



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

In Conversation with Rob Harle

Sunil Sharma¹

Rob Harle is one of the last Renaissance figures!

*The versatile Nimbin Valley-based Australian thinker, painter, sculptor, writer, reviewer, cover-page designer and a re-born, restive poet, the much-in-demand Rob Harle is rapidly getting global critical attention for the consistency of his works animated by a deep-rooted liberal humanism. The humanist poet regrets the decline in moral values and calls the current society, post-human. He feels that the high-tech and supermarket culture are taking toll on human personality and rendering it defunct or ... almost. His digital art works, essays, poems and recent fun fiction pieces – minis – provide a relentless critique of such a reified society where machines are becoming more sacrosanct than the human agency. His two collections of poems, *Scratches and Deeper Wounds* (1996) and *Mechanisms of Desire* (2012), are Swiftian in their satiric tone and his minis resemble the literary tradition inaugurated by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. Rob's cover designs and cerebral reviews of global poetry anthologies are earning him the respect of the poets, editors and critics.*

Here is a literary e-interaction with this senior artist who has studied Comparative Religion and Philosophy; Art, Architecture, Writing and Psychotherapy, among others. He is very passionate about learning and scaling new heights. As a restless artist, he is experimenting by mixing genres and breaking boundaries. Despite being firmly rooted in the native soil – he sincerely talks of the enduring relevance and profound value of the Dreamtime, a sacred concept for the Aborigines, and, austerity in public life, measures for the regeneration and revitalisation of the contemporary Australia – Rob is able to create a complex of resonating images, great ideas and a crisp idiom for a reader in a hurry and on the move. But reading Harle is not that simple either. He can be infuriating and fun or both at the same time. His new works – that includes latest fun fiction – prove to be writerly texts that challenge conventional ways of looking and understanding things.

Rob Harle is a true Renaissance figure, unlike other one-dimensional artists in love with their own image.

Parody, pastiche, post-modernism – you can sample them all in his writings, designs, magazine pieces and paintings. He is local and transcendental in his productions – visual, print and digital.

Here is the dialogue with the great writer. This interview was conducted by email in August 2013.

¹ An interview with Sunil Sharma by Rob Harle is available on Boloji.com - <http://www.boloji.com/index.cfm?md=Content&sd=Articles&ArticleID=15062>

Q: Rob, welcome! This is our second literary interview—and perhaps, not the last. I believe a lot needs to be done in the area of re-assessment and a critical reevaluation of the multi-faceted artist from Nimbin who is very active in various fields of artistic expressions. Kind of long journey of a sincere and consistent search for truths in a time and age when truths are in the short currency only. Do you agree with this view?

A: Yes I do. The concept of truths changes through the years, and there will always be those who have a need to try and expose those truths. I've worked very hard for a long time in literature, art and philosophy with very little critical appraisal. This fortunately has changed a little in the last decade because of the Internet opening up the world to me and allowing me to escape the constraints of this cultural backwater called Australia. I'm particularly grateful for the opportunity I have to work with *Leonardo* (International Society for Art Science and Technology) and to *Rupkatha Journal* (Kolkata), especially Tarun Tapas Mukherjee.

Q: Re-reading some of your poems in *Mechanisms*, I was starkly reminded of Allen Ginsberg and his iconic poem on supermarkets in the America of the 50s and onwards. *A Supermarket in California* discusses issues that you come to expound in the second collection *Mechanisms*. Are such parallels accidental in a writer's inner life? Or, mere re-articulations of sub-conscious cultural references for the newer contexts? Or, again, cases of conscious and clear-cut intertextuality?

A: Interesting you mention Ginsberg's supermarket poem, there is a similarity yes, but this is completely coincidental. I'm surprised more poets don't write about supermarkets, their ubiquity and bizarreness surely deserves more coverage. I do think this is a sub-conscious cultural reference, with a fresh take. As you know I have written many poems about supermarkets (not just one) it is basically the theme of *Mechanisms*, numerous people have said to me that after reading my poems their supermarket experience has never been the same again. Fantastic!

Q: What is the current poetry scene in Australia? Does it appeal to your intellect?

A: Poetry strangely is becoming more prevalent in Australia than the last 20-30 years I think, that is, more is being written and performed. This doesn't mean any more is being published or appreciated by the general public, but we're going to change that. There are some really good poets in Australia, I mean the best, and their work excites me emotionally and intellectually.

Q: What are the primary impulses animating the classical Aussie poetry as deciphered by a well-informed and critically aware poet-critic like you?

A: Classical Aussie poetry is largely connected with the land and the new settlers and an indigenous individual's relationship with it. This is not the Aboriginal Dreaming relationship with the land. This is pioneering poetry and bush verse based on the English iambic

pentameter style – Lawson, Paterson, Mackellar and so on were largely ignorant of the Dreaming, as are most white Australians today.

Q: What is your conception of the post-modern art and artist in a crass mercenary society? Do they fit in?

A: Hard question because I find it difficult to generalise here. There is much post-modern art that is total garbage; in fact it's worse than garbage because it pretends to be something that it's not. At least now, anyone that is in the slightest bit progressive and can actually think has left the abomination of post-modernism behind and is getting on with new work that re-conceptualises the human being in this scenario. Sure there are some very good works created under the postmodern umbrella, but much of it reflects exactly the crass mercenary society that spawned it.

Q: Poetry does not pay. Yet, ironically, there is a proliferation of poets and boom in the online poetry-sites, thanks to the all-pervasive and all-defining social media. How do you see this great social contradiction of our times?

A: Yes it is strange, but if we think about why this is happening it is not so strange. True poets and artists are not primarily motivated by money that is why we live below the poverty line in a country like Australia (according to the latest major survey). The Net and now social media allow the sharing of art and poetry, allows a poet to have a place to publish, to satisfy an obvious deep need of many people to create these pieces. The greedy publishers, both literary and academic, can go to hell and that's exactly where they are going to end up because the Open Access movement is growing like social media has. There are a few publishers that have a cultural soul and may good fortune be upon them for supporting both new and established poets.

Q: What does poetry mean to you?

A: Poetry is a thing that is immune to infection by 'the crass mercenary' affairs of humans. I just love writing it. Truly good poetry is deceptively simple; it expresses ultimate truths in a way that seems like it is talking about everyday matters. I can't say it any better than Rushdie: 'A poet's work... to name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start argument, shape the world and *stop it from going to sleep.*' [*My emphasis*]

Q: You have now come to feel that poetry can afford better vistas and avenues of artistic cognition and expression in recent months. Care to explicate your changing perceptions about the potency of poetry as a change agent and of your evolving new poetics?

A: I don't feel that poetry can better express what I want to say, rather, I'm tired of the art circus and the significant expense of producing pictures (framing, commission etc.) so I've decided to concentrate mainly on poetry and of course as usual review writing.

Q: In last few months, you have been toasted in India that has a growing number of writers writing in the colonial legacy of English. Is it possible to re-possess and re-claim a language of the master for describing post-colonial experiences? Do not you think the idiom and current realities do not go together or jell so well, as they might in poet's own language?

A: This is a very interesting and important question which needs some serious academic research. In critical writing or academic writing I would say it is not a significant issue, but in poetry it could present certain difficulties that require a little more effort and attention – we all know the difficulties in translating poetry, so the same difficulties may apply in writing original poetry in the second language. Having said that, I have no trouble in 'getting' exactly what my Indian poet friends and colleagues are expressing in their poetry. A glossary for arcane terms or names is always helpful.

Q: Are Indians better or mediocre in their poetry? What about their hold over English? Some Western editors find it difficult to access and are known to give instant tutorials to the poets mostly professors of English only in India!

A: I think the Indian poetry that I have been exposed to is exquisite, and as I've said before it has a more gentle 'tone' than Western poetry. There are a few 'quirky' uses of language in Indian English poetry, but that gives it its subtle nuances and charm. Any Western editor that has the *audacity* to 'give instant tutorials' to Indian poets, is probably both ignorant of 3 to 5,000 years of incredible history and cultural/literary/spiritual development and is perpetuating the imperialist, colonialist 'Holier than Thou' attitudes, that make them such boring ignoramuses. 'Off with their heads!'

Q: You have recently reviewed few anthologies with India focus. Do you find such poetries full of originality, élan and vitality? Or, are they mere post-colonial mimics of Western poets and their standards?

A: The actual poetry (generally speaking) is certainly not a 'mere post-colonial mimic', far from it, BUT there is still an underlying feeling in critical writing and articles ABOUT Indian poetry that the Western tradition (meaning English/Britain) is *the* standard, well in my opinion it is not. The Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana were written before Keats, Donne, Elliot et al were even thought of and these are a form of wonderful poetry. So I would implore non-Western cultures to present their works as they are imbued with their own culture and the West can either like them or lump them, too bad for the West if they don't embrace them.

Q: Is poetry an exalted art? Does it deserve its hallowed status in this age of instant forgetfulness?

A: Yes it certainly is! Just because a huge number of the 'I' generation don't know the difference between a noun and a verb doesn't mean in the grand scheme of things that we

should abandon the beauty and necessity of poetry – they have to rise to our standards not the other way around. The scourge of postmodernism raises its ugly head again.

Q: Can great art afford us escape routes to different realities or higher realms? Can it enable us as readers/writers in creating parallel worlds?

A: Yes absolutely! Yes absolutely! Yes absolutely!

Q: Can art work as a therapy?

A: In a sense that is all it is! Given my time over again I think I would become an official art therapist, because art, more so than Freudian talking cures, psychotherapeutic sessions etc. gets right to the heart of the matter. I was stunned by an art exhibition recently; a woman I knew 20 years ago had some mental health problems. This exhibition of abstract paintings was like looking at her naked raw psyche; with blood dripping out of the scratches after vinegar had been pored over them. It was overwhelmingly powerful, eerily beautiful and profound.

Q: Sometime back, you have written to me that a well-crafted and well-meaning poem can move you to tears. It was a startling admission coming from a self-declared writer having a granite exterior as self-defence strategy. Does it imply that poetry can evoke empathy in a tough listener and make them human, its recipients?

A: Yes most definitely, anyone who could read some of your poems Sunil and not be moved to tears would be clinically dead! So a tough exterior protects the sensitive inner core, like an Echidna's spikes, just because the exterior is tough doesn't mean the interior is.

Q: Inner transformations are possible through great arts?

A: I believe so, great art brings to others that which they cannot articulate themselves, but when they view a painting or read a poem a transformation takes place, perhaps not always an epiphany but an increase in awareness and understanding for sure.

Q: Your family has got soldiers, accountants, engineers and advocates. Your great-grandmother was a poet who went down unheard. In such an interesting history of mixed genes, your poetry strain becomes dominant. What are the other main reasons that enabled it to survive in a hostile environment?

A: I don't actually know to be honest; it has been against all odds really. So it must be an inner compulsion that nothing can stop. In the Indian spiritual traditions I believe it would be seen as a facet of karma. In this vein I was quite staggered to note that my personal astrology chart has an uncanny number of important characteristics identical to P.B. Shelley's! Perhaps genetic memory is far more possible or stronger than mere Western science would have us believe?

Q: Elections in Australia are around the corner. You do not seem to be happy with the parties available there. This sense of gloom and powerlessness is universal for middle-class and its professional thinkers everywhere. Egypt, the earlier Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street campaigns testify to this expanding dark mood of the educated classes and their angst. Do you agree?

A: I agree with the gloom and angst concerning what the political parties offer. But not the powerlessness, the people can change anything with solidarity. We just did this in the northern rivers region of NSW concerning the life destroying practice of CSG (extracting gas from the earth with chemicals). I have never in my life seen Australian political parties reach such levels of stupidity, deception and incompetence. In essence we have a choice in Australia between the Lying Morons and the Deceptive Idiot's parties. Excuse my cynicism!

Q: What are the political solutions?

A: I don't know. A revolution where individuals join together and demand their rights, this will not happen in Australia because we have all had it too good and apathy reigns supreme.

Q: What is your advice to new poets?

A: Fuel the 'fire in your belly' and help others see the possibilities of a life worth the living. If your poetry is not worth dying for, it's not worth writing and certainly not worth publishing.

Q: Your favourite artists?

A: *Sculptors* – Constantine Brancusi and Henry Moore. *Writers* – Jean Paul Sartre, Leonard Cohen, Charles Simic, Franz Kafka. *Painters* – Giorgio de Chirico, Yves Tanguy.

Q: Does age affect artistic production in a big way?

A: For an artist, artistic production is just the same as life, so the impulsiveness of youth gives way to a more steady approach, this in turn gives way to a 'wiser' approach, perhaps concentrating on quality rather than quantity as one gets older. With age it's far less about proving oneself to others than being satisfied within oneself.

Q: Does ageing enhance your vision and make you deliver your own magnum opus?

A: I think this is an individual thing and hard to generalise. But some poets and artists rest on their laurels and become boring and stale, the 'fire in the belly' goes out, I don't only mean anger/rage; I mean passion as well. Others like me try to maintain the rage. I never tire of quoting Dylan Thomas,

**Do not go gentle into that good night
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.**

And never forget the dying of the light starts the minute you're born.

Q: Any message to your readers?

A: I hope my readers take the *same* time and care to read my works, especially poems, that I take in creating them. My poems generally have many layers of meaning, sometimes with arcane mythological references. I always feel happy when someone says I didn't understand such and such so I had to look it up and it was well worth the trouble. If you are going to take the same time to read my poem as the headlines in a daily newspaper then please don't bother, this is just insulting.

Q: Your reasons for surviving as a non-commercial but happy writer in an anti-writer, non-happy consumerist culture?

A: Not sure. Perhaps I was born a rebellious, stubborn, obsessive individual that just will *not give up* under any circumstances. My father once told me I was like a rebellious pirate, but that I was too stupid to shanghai a crew, so always sailed out to sea alone!

Q: Thanks for bearing with your Indian interlocutor.

A: Thank you Sunil it has been a great pleasure.

Sunil Sharma is Principal at Bharat College, affiliated to University of Mumbai, India. He is a bilingual critic, poet, literary interviewer, editor, translator, essayist and fiction writer with many international publications to his name. Besides that, he is a freelance journalist and blogger. His areas of strength are Marxism, Literary Theory and Cultural Studies.

His blog can be viewed at <http://sunilsharmafictionwriter.blogspot>