

UP AGAINST THE WORKSHOP

Anis Shivani. *Against the Workshop: Provocations, Polemics, Controversies*. Texas Review Press, 2011.

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Anis Shivani, a poet, fiction writer and critic who the *NDR* has published in the past—not that you would know it from the book under consideration, or from its publicity materials—has always stood out for me in one singular way: he's a voracious reader, a reader of actual books, one of a vanishing breed, a throwback to an earlier generation, or so it seems in these dire and dismal digital days.

However he manages it, Shivani's existence appears to be full of reading and writing; more writers than I care to count are not extravagant readers, but fairly selective readers. And one always hopes for readers who are not writers themselves and I'm sure some such individuals can be found somewhere. (Where, oh, where?) But Shivani, by all evidence, devours books. And I am always happy to discover such a person; if the world had more Shivani-type reader/writers, writers would have much less to complain about.

Indeed, anyone who pays attention to the contemporary literary world has complaints and Shivani rose to notice, at first, as an attacker of MFA programs. In this regard, he was a Johnny Come Lately, since a variety of MFA bashers (the list is long—more on that later) had already staked out that territory, but, somehow, equipped with cultural blinders and the certainty of a Conquistador, Shivani has claimed the territory as his own. One of the most common sins of our time is just this sort of intellectual dishonesty; usually it is brought about by ignorance: This is the first...no other writer has...etc. Absolutes are hurled about in the real world and one can see, at least, their use—but, in the literary world, absolutes are more than quarrelsome. They're downright foolish and the tool of the under-read, usually wielded willy-nilly by book reviewers.

In 2010, I wrote Shivani an email, which I reproduce below. I never heard back from him, though, given the vagaries of email, he may never have read it.

Dear Anis, Since you are one of our authors and having just read your piece on the over-rated, I did want to make a few remarks I've been thinking about your work since we've been publishing it. The main thing is your continuing attack

on creative writing programs. As you may recall, I did temper your remarks about MFA programs in your Wood's review we published. The broad brush might get the painting job done sooner, but most often not as expertly. What you say in your post about the over-rated is certainly true, that we have no Wilsons, Kazins, etc. I have made similar remarks over the years. But, one reason why we don't is also involved in the mushrooming of creative writing programs over the last three decades. All those creative writing programs are not the cause of the problem, they are an effect. The difficulty comes from a phenomenon of the baby boom. Long ago I wrote about the odd fact that the number of first novels published each year in most of the 20th century was constant, around a hundred, up until the early 1970s. Library Journal had kept those records the longest. As I mentioned in the literary review piece, it was the golden age of reading, the 60s and 70s, before all the electronic competition came stampeding in. What happened is the number of people in American higher education (any college) tripled during the 1960s. When you educate more people you end up with more novelists, poets, etc. By the 1980s the number of first novels was over 300 a year. No functioning critic could keep up with the flow. That is also one reason criticism took the lead everywhere. If you have a theory you can apply it to anything, the handful of books that wandered by your consciousness that year, etc. It became a supply problem. MFA programs flourished, perhaps paradoxically, because of the perception that American students couldn't write decent English. State universities use the creative writing students in the programs they created as cheap labor. They still do. Again, it's a complicated problem. Even someone like yourself, a voracious reader, can't keep up with everyone. Have you ever read any of my novels? My nonfiction books? Since the answer is likely no, you see the problem. I tend toward belles-lettres, especially in my early work. And I know that I wouldn't have likely met Edward Dahlberg, if he had not turned up teaching "creative writing" in the street-car undergraduate university I attended. And also take note that your 15 over-rated contains a lot of critics, not novelists. In any case, your post has gotten a lot of comments, which will help you, since notoriety is still the coin of the realm. Let me know when the literary journal piece runs. All Best, William.

When I sent the above, Shivani had gained a perch on the news and opinion aggregator "The Huffington Post," and he had published a piece (with photos) entitled "The 15 Most Overrated Contemporary American Writers." Needless to say, as I mentioned in the email, Shivani had begun to see the career advantages of controversy and he had met the paradox head on: that in order to gain an audience (or eyeballs, as readers are called on the web) one must join them, in order to beat them and to attack the well-known is always more profitable than damning the obscure. The chief mystery in the literary culture is how one acquires an audience, actually gets read and considered.

One argument that can be made is that creative writing programs have kept alive contemporary literature in English Departments across the land;

and, subsequently, it is the avant-garde that has retreated to academia, not the sort of literature MFA programs are condemned for producing (“cookie-cutter”, “bland”, etc.). The contemporary fiction writers often taught in English departments (by PhDs, not the creative writing faculty) are the avant-garde-ists, the so-called cutting-edge types. The Fiction Collective, which began in the early 1970s as a publishing venture for fiction writers formerly published by commercial houses, but who had been abandoned by them because of insufficient sales, is now, in its new incarnation as FC2, mainly the home for experimental writers above all. In the beginning, it wasn’t so much an aesthetic opposition, but a commercial one: sales vs. art. Now it is a war between art and art, between hipsters and, for the lack of a better antonym, the traditionalists, though, since the avant-garde itself has such a long tradition, it, too, is comfortably familiar. The avant-garde finding a home in the academy is more troubling than the fecund proliferation of creative writing programs.

But Shivani’s advantage is that his attacks are all over the place; he is, in the main, a champion of the global, not the parochial. Of course, that is the real point. And, I assume, eventually, the globalization of literature will become his primary subject. In *Against the Workshop* he makes a stab or two at it. But, unfortunately, Shivani does seem to echo the outlook of Horace Engdahl, the permanent secretary of the Nobel Prize in literature, who, in 2008, told the AP:

There is powerful literature in all big cultures, but you can’t get away from the fact that Europe still is the center of the literary world ... not the United States. The US is too isolated, too insular. They don’t translate enough and don’t really participate in the big dialogue of literature ... That ignorance is restraining.

Shivani shares this world view, more or less. One of his favorite authors, if not the favorite, is Orhan Pamuk, who has already won the Nobel Prize. And Pamuk writes about a world Shivani is familiar with. If that’s not parochial, what is? But take a look at the last few years of the *Best American Short Story* volumes. Half of the stories are set elsewhere than the USA; a number of the writers in the volumes are transnationals. The evolution that has occurred in the literary world is the same that has taken place everywhere: we are the victims and the beneficiaries of globalization.

Shivani may be native born (Texas?). This biographical information is, curiously, harder to pin down than it should be, but, nonetheless, Shivani has assumed the persona of a transnational. He went to Harvard and studied economics; at least, he has a BA in economics. It’s a bit much for him to bash MFA programs just because he never went to one. It appears, oddly,

that he has never had much formal study of literature. I may be wrong, but his tastes do share the eccentricities of the autodidact. Certainly, when it comes to surveying the national American literary landscape, he does display a number of blind spots. A handful of the early bashers of MFA programs are those that helped create them; theirs was a case of self-hatred, not an uncommon affliction of American writers. One only needs to consult Mark McGurl's 2009 book, *The Program Era*, to become acquainted with some of that history; Shivani mentions the book in his Preface, so, he seems, post facto, or post these essays, to have encountered it; or, perhaps, he's kept up with the 2010 - 2011 exchange between Elif Batuman in the *London Review of Books* (which largely takes the Shivani view, though more judiciously) and McGurl in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. But there is no mention of the 1994 book by John Aldridge, *Talents and Technicians*. Or, two years later, the 1996 book, *The Elephants Teach*, by D. G. Myers.

But Shivani takes the fish-in-a-barrel approach, since the barrel is big and there are so many writing programs in it. Who could ever attend an AWP convention of the last few years without being filled with dark, troubling thoughts?

The concluding piece of *Against the Workshop* (a "Pushcart Prize winning essay"! boasts the cover), "The MFA/Creative Writer System is a Closed, Undemocratic Medieval Guild System that Represses Good Writing," Shivani throws down his bolts from his high-school-stage-set of Olympus, again, not crediting, or quoting, from all those who have come before, speaking out against the system he decries; he maintains a Captain Renault-like indignation: I'm shocked, shocked, etc.; what good would it do him if he acknowledged he was at the end of a long queue?—better to jump the line: "Medieval guilds were endowed with the right to combine and make their own regulations—precisely this impetus is behind the MFA system's retreat from the world of unabashed capitalism (also known as 'reality' in the industrialized world)."

Well, I guess that's his Harvard education coming into play, all those economics classes. And one does need to be a rank conservative at heart (or just wrong) to think writers in the USA have retreated from the world of unabashed capitalism, "also known as 'reality'." One of the dispiriting attributes of Gen Xers and Millennials is that most of their heroes are capitalists (see Steve Jobs, etc.). Unfortunately, the MFA system is not a guild system, except accidentally, here and there. Too bad Shivani didn't go to Yale, instead of Harvard; he could have taken (perhaps) Harold Bloom and suffered the anxiety of influence, rather than the anxiety brought on by too many MFA programs. Though the growth period of the MFA world was

during the last three decades of the 20th century and the rise of organizations such as the AWP and Poets & Writers mirror those dates, the singular place where the “Guild” system critique has some legitimacy, the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, opened its doors in 1936 and has produced the longest list of writers who have attended, and writers who have helped other writers, over the years. So, if the contemporary problem that Shivani recently has noticed began before WWII, I would think it is a larger phenomenon than he has even begun to admit or understand; in the essay he acknowledges that Iowa’s program “existed”, but blames everything else on the “sixties scene.”

According to Shivani, “writers” want to run from the “market economy.” He claims, “If they could create a self-sufficient guild, they would be removed for its vicissitudes.” He seems to have the same economic and political analysis as Eric Cantor, if Representative Cantor was a literary critic, and not the Republican House majority leader. It may be the case that Shivani started out so far Left he became Right.

As I wrote in my email, the boom throughout the 70s and 80s of MFA programs was a creature of capitalist exploiters, wanting to have more cheap labor (or, in a few cases, such as Columbia, high tuition payers) available. MFA programs were the canary in the coal mine, prefiguring the current situation where adjuncts, graduate students, do so much of the teaching in American universities, especially the basic writing classes offered everywhere.

Shivani names some of the backscratcher who come and go (and those who came and went) over the decades: Older writers helping out the careers of younger writers. This is unavoidable and, for the most part, laudable. The history of literary communities is friends helping friends, the acquaintance-ship bias that is always worth something. It’s an economic premium, which Shivani should know about. Shivani’s MFA program bashing is his version of attacking the 1 percent, the fashionably elite and overpraised. The production of fame is most often a high capital production here in the states, which requires the right publishers and the helpful collusion of the few gatekeeping publications that matter in that machinery. I’m all for attacking the one percent, wherever it’s found (Occupy AWP!), but attacking the overpraised these days is just one more bubble in our bubble economy that can be all too easily popped.

Against the Workshop is a hodgepodge, but that is shared with any number of miscellanies. (I was under the delusion that he was going to produce a coherent monograph, like *The Program Era*.) Alas, Shivani has a fondness for one literary form, one often used by amateurs, where the author assumes the voice of another to perform self-surgery on the presumed speaker. It’s a form of parody, I suppose. The first example, unfortunately, begins the vol-

ume (p. 1, after a Preface, and an Intro by Jay Parini—who is later praised in the book; Shivani, no matter how assiduously he attacks log rolling, is not immune to favoring writers he knows personally), an epistle “written” by Aylesha Pane (an agent) to Preeti Samarasan (her client). If you don’t know who these people are, well, you don’t know. And, late in the volume, in a review of *The Best American Poetry 2007*, the voice of that year’s editor, “Heather McHugh” is employed. Shivani has no talent whatsoever for this sort of thing; and both pieces only bring to mind cringe-inducing words like jejune, sophomoric, childish.

In these and other weaker outings contained in the volume Shivani sounds like an MFA basher who has been spurned from some program he had applied to. In the concluding essay there is this sentence of complaint: “You may pay a few thousand dollars to attend Bread Loaf as a ‘paying contributor’ and soak in the mystery surrounding the über-masters, but you may never become a scholar/fellow/waiter unless you are a certified member of the guild.” (But, in this case, it is likely he knows whereof he speaks, since in Shivani’s 2009 book of short fictions, *Anatolia and Other Stories*, there is a tedious tale set in a Bread Loaf-like summer literary confab, a sour-grapey account and the least commendable story in the volume, one I reviewed favorably in these pages.)

While reading *Against the Workshop* I kept finding myself wishing that Shivani had gone to some graduate program, more pertinently, some PhD program in literature (coincidentally, Batuman’s central point: PhD jingoism), so he could put his intelligence to some coherent use, rather than presenting us with this sort of volume that is so full of internal contradictions that one wonders how an author as smart as Shivani obviously is could have missed them himself.

I certainly don’t enjoy taking a contributor to *NDR* to task; I could have just skipped his book, but the most prevalent form of censorship in our literary culture is to overlook, to ignore. Any attention given is attention paid. But, Shivani might well be advised to learn in the future how to make fun of himself, which would be a help down the road to him (as well as the rest of us), if he chooses to continue to make such sport of others.