themselves and their own self-worth only in terms of how or to what extent they are employed. And I think it's safe to say we desperately need our young adults today, around the world, to understand the value of human life in far bigger and far more compassionate terms than a paycheck.

At the same time, democracy itself becomes a very precarious endeavor if there is not the education in place that asks difficult questions of civic engagement and collective responsibility. An education, in other words, that has less to do with preparing for a job but has everything to do with preparing for the future.

As the American writer Roxanne Gay asked earlier this month, after giving a college commencement address, “What now?”⁷ “I don’t traffic in hope,” Gay explained in the *New York Times*. “Realism is more my ministry than unbridled optimism. Hope is too ineffable and far too elusive. Hope allows us to leave what is possible in the hands of others.”⁸ This connection between the passivity of “hope” and the active responsibility that this moment demands, of all of us, is exactly where and how I believe the Humanities come into play.

In his 2007 PEN World Voice speech, the Israeli writer and peace activist David Grossman described the outside world of the political landscape of the Middle East and the inside world within his own heart after his son, Uri, was killed during his mandatory military service.⁹

“I can tell you,” Grossman said, “about the void that is growing every so slowly between the individual human being and the external, violent and chaotic situation within which he lives... And this void never remains empty. It is filled rapidly – with apathy, with cynicism and, more than anything, with despair; the despair that fuels distorted situations, allowing them to persist on and on, in some cases for generations.”¹⁰

Grossman went on to explain that though he lives in Israel, he wasn’t only talking about Israel, noting correctly every human being, everywhere, has some sort of “predicament,” including our own individual traumas or regret, which threaten our freedom and, not unrelatedly, “our language.”¹¹

But writing, he claims, can serve as the antidote, providing not just emotional catharsis, but a much more universally necessary ability to engage with complexity. While writing, Grossman says, “I am not condemned to this absolute, fallacious and suffocating dichotomy – this inhuman choice to be ‘victim or aggressor,’ without having any third, more humane alternative.”¹²

Over the last decade that I’ve teaching writing to undergraduates, this speech by Grossman is the only text I’ve taught in nearly every single class, every semester. But this was not always the case. I teach at an all male Orthodox Jewish college. All my students are young, religiously observant, Modern Orthodox Jewish men, many of whom begin their college careers after a year or two of traditional religious

study in Israel. Years ago, in my first semester there, I arrived full of what, in Yiddish, we call *chutzpah*, a kind of buoyant audacity. With my students that first year, we read Malcolm X and we read about learning to read in prison and we read about oppression. I was young and enthusiastic. But what I wasn't, yet, was a very good teacher. Any strength or clarity or even interest in the writing process, particularly for undergraduates sitting in a required composition class, I've since learned, cannot come from what a professor talks about or even from thinking about important ideas. The value of writing comes through the encounter with your own sentences and the exchange with your own beliefs. Through navigating your own experiences by putting them into words. The power of writing comes with the moment-to-moment awareness of unspooling your own logic without relying on any prefabricated language.

While I knew as much from experience, my initial reading of Grossman's speech shifted my approach to teaching and strengthened my ability to discuss the value of the writing process with students. While I would teach "Writing in the Dark" anywhere and, indeed, did teach it while at Presidency University in Kolkata this past semester, at my institution in the U.S., the text is especially meaningful and provocative.

What Grossman says comes in direct opposition from what many of my students – indeed most people in the world – would expect. He says that when he writes, he "is able to feel close to his enemies' suffering and to acknowledge his just claims without relinquishing a grain of his own identity." And this is profound. That anyone, but particularly someone whose son was killed because of his identity, can articulate so clearly the importance of retaining that identity without sacrificing empathy is, to me, electrifying.

But as a writing teacher, I do not emphasize the inherently political nature of the speech. Instead, in class, we talk about writing and rewriting. We talk about how we learn as we write. We talk about what we couldn't have understood without writing. And we talk about why that matters in our own day-to-day lives and in the world we share. And for my students in particular, many of whom do not often have access to Jewish voices expressing consideration of the Palestinian experience, such claims, like writing itself, open up the world.

And yet, the speech does not only resonate with my students because of the nationality of the writer. We read Grossman's speech at the end of the semester, after the students themselves have been deeply involved with their own writing. For four months, these are undergraduates who, perhaps for the first time in their lives, have been asked (required!) to write and rewrite. To put their experiences into words and, through their writing, to make connections between their own lives and the larger forces – historic, cultural, economic – shaping their lives. We write about very ordinary stuff – reading and growing up and going to school and daily life on campus. But through that encounter, they begin to experience for themselves that flexibility, that pliability and capacity for complexity that Grossman describes. In other words, by the time we read Grossman, his descriptions are both illuminating and relatable.

I bring this up here today because I find Grossman a never-ending source of inspiration. But I also believe that what Grossman says is why we're all here. The study of the Humanities requires and demands an active willingness to engage with complexity. To consider events and history and word choice from different angles. And our work, on campuses and in Humanities departments especially, is to help each and every student discover for him or herself why that matters.

Now, for as much as I love reading David Grossman with undergraduates, I also must admit that I came to India as a Fulbright scholar not only because I've regularly spent time in India since I myself was an undergraduate and I love it very much, but also because I needed a break from the U.S. My own classroom, especially since 2008, has reflected these larger national trends of dismissing and doubting the importance of the Humanities. Frequently, my students – and I don't blame them for this – can't understand, at least at first, how a writing class is going to help them become a doctor or a lawyer or an accountant. And, to be honest, I wanted a break. I wanted to step away and live in India again and teach different students and ask myself why this work matters. I got worn out from being on the defensive for so long. My salary has been frozen and my teaching load has gone up and my students sometimes write on Rate My Professor that I'm a "man hating feminist." So I came to India asking myself not only if the Humanities could survive the 21st century, but, more accurately, if I had it in me to keep trying to make sure they did.

It's been with these questions in mind that I've come upon Henry Louis Vivian Derozio. I'm sure you all know much more than I do about the Bengal Renaissance, and I'll try not to embarrass myself up here by getting things wrong. I'll also ask you directly to share with me your own stories of the Bengal Renaissance later this afternoon.

But what I do know is that in 1852, the Indian mathematician Radhanath Sikdar became the first person to accurately measure Mount Everest, known until then as Peak XV.¹³ And I know that two years later, Harachandra Ghosh, Sikdar's friend from college, was elected judge in the Small Causes Court, the first Indian to hold the position in Calcutta (now Kolkata) under British rule.¹⁴

Around the same time, a third contemporary from their undergraduate years, Ramgopal Ghose, was earning a fortune. After working as an agent for a British merchant, Ghose founded his own firm in 1848, the first "indigenous" business of its size, trading in, among other things, Burmese rice.

Derozio himself had been educated by David Drummond, a broad-minded Scott, whose Calcutta school was briefly open to European and Indian children alike and whose curriculum emphasized the Scottish Enlightenment. Derozio's teaching was therefore deeply informed by the philosophy of David Hume, who championed skepticism, as well as by Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*, a defense of the French Revolution addressed to George Washington in which Paine denounces aristocracy and slavery.¹⁵

Derozio was eager to foster among his Bengali students that same spirit of critical thinking. But this learning was not, as Dr. Swapan Chakraborty, Distinguished Professor of Humanities at Presidency University and former director of the National Library of India, explained to me in his office one blistering April afternoon, a "withdrawal into the self," as the study of the Humanities is often seen in the U.S. today. "But rather an opening out."¹⁶

"We had a concept of *jati*, of 'race and caste,'" Chakraborty continued. "But in Derozio's time, there was not yet the concept of *jatirashtra*, the nation-state. He taught the history of French Revolution so his students could get the idea to reclaim nationhood."¹⁷

It's easy to either romanticize or ridicule an idealistic young professor and his acolytes of any era. But as a professor, Derozio's work shines

crucial light on why the study of the humanities is not only individually meaningful, but essential for the health and progress of a nation as a whole. Arguably for the world at large.

Radhanath Sikdar did not develop new dimensions of geometry, trigonometry, and our understanding of the physical planet simply because he'd studied David Hume. Ramgopal Ghose did not become both a successful businessman as well as a pioneer for providing education to girls only because he'd read Shakespeare. Harachandra Ghosh did not help create a more efficient and accessible judicial system just because he'd debated the ideals of equality that drove the French revolution.

And yet, it is difficult to believe these men would have made these same accomplishments without Derozio's teaching. "He has been the cause and the sole cause of that spirit of inquiry after truth, and that contempt of vice – which cannot but be beneficial to India," Radhanath Sikdar wrote of his former teacher.¹⁸

Derozio died before he was able to see what his students went on to achieve. But I have been galvanized by their story. During an otherwise bleak moment in higher education, Derozio and his students serve as a reminder for why the Humanities are not a feckless alternative to job training but essential means for transforming the energy of youth for the greater good.

Derozio opened his students up to different ways of thinking. He encouraged them to ask pointed, uncomfortable questions of each other, of themselves, and of the history of which they were then part. He encouraged them to write. And in the process, his students came to see one another as citizens of a country that did not yet exist.

In the face of this crisis of the Humanities, this concept of nation-building would serve us all well to invoke. Our countries and our world need rebuilding. To do so, we need young people who have been exposed to the wisdom and history of other cultures. Who have the opportunity to risk controversy in order to reclaim nationhood.

This is what I will take home with me when I leave Kolkata next month. This testimony to what impassioned, dynamic literature and history courses can inspire. This evidence of the necessity of writing in the humanities in order to nourish our shared humanity through writing.

FOOTNOTES

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Liesl Schwabe directs the Writing Program at Yeshiva College, in New York City, and is currently serving as a Fulbright-Nehru Scholar in Kolkata, where she has been teaching creative nonfiction and essay writing at Presidency University. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, and *Creative Nonfiction*, along with many other journals and anthologies. She holds an MFA in Creative Nonfiction from the Bennington Writing Seminars and lives in Brooklyn, NY with her husband and two children