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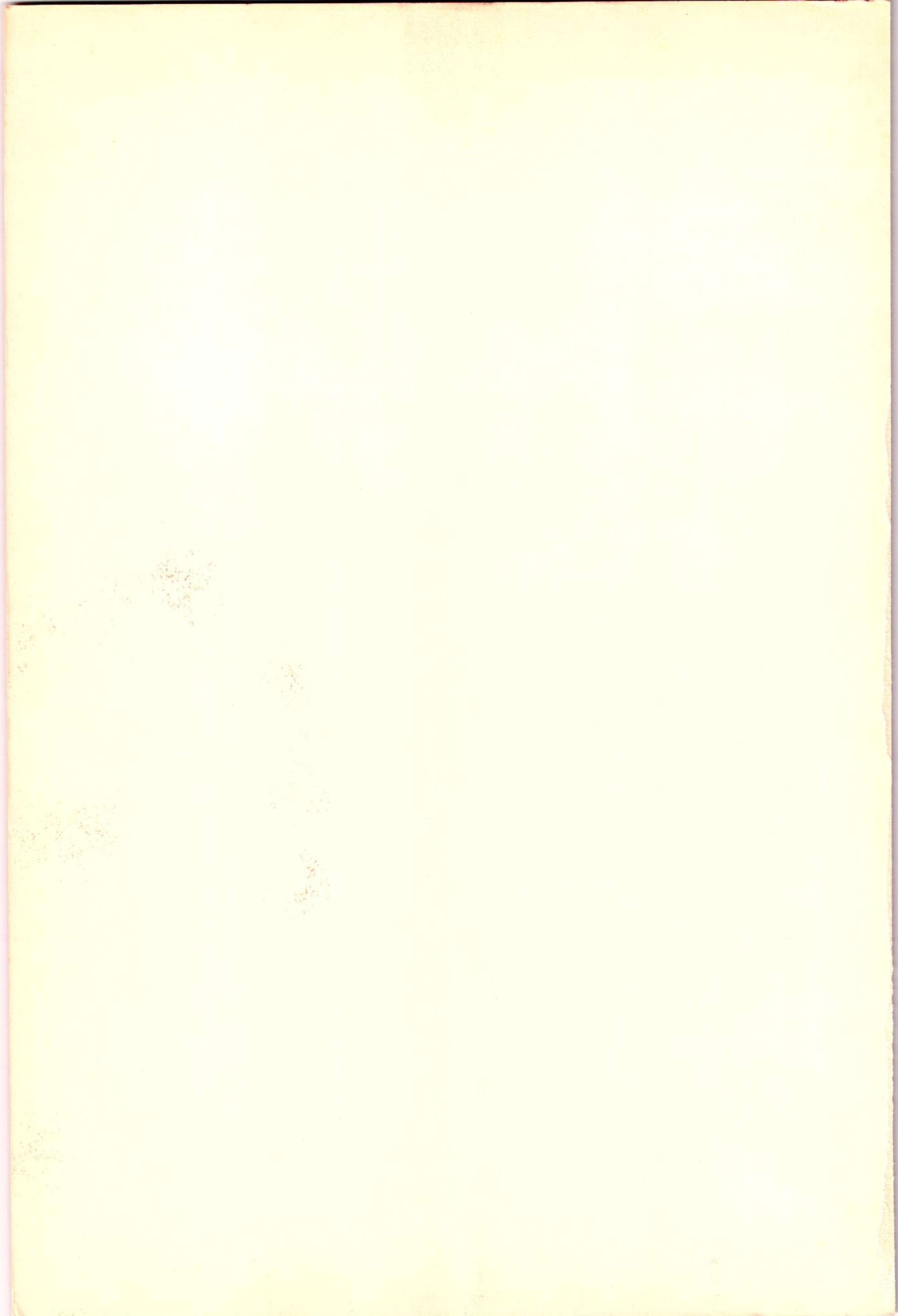
SOUTHEAST ASIAN REVIEW OF ENGLISH



SOUTHEAST ASIAN REVIEW OF ENGLISH

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SOUTHEAST ASIAN REVIEW OF ENGLISH

Vol. 2 August 1981

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Southeast Asian Review of English is published twice a year in July and December. Contributions are welcome: articles, reviews, review articles, essay reviews, checklists relating to Commonwealth or Third World literatures in English, poems, stories and other creative work, English translations of poems and stories written in any of the Southeast Asian languages (submitted together with the originals), English-language studies, and commentary on the cultural and intellectual aspects of the Southeast Asian world. Manuscripts should be typed, double-spaced on quarto paper. These should follow the MLA Style Sheet. Great care will be taken with manuscripts submitted. The Editorial Board cannot undertake to return any manuscript unless it is accompanied by a self-addressed envelope and return postage.

Department of English
University of Malaya
Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia

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EDWARD KAMAU BRATHWAITE

*YELLOW MINNIN

I

There are certain dreams that boys
have living by the sea
that they will become infamous sailors

see galleons whales
find treasure at the bottom of the ocean
tree; in the hills that they will climb

the mountain; in the desert ex-
orcize their god; in
my backyard that i will shift the boulder

brought years and years before
by the wet shoulder of torn
waves: grown older now and darker

no longer mossy
and in the jewel case of earth beneath
it: there would be this crab: tick-

ing scarlet: petties purple
frothing fromits from its shellac shell and shelter.
this was our vision of the ancient sun

squatting upon the sandy ridge of memories
this crab knew ancient histories
old harbour cartagena tenoctitlan half

*A sequence from *Sun Poem,* forthcoming; with grateful acknowledgement to Oxford University Press, and with thanks to Edward K. Brathwaite for sending it to us.

moon fort plantation grasses; re-
leased its scrapers scuttled with us back
to prisoned childhoods hintless of the world

of banks and bombs now voiceless auction blocks
but instincts fished for lay below the surface
with held and shining breaths that dived us down to truth

of ship retreating coastline dumbless origins

II

1

The sea spoke to me softly of angels
but they were not white roses nor faery queens
they were black besses and bussas who came sculling over the reefs in their bateaus

the sun made patterns on the water that gave birth to children

the children, *mmofra,* sprats and sprays
tin charcoal sticks
eyes bright as sapodilla seeds are black

crack open with the sun's glaze

and weep through the air like pollen of tears
their gold dust dies on the dry hillside
where an old woman, long patch work kente apron on the sky

line moves slowly with her hoe like a one leg

2
the games we played had little meaning
we were not hunters nor warriors nor even great lovers
we lacked the criminals

we picked up sticks seeds pebbles forgotten divinations

played romie or whist or suck-de-well-dry-dry
or draughts and dominoes
or monte carlo round the moonlight grass-

lamp and felt the power of monopoly's hotels

blue chips of wood: park lane mayfair the malls where rolls royce pawked
and grabbed scouvenirs
and when the gas ran out we fell sleep along the deadwood racetrack underneath the
kitchen chairs

3

not knowing the names of our flowers and trees

scratchywhist womans tongue hogplum stinkin toe
we would only call our brothers robin hood or barnabas collins
we took white plastic bico cups of ice cream

bought from the bico man in the light blue bico van

cut them to make serrated teeth of draculas
we fit the crescents up against our gums and waited mouth shut tight
and full

when strangers passed and said hell

o: we let our eye
lids down and slowly un

dead: grinned

4

mosquito one mosquito two
mosquito jump in de ole man shoe

mosquito two mosquito tree
mosquito stick stick miss sally knee

mosquito tree mosquito four
mosquito knock in de donkey door

mosquito four mosquito five
mosquito six and de poor get lix

mosquito six mosquito seven
de man in de moon isn't livvin in heaven

mosquito seven mosquito eight
mosquito nine rape de girl in de pine

mosquito nine mosquito ten
de monkey jump up and jump dung agen

aeyae yae jin jin *aeyae yae* jin-jin
monkey eat tobacco an shit

white lime

A Note in Preview : THE RETURN

Ooi Boo Eng

The story in this issue, 'The Eviction', is the first chapter of a forthcoming novel by K.S.Maniam. It is called *The Return,* and any day now should see it coming out to take its place in the Malaysian/Singaporean literary scene in English. I have had the pleasure of reading it in manuscript and I should like here to give a preview of it, very brief as it must be since I ought not to pre-empt as much room as a review can more appropriately lay claim to in order to make convincing what there is to be said. Without the space for a patient and self-effacing presentation I will say my piece in general, assertive and personal terms. I had better, then, say right away that I really do believe that *The Return* when published will be a thoroughly respectable item in the steadily lengthening list of Heinemann's Writing in Asia Series.

One way for a reader to try for as much objectivity as can be hoped for in the evaluation of a new work is to have the work under consideration stood up against all other works of the same genre so far published in the series. I have done this a number of times in my mind and I have no doubt that it does stand up well with all the fiction published to date by Malaysian/Singapore authors (and perhaps, too, with the rest by other Asian authors in the series). If *those,* why not *this?* The case, though, is rather stronger than this. It isn't just that *The Return* is no worse than any published Malaysian/ Singaporean fiction volume in English one cares to name; in my mind *The Return* bids fair to take a place among the top two or three, whatever these are agreed to be.

The moment I began reading past the first three or four sentences of *The Return* the feeling came, subdued but definite enough, that this was going to be good. That response has a lot to do with something in the quality of the writing and the adjustment of its focus: a style that in terms of diction and phrasing/syntax/movement is almost always lucid and simple — deceptively simple in that (a) it says what is to be said without drawing undue attention to itself and (b) it can at times suggest more than what seems to be said without straining itself to do so; and a focus that can manage factual or concrete observation or description while at the same time making of the observation something that comes with some degree of symbolic overtone to it.

Consider, for example, the beginning of the novel. I can't recall any Malaysian/ Singaporean novel which takes off as confidently and simply with the creation of the sense of an opening : 'My grandmother's life and her death, in 1958, made a vivid impression on me. She came, as the stories and anecdotes about her say, suddenly out of the horizon, like a camel, with nothing except some baggage and three boys in tow. And like that animal that survives the most barren of lands, she brooded, humped over her tin trunks, mats, silver lamps and pots, at the junction of the main road and the laterite trail. Later she went up the red, dusty path, into the trees and bushes, the most undeveloped part of Bedong. The people of this small town didn't know how she managed . . .'. It would be a pleasure to go on quoting; this is the kind of writing, not sufficiently common in Malaysian/Singaporean novels, which can bear close, reasoned analysis. Here I have to limit myself to point to a few things impressionistically. Words and phrases are simple but they work with a spot-on effectiveness; 'out of the horizon', for example, is a common phrase but it is just the phrase — as good as any, at any rate, that can be reached for — for creating the impression of a figure nowhere in sight one moment, then very much there the next; 'three boys in tow' is, again, a common phrase but it is idiomatic and registers a subdued humorous attitude to the image of a displaced

person determinedly holding on to what she considers essentials, including three boys dragged along with her willy-nilly; nothing unusual about the verb 'brooded' in itself except that it is so much better than 'stood', the verb expected in the context of a phrase like 'at the junction of . . .' – a verb which would convey the meaning of coming to a pause, a momentary state of inaction, without the suggestion registered in 'brooded' of something like taking thought because of some anxiety or uncertainty; and 'humped' is just the word – it sustains the simile of 'like a camel'. Another aspect inviting comment is that this is a passage of recall, of piecing together anecdotal bits about the grandmother, and the way the passage moves somehow gives the impression of a quietly relaxed concentration given to the recalling. The flow of the syntax or phrasing is smooth without being flaccid or headlong; on the contrary, the easy flow is controlled unobtrusively to bring emphasis to bear where emphasis is needed: the placing of the adverb 'suddenly' *enacts* the meaning of it rather than merely expressing it; and 'brooded' is so placed that the pause induced naturally by the demand of the phrasing gives it a weighted significance – makes 'brooded', in other words, brood. Finally, one of the underlying 'motifs' of the novel as a whole is already there in the passage : the 'motif', that is, of some deeply felt human urge driving a displaced person to strive not just for survival but for a survival that leaves something of the person's past – call it identity or roots (here symbolized in the grandmothers paraphernalia from her past life) – intact.

The point I want to make in going on at such length on a short passage is that here is a Malaysian/Singaporean novelist – Lloyd Fernando is, I think, the only other one – who shows evidence of being able to work into something brief and simple an ample and varied resonance of meaningfulness.

I must say that when Subramaniam read the whole opening chapter at a session of 'Readings in Commonwealth Literature' organized by the Malaysian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies the applause was discreet but far from perfunctory; it was, I thought, spontaneous and sincere – in response, I think, to qualities of the kind pointed to above.

I must also admit to thinking, at one stage of my mulling over the novel, that there was a falling off in quality and presentation through the last quarter or so of it. But on re-reading and re-thinking I began to realize that I had failed to give weight to the possibility that what at first I took to be an inadequacy of perception on the part of the author could be intended as some blindness on the part of the first-person narrator (Ravi) to see and sympathize with the 'dreams' of his father (and grandmother); a refusal almost to see and understand because of too much self-concern. The very end of the novel then takes on the aspect of something deliberately disjunctive – a sort of coda or epilogue which gives notice that with time and brooding insight begins to come and promises to deepen. The first chapter, then, demonstrates the insight achieved which makes it possible for Ravi to give, in a manner marked by both empathic identification and detached observation, an account of his grandmother who comes across as a person, a character and a force or energy generated by the human need to have a place in the sun in more than the sense of making enough to live on. Seen thus the first chapter falls into place in the design of the novel as a prologue complementing the epilogue referred to above. The epilogue leaves the novel open-ended, allowing for the possibility of a sequel which could concern itself among other things with imagining through in detail how the insight struggled for and shown implicitly (in the first chapter) to have been achieved is in fact achieved.

Before making a final assertion I ought to say that I hope no expectation has been given of the writing being sustained everywhere at the level of the passage commented on above. Here and there some rephrasing or re-touching may be called for; but there are no abysmal lapses; and it would not take a lot of searching to turn up other stretches in the writing which can stand up well to some such scrutiny as that tried out on the passage quoted.

The Return deserves being seriously reviewed when it comes out, any day now.

(May, 1981)

THE EVICTION*

MY GRANDMOTHER'S LIFE and her death, in 1958, made a vivid impression on me. She came, as the stories and anecdotes about her say, suddenly out of the horizon, like a camel, with nothing except some baggage and three boys in tow. And like that animal that survives the most barren of lands, she brooded, humped over her tin trunks, mats, silver lamps and pots, at the junction of the main road and the laterite trail. Later she went up the red, dusty path, into the trees and bushes, the most undeveloped part of Bedong. The people of this small town didn't know how she managed but they saw her before a week passed, a settled look on her face, a firm gait to her walk.

A bit of land had been cleared beside the infrequently trodden path to the Hindu cemetery. From salvaged planks, no one knew from where, she nailed the first shelter among the many she was to design. Her three sons cowered in there most of the time.

"They were like chicken afraid of slaughter," a man who had known my grandmother when she first got to Malaysia, said, laughing.

"She was a great walker in those days. She trudged to the estates, sometimes ten miles away, a load of saris she had brought from India on her shoulders. They were soon gone. Then Letchumunan, the textile merchant, gave her a cut for paddling his goods. But your grandmother wanted to light her own lamp! And her boys had become wild fowl, dust of all Bedong on their feet," the man said, his eyes glazed with searching the past for my grandmother's image.

But she had become a tinker, the white flour sack of tools bulging on her back. The women who came to answer her calls thought, having run out of initiative, that she had come to beg. My grandmother shook her head, refusing the glass of water or tea – she wanted work. Day after day she squatted in the common yard (the shared ground of Indian habits?) of several houses, her equipment set up. The children heralded her arrival with: "The camel is coming! The hump is here!"

Under the ringing nickname, she bent proudly to her task. The white sack yielded a tiny stove, anvil, hammer, spatulas, rolls of copper, silver foil, aluminium, lead and a husky bellows. The children wouldn't go away, hushed and crowded round her, waiting for a miracle.

"Bring out the pot we wanted to throw away last year!" some man jokingly called one day.

My grandmother smiled to herself and fanned the coal fire with the bellows. She held the pot handed to her against the sky.

"It was like looking at stars on a lonely night," she told me, when she recalled in snatches her early days.

They crowded round her, jostling each other, to witness this pale woman, head always covered with a sari border, fumble at the job. The bellows husked, the coals danced blue, the tiny hammer and spatulas flashed, crossing the morning sunlight into a mysterious pattern. A knob-like steel rod pressed and cajoled. The pot hovered, light in her hands, like a delicate butterfly over the flames. When she handed the pot back the man received it reverently. My grandmother chuckled recalling the man's surprise.

*See 'A Note in Preview : *THE RETURN*' in this issue.

The Indian families in Bedong, within three months, had nothing to offer except the respectful glass of tea. She ended her tinker's career and once more stood, characteristically, at the cross-roads, contemplating a new job. All her Indian skills and heritage had been depleted.

"It was like treading Indian soil still,'' she commented reflectively when she sat later on the *thinnai* of her newly-built, first real house.

For a time, she said, she went round casting the "evil eye" from ailing children. I saw her at work, some years later, her reputation still undiminished. She would fast a whole day, then travelling sometimes on rickety bicycles, sometimes in rattling private cars, she alighted at the house of the stricken, often in remote rubber estates. The older women in the family sometimes did the job but didn't possess the special "touch" my grandmother had. The victim of evil forces, usually emaciated, was led into the only bedroom the family shared. Under my grandmother's gentle hands the boy squatted, trembling, on the floor. To the dust the family had collected from the four corners of the house, she added certain leaves, extracting them from her embroidered pouch. I don't know whether it was her mere presence or the ritual itself that was effective but the boy followed us to the door, unaided, when we left. The handful of chillies, dirt, salt and leaves my grandmother had thrown into the kitchen fire crackled furiously, a sign that the possessing spirit had to flee unceremoniously!

Another event interrupted her new development. The Japanese Occupation put a stop to free movement. She reverted to farming, tending her maize, tapioca and vegetable plots. She sold the surplus, accepting bags of the almost worthless Japanese currency. Years later our house in the hospital compound was entered by thieves; they carted away a whole trunk of what they assumed to be hoarded Malaysian notes. The moonlight must have played a ghastly joke on them as they dug their hands into piles of the "banana tree" bills. We discovered the trunk abandoned a hundred yards away, our "treasure" intact!

My grandmother barely survived the Japanese Occupation but already she had become "Periathai'', the Big Mother. Even her grandchildren addressed her by that name. If they didn't they were admonished by any Indian within earshot.

I was already attending school when Periathai built that real house of hers. It had a large, cool hall, a small room and an old-fashioned, Indian cooking place. We, her grandchildren, enjoyed more the colourful entrance to this house. A double-pillared affair, it had strange stories carved on its timber faces. The carver, a man who had come from India hopeful of a well-paid job, readily accepted the small fee and lodgings Periathai offered. His trudging through a series of rejections had made him a perpetual wanderer, a dependent on his story-creating chisel. He must have put all his disappointments, nostalgia and dreams into those four pillars. The walls, *thinnai* and even the *kolam*-covered yard appeared insignificant. Some of the Ramayana episodes stood out with palpable poignancy: Rama challenged, bow and arrow at the ready, yet the brows lined with anxiety for the missing Sita. The sculptured, fold-like flames envelope Ravana's palace and threaten to engulf Sita's tender, shapely limbs and breasts. One pillar carried the creation of the Ganges, the cascading water stilled, another the typical rustic look of the Indian village.

Some Fridays, when Periathai said elaborate prayers, the grandchildren were invited. We waited for her seated on the *thinnai,* observing the other houses, hemmed in by hibiscus hedges, isolated by a life of their own. The rowdier among us sprawled on the unclinging, plastered soil of the compound. Then the light dimmed and Periathai arrived

with her hand-cart. She never said a word but we knew every gesture and movement of the ritual she enacted on such evenings. Preceding her to the communal bathshed, we washed ourselves reverently, then returned to the *thinnai*, a hushed lot.

Periathai forfeited her customary warm bath. Instead, she punished herself with cold water; we heard the slap of the water on her body, resounding through the mysterious dusk. When she finally emerged she was dressed in simple, white garments, her face rubbed with saffron paste. Her hair, let down completely, fell tapering to her knobbly waist. She was almost shy then, hardly daring to look at us. But inside the house – we had been instructed to witness, even to participate – she assumed an absorbed, impenetrable air. The complex series of events gave her no time to think.

Periathai opened one of the two tin trunks she had brought from India. Handling every object gently, she took out a statue of Nataraja, the cosmic dancer ringed by a circle of flame; a copper tray, a hand-woven silver-and-gold sari, bangles and a *thali*. These were laid out, Nataraja raised in the centre, on an earthen dais on the wall niche. Then she drew forth bronze tier lamps and pouring oil from a clay container, she set them, three in number, alight. The sari, the jewelry and the idol glowed now, creating a kind of eternity around them. Periathai sat cross-legged, hair wet and in unadorned clothes before the holy niche and entered a deep contemplation. Perhaps Nataraja spoke to her of the original spirit, and her personal articles of the home she had left behind. It was a re-immersion, a recreating of the thick spiritual and domestic air she must have breathed there, back in some remote district in India.

The spell broke the moment she turned and smiled at us. We scrambled for places on the large, iron bedstead beside which were ranged clay and copper vessels holding strange delights. There was a kind of dried, sour meat that tasted like stringy jelly. There were balls of puffed rice with just the right pinch of chillie, and from another long-necked jar came snaky bits cooked in thick treacle. We were only given two-tooth bites of these tasty morsels, more as an appetiser for the main meal on the *thinnai*. There, *vadais*, left over from the day's sales, *dhal* curry filled with brinjals, potatoes, pumpkin cubes, tomato slices and avarakai (Indian legumes), were served with rice. Those of us who had "behaved" received a tea-spoonful of home-brewed ghee to flavour the spread. Then, with only a tier lamp placed in the centre of the most complicated *kolam* in the cowdung plastered-compound, Periathai told us stories. Her voice transformed the *kolams* into contours of reality and fantasy, excitingly balanced. I felt I stood on the edge of a world I may have known.

But this feeling came crashing down with the proclamation of emergency rule over certain parts of the country. We lived under the regimented, dark sky of curfew land. The roads looked deserted even at the times they were opened to the public. An unshakable darkness fell over us, every night, at eleven when all lights had to be extinguished. The first few weeks strange apparitions appeared just inside the closed door, boisterous activities sounded in the bathroom and tins rattled. I dreamed always of a blood-covered figure suddenly confronting me with a blood-stained *parang*, asking for sanctuary. We lived, officially, in what was termed a "black area". This designation covered small towns and remote kampungs close to jungle fringes and foothills, perfect hiding places for communist terrorists. An English estate manager had been gorily stabbed to death in his lonely bungalow, only a few miles from Bedong. The other British planters, the handful who remained, went to their Club in Sungai Petani, escorted by the military in jeeps. Sungai Petani, my schooltown, was a "white area", that is, a communist-free region.

Periathai's carved columns and *kolams* were neglected. She only spent the occasional night at home. Her adopted daughter, Pakiam, merely guarded the house against thefts. Determined to keep her *vadai* business going, she slept on a cramped, wooden platform in the back of a provision shop. The *vadais* would be ready, cooked on a make-shift stove before the town was opened to the public for two hours in the morning. Then the siren went. Periathai hurried back to the Indian provision shop to wait for the two hours of business in the afternoon. Grieved by the separation from me, she made me keep her company for a day or two. People used to look quizzically at her and a few bought her wares out of charity.

"Never let anything break your spirit," she told me, though I didn't understand her.

On rainy days the streets were even more desolate, the nights completely dark when only phantom figures squelched on the soft ground outside the window. I learned to live within prison conditions, danger massing beyond in the familiar surroundings, freedom only a dozen miles away. During the long, sleepless nights I thought sparingly; morning was a release, not an expansion. The darkness, the siren wail and an occasional gunshot built into a monstrous fear depriving me of normal behaviour. If curfew hours were reduced, as it happened sometimes, to commemorate some national event, I didn't know what to do with the extra time. Used to seeing armed men at check points, I panicked when there was none.

Periathai died when the curfew was lifted for good and the military disappeared from the scene in 1958. Her fortunes reached pre-Emergency prosperity but the lump she had always had on her shoulder had grown to the size of a clenched fist. She tried to incise it but it never "ripened". Her sons took her first to the Group Hospital and later to the District Hospital in Sungai Petani. The doctor shook his head: it was terminal cancer. Periathai shrugged the diagnosis off and continued to occupy her place at the pawnshop pillar.

Her sons had their own families, so she expanded her house, adding to it two more rooms and bought her adopted daughter jewelry. But some inner preoccupation robbed her walk of its customary jauntiness and her expression, this-world consciousness. These spells were, initially, fleeting, isolated incidents. It was when the Town Council officials got to her that she began to lose weight. She divided her time between her *vadai* hand-cart and the Town Council Office, appealing for land ownership on the grounds that she had occupied that bit of land long enough to be its rightful heir.

"My many spirits roam it," she told me. "When I die I'll never stop haunting the place."

But she had no papers, only a vague belief and a dubious loyalty. The houses around hers were already being pulled down. Rafters, fallen beams and charred remains gaped like a death larger than Periathai's approaching demise whenever I went – and these had grown fewer – to visit her. She refused to leave the house for fear that it might be demolished during her absence. Her customers sometimes placed special orders with which she kept herself busy.

The Town Council men sent her eviction notice.

She covered her *vadai* hand-cart, stood it at the foot of the large bedstead and didn't get up for almost a week. Her body began to waste away; her sons, their wives and her grandchildren were constantly in the house. But she lay, her back turned against them, the fist-like tumour straining the blouse.

The weeks that followed emaciated her. Periathai soon lay, hardly rustling, like a wrinkled bamboo stem on the voluminous sheets. The Town Council sent her another

official letter: she could stay in the house until her death. Periathai managed a smile when I got to a strangely deserted house that evening. She held out the envelope to me. When I finished reading the "reprieve" she said:

"Lift me."

I hesitated. She hadn't moved from the bed for more than a month.

"Lift me," she repeated.

I took her by the arm-pits for she was light enough but once on the floor she shook my hands off. Moving with great effort she wobbled towards the shrine-niche. Pakiam trailed behind and obeying Periathai's unspoken commands, pulled out the tin trunk from under the bedstead. She took out the wedding sari, *thundu* – all mildewed – and the *thali.* Laying them out on a copper tray, she placed it before Nataraja. Under her trained fingers the several wicks of the tier lamps sprang into life almost at once. Periathai knelt down painfully. The incense and camphor Pakiam burned filled the room with thick smoke. But somehow Nataraja glowed dully. The light that fell from the tier lamps didn't throw the tin trunks, mats, lamps and hand-cart into solid relief as it had on Periathai's ritual Fridays.

From then on she sank fast. Our parents warned us not to go near her. But we had to edge close to her to catch what she was saying. She talked with obvious effort but talk she did, with a vague premonition, of all that her eyes had seen, her ears had heard and to whatever her spirit had responded.

We moved in to listen to the saffron-scented, death-churned memories, stories, experiences and nostalgia. She was a child, a young girl, a new bride and a widow. There was rasping wind in her voice, cold fear, romance, exalting strength and devastation. She blubbered most about the sea, crooning to it, beseeching for a safe passage with her tin trunks. Some mornings she was a freshly-harvested field, smelling of stalks and turned earth. We forgot our parents' warning not to breathe in too closely her fluid words. We forgot and leaned against the curve of the land she built now with desolating winds, now with a dark and humid soil and filled with abundant fruit. Yet it was also a land haunted by ghosts, treaded lightly by gods and goddesses, violated by murderers where a widow went through the fire to reach a dead husband.

And now the town came to her, unable to face the empty pawnshop pillar. They streamed in continuously, stood silently at the large bedstead, stared at the covered hand-cart and stirring themselves suddenly went out to the kitchen, to a cup of warm tea and a plate of *vadais.* While she sank, while her body fluids dried up, a flow of noise and chatter built up around her. She looked out of gaunt eyes, now at this man, now at that woman and they remembered the deft hands that had danced to a certain rhythm as she wrapped their *wadais.* If her body diminished, her eyes never lost their vitality. And on the morning she died, speechless, her eyes never spoke a farewell.

K.S. MANIAM

MOMENTS

tweak one off & you'll
twitch for more   so just right   the
snapping off of twigs

earth's still good old earth
when first light blooms bedewed, bird -
sung, atavistic

evening's evening when
somewhere leaves burn & leave the
air aromatic

gorgeous grace, bright eye(d)
in sky: the 15th moon, preg-
nant & phlegmatic

Ooi Boo Eng

TWO POEMS by S. KON

Rantau Abang
(from: East Coast: Three Beaches)

Do you remember an inimical beach?
No trees or shade there, nor soft sand,
a harsh, hot place by day.
Once clouds came over, borne on a western storm;
the sea turned black,
like darkened and hammered pewter,
grew wicked, forbidding.
At night the turtles came;
the place was *their* nursery, not made for man.
But there were people walking all over,
shining flashlights, crowding and staring.
They took the beach away from the turtle,
and made it belong to man.

Nefertiti

Nefertiti is dead,
        Akhenaton's beloved,
        queen of the lake-palace
        of the fountain-garden.
Lay her to rest. Let four days pass
        ere she is given to the men who draw
                out the brain through the nose:
        let her perfection become imperfection,
        let her clay begin its descent to the dust,
        lest the embalmer
        blaspheming
        attempt to possess
The beauty of Nefertiti.

No bone is left of her, Nefertiti . . .
Spices and myrhh have preserved no
        Shred of her sinew, no remnant of flesh.

Out beyond Thebes
        on the walls of the palace the images glow,
        her portraits painted by men who loved her.
Vanquished the sands of three thousand
        years, for all the world knows
The head of Nefertiti.

THREE POEMS by SIEW-YUE KILLINGLEY

Infinity*

The street lamps shone like jewelled worlds
Strung on a slender invisible chain
Around the dark stretching neck
Of night, like a queenly black beauty
Confident of adoration and able to remain
Unconscious of each individual point of beauty.

The round world shone as a polished lamp
Hung on a slender silver chain
Around the dark stretching neck
Of infinite space, stretching and chaining
Together days and nights for endless worlds,
All unconscious of each other's burning.

Each life in the round world
Shone as a lamp hung on a chain
Around the turning figure of the world,
Preening to admire herself in the glassy
Sea of infinite space, queenlike, to remain
Unconscious of each individual cause of beauty.

A Lifetime

Once in the dew of a flowering field
I grew and danced in the wind. The sun,
Eternal, rose and shone, and sombrely revealed
My passing attendant shadow to me, the one

Transitory record of my passing life,
For soon the mower came and cut me down.
By chance, some others missed his casual knife
And remained starkly alive, vulnerable, to crown

The dying field, darkening with their thin shadows
Their once-bright fellows, now limply tossed
By the still blowing wind which scanned the meadows,
Telling in whispers the dew-beads drying on the lost.

*With acknowledgement to the Editor of *Poetry North East* (Newcastle upon Tyne, England).

The Seagull*

Out of these hills of time
Has oozed forever the slime
Of inhuman nature glistening
Like rivers of dark grime
On a white seagull's back,
The bird which so patiently
Plunges and stretches to void
The clinging oil from its back.
Stretch back. Stretch back
And remember a time of listening
Before these hills which we climb
All unknowingly become the slime
To drown us forever. In time
Even they will darken and heave
No more to shake off the slime
Of inhuman nature, like a gull
Tired of endless plunging. In that time
There would be no time but endless
Waiting. But we are not friendless:
A human nature has descended
And dwelt among us. Befriended,
We brutish beings may in time
With hope become like the pure water
Which glistens in the white feathers
Of the seagull as it sweeps
In free flight between the clouds
And man, gashing into the setting sun,
Like an eternal bright river
Flowing upwards in the hills of time.

Newcastle upon Tyne.

*With acknowledgement to the Editor of *Ore* (Stevenage, England)
in which the poem is scheduled to appear.

COMMUNICATIVE APPROACHES TO THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN MALAYSIA

Mildred Nalliah

I. Introduction

As suggested in the title, this paper aims at discussing the use of communicative approaches in the teaching of English in Upper Secondary Schools in Malaysia. It is chiefly addressed to those who are involved in facilitating the learning of the language in our schools, particularly language teachers who I believe have received the introduction of the 'communicational' syllabus with much lukewarmness, if not resentment mixed with dismay. This is understandable for what is overtly stated in the syllabus appears to be a drastic swing from the more 'traditional approach' which has been faithfully handed down from one generation of language teachers to another, who believe that the good old methods have actually produced good results as evident in the fluency in the language shared by many of our generation.

However, the situation has changed such that the 'traditional approaches' can no longer maximise the learning of the language in the present context, for reasons I shall elaborate on later.

It is my intention in this paper to discuss the reasons for the necessity to adopt new approaches to teaching English; to explain the rationale that goes with the communicational syllabus; and to make certain recommendations in planning and presenting a lesson using the communicative approach.

It is hoped that this paper will help teachers come to a deeper understanding of the communicational syllabus and foster a happier working relationship with it, for after all the syllabus will stay for some years to come, though it is hoped that parts of it will be further improved to help teachers do a better job in enabling pupils to learn the language more effectively.

II. The Background

The second half of the 1970's saw the advent of a new trend in language teaching in the upper secondary schools in Malaysia with the introduction of the 'communicational' syllabus.

This was in keeping with two important factors which helped determine the new approach to language learning and teaching:

i) Firstly, the role of the English Language in Malaysia changed considerably with the introduction of the National Schools system where Bahasa Malaysia is the sole medium of instruction. Prior to this English was used as a medium of instruction in all national-type schools, thus fostering a certain degree of competence and fluency among the pupils who used the language to learn the other school subjects. However, with this change, English is to be now taught as another school subject, giving little opportunity for the pupils to actually use the language.

ii) Secondly, this same period also saw a world-wide reorientation in language teaching towards a major focus on communicative skills.

This shift in emphasis paralleled a similar emphasis within linguistics where socio-cultural factors which help determine the actual form of the utterance and the corresponding meaning it conveys were given central importance.

III. The School Situation

Before the introduction of the new syllabus language teaching in the school had been limited to a grammar-based approach which emphasised a knowledge of the rules of grammar and a description of the structure of the language. The syllabus was strictly structural with a superimposition of situational teaching. The unit of learning was the sentence which was often artfully presented 'contextually' in a 'meaningful situation'.

This concern with teaching the grammar of the language matched well with a similar concern with the study of form and the description of the structure of the language in linguistics. The characteristic feature of Bloomfieldian and neo-Bloomfieldian structuralism and even Chomsky's Transformational Generative grammar is grammatical knowledge.

The grammar-based approach survived well in the English-medium schools where English was extensively used in the learning of all the other subjects. The pupils actually saw how the language could be put to use not only in extending their world-view via learning subjects like history, geography, science etc., but also in their everyday communication between teacher and pupil on the one hand and pupil and pupil on the other, for the exchange of information. Thus the mastery of the language carried with it a very definite purpose, i.e. it served as a necessary tool in their everyday communication and learning experience.

In contrast to this, pupils from the vernacular schools where either Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese or Tamil served as the medium of instruction lacked the opportunity to use the language and fell behind pupils of English-medium schools in their English Language proficiency. It is not uncommon to find that pupils from the vernacular schools have difficulty coping with the language in its normal communicative use even after having undergone at least seven years of instruction in the language.

Thus the assumption that once the learner has mastered the rules of forming grammatically correct sentences he will be able to use them in actual communication when the need arises does not hold because more often than not pupils who have learnt English as just another school subject in the school curriculum using the grammar-based approach may generally be able to read and write in the language but, confronted with speakers of the language, may find themselves either tongue-tied or deficient in fluency.

Since English is no longer a medium of instruction, and is only taught as another subject in the school curriculum, and since presumably it is our objective to equip our school leavers with a working knowledge of the language so that they can communicate effectively in the various job situations which they find themselves in (90% of school leavers being potential job seekers after Form V and 10%, potential tertiary students: see Appendix A), alternative approaches which focus on communication have to be found.

IV. Language and Communication

The primary function of language is communicative in nature. People use it to interact socially with one another. Thus, knowing a language is more than just knowing the

rules to generate an infinite number of grammatically correct sentences. It also involves knowing something about how language fulfils this *communicative function* so that one is able to produce utterances which are socially acceptable.

Since language is very much a crucial part of social behaviour, 'there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless' (Hymes, 1972). Coming down hard on this aspect of language, sociolinguists paved the way for the communicative approach to language teaching, advocating that a linguistic theory should develop to provide a more 'constitutive role for sociocultural factors' (Hymes, 1972: 277).

In learning a language one should not only know the formal properties of the language as a system but also know how this system is put to use in the performing of different social actions. Thus the language teacher's concern is not only the grammatical competence of the learner but also his communicative competence. What this means has been summed up very neatly by Hymes (1972): the adequate Language-user is one who has acquired 'knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He/she acquires competence as to *when* to speak and *when not,* and as to what to talk about *with whom, when, where,* in what manner. In short, a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events and to evaluate their accomplishment by others. This competence, moreover, is integral with attitudes, values and motivations concerning language, its features, uses,' (Hymes 1972: 278).

This brings us then to examine the fundamentals which underline communicative teaching and the implications of this approach in the context of the 'communicational syllabus' for upper secondary schools in Malaysia.

V. Communicative Teaching

The term 'communicative teaching' itself implies the necessity to teach communication via language as opposed to teaching language for communication.

Allwright (1979 : 168) drives home this point succinctly when he says that 'if we really have communication as the major aim of our (language) teaching, we would be well advised to focus on communicative skills, in the knowledge that this will necessarily involve developing most areas of linguistic competence as an essential part of the product rather than focus on linguistic skills and risk failing to deal with a major part of whatever constitutes communicative competence'.

Thus in communicative language teaching 'the communicative act' forms the basic unit of learning as opposed to the sentence as the basic unit in the structural approach.

Communication only takes place when the learner is able to make use of sentences to perform a variety of different acts of an essentially social nature, and since communication never occurs in a social vacuum but is always related to a specific social situation the learner needs to know those conventions or rules of use which control the selection of well-formed sentences appropriate to that particular social situation.

In communicative teaching one is primarily concerned with *who* uses what sentences in *what social circumstances* and for *what purpose.* Contextual features are important as aspects of the situation influence both the form and function of language. Thus the communicative happening or speech event forms the starting point in communicative teaching, as we are concerned with the interplay of the different component features of the speech event which ultimately result in the production of a communicative act.

The constituent factors in the speech event are the following:

Addresser
Addressee
Message form
Channel
Setting
Topic
Code

An act of communication takes place when the *addresser* sends a *message* to the *addressee* through some *channel* in a particular *setting*. A certain *topic* is talked about and the message is expressed in some *linguistic* and/or *paralinguistic code*.

VI. The 'Communicational' Syllabus

The 'Communicational' syllabus designed for the upper secondary classes in Malaysian schools is very much sociolinguistic in orientation, the emphasis being on the teaching of communicative skills. However, the aims of the syllabus have been narrowed down to teaching English for communivative purposes in 'areas of work' where the Form-Five school leaver 'will rely on English to a significant degree' (The English Language Syllabus. Tingkatan 4–5; 1976: 3).

To this end 'the syllabus requires that English be learnt through situations' (Resource Book for the English Language Syllabus, 1979). The syllabus states that teachers should aim at getting students to develop skills necessary for communicating accurately and effectively in situations where they may be active participants. It also states that 'the student must play a role in the situation' and that 'he would need to carry out a number of tasks in order to come up with the expected product' (Resource Book for the English Language Syllabus, 1979).

The above quoted abstracts from the 'communicational' syllabus leave no doubt that the basis of the language-learning unit is a communicative happening with the intrinsic components of the speech event.

Thus in the communicative approach to language-teaching, the first step that a teacher takes is to specify the situation in which the communicative skills take place. This in turn involves stating who the participants are (addresser, addressee) and the roles they play; where the setting is; what the topic and message is; which channel is used (aurally or visually); and, most important of all, the code, i.e. the linguistic items or actual language structures to be used to carry out the communicative act or 'product' as referred to in the syllabus.

VII. Planning A Language Lesson Via The Communicational Syllabus

In the Communicational Syllabus, sixteen areas have been laid down which cover different language 'products' or communicative skills. The syllabus also provides various situations in which the communicative skill could be used. In Area I, for example, the communicative skill to be learnt is relaying of information to others, and a list of situations in which the skill could possibly be used is given, such as (to refer to no more than three):

(a) You are a hotel receptionist; you receive a call for a guest who is not in. The caller gives you a short message for the guest, asking him to meet the caller at a certain cinema in town. Relay this message to the guest when he returns.

(b) You work in a restaurant as a waiter. A customer comes in to order lunch. Pass on this order to the cook.

(c) Ali and Muthu dislike each other but both are your friends. Ali has just met Muthu's cousin Shanta and wishes to visit her at home. He does not know the way and is reluctant to ask Muthu. Find out from Muthu the way to Shanta's house and relay the directions to Ali.

Though all three situations involve the communicative skill of relaying information to others, the particular language functions and the corresponding language structures needed to fulfill the functions differ for the three situations quoted above.

In situation (a) the main language function is giving a message. Hence the essential language structure to be used is reported speech. Since the role relationship is that of hotel receptionist and guest, polite forms are necessary.

In situation (b), though the overall communicative skill is still that of relaying information, the particular language function is different. In carrying out the language function of passing on the order to the cook, the waiter in effect only has to use the correct lexical items together with the necessary quantifiers and qualifiers.

Example:

One fried rice
Two dozen egg sandwiches, etc.

As the role relationship is that of waiter-and-cook (i.e. fellow work-mates), niceties and courtesy are not as important as clarity and accuracy.

In situation (c) the language function is giving directions. In giving directions it is necessary that the pupils be able to manipulate the following structures correctly:

(1) Directives

Example: a) Take the No. 41 bus.
b) Stop opposite the Post Office. Etc.

(a) Prepositions and adverbials of place.

Example: on, under, from, along, opposite, left, right, etc.

Though a third person is involved, reported speech is not required.

It could also be mentioned that the manner in which initial contact is established in opening and closing the channel would be different for the three respective situations as the role-relationships and settings are different.

We see that though the syllabus specifies teaching a particular communicative skill or 'product' and suggests different situations in which the skill could be used, the language teacher has to decide for himself how the context of situation and its

component features (as discussed earlier) will help determine the exact nature of the communicative act.

Thus establishing the roles that the pupils have to play, together with the extra-linguistic features like setting and background would be the first step. Secondly, the language teacher has to consider the language functions which the situation demands. Language functions are what one is able to perform or do via language, such as giving directions, passing on orders, relaying a message, describing a process/procedure, identifying, etc.

Notions are just as important in communicative teaching as the learner will need to give information about something. For example, if the learner has to perform the language function of giving directions then he has to deal with notions of location and distance such as 'near', 'far', 'remote', 'to the north', 'east', etc.

Having established the situation in which the communicative act will occur, together with the language function(s) to be performed and the notions to be expressed, the language teacher must now decide on the linguistic forms or language structures which can be used to perform the communicative act. The teacher has to see that the learner is able to choose the linguistic forms to fit the language function. For the learner to be able to do this, he not only needs a sound grammatical knowledge of the language but a knowledge of the rules of use as discussed earlier.

Though the communicative approach emphasises communicative competence, this does not mean that the language teacher can do away with teaching grammatical structures for the learner has to be able to identify and produce the structures which he needs to use in carrying out the language functions. Language learners will still have to be taught how to manipulate grammatical structures but with a different purpose. They will have to be able to use language grammatically so that they can carry out communicative acts effectively.

However, it is important that the learner is made to realise that not all structures of the same grammatical category perform the same language function; neither does the same language function need always be performed by the same language structure. For example, although the imperative has been often accepted as the form of the code most directly related to the communicative act of ordering, the following utterances as cited by Widdowson (1975:205) carry with them different language functions owing to the different circumstances in which they are spoken.

Consider the following utterances.

1. Go away.
2. Pass the salt, please.
3. Bake the pie in a hot oven.
4. Invest in premium bonds.
5. Forgive us our trespasses.
6. Come to dinner tomorrow.

The first is an order, the second a request, the third an instruction, the fourth could be a piece of advice, the fifth an appeal and the sixth an invitation.

On the other hand, as Widdowson points out, a basic communicative act directing that a package be handled with care could be expressed in a variety of linguistic forms such as the words 'Glass', 'Fragile' or the directive itself, 'Handle with care'.

The rules of use also include a knowledge of the social conditions which must obtain for an utterance to be intended and interpreted as it ought to be. Consider the following exchange.

Hotel receptionist	:	There's a call for you, sir.
Guest	:	I'm in a hurry.
Hotel receptionist:	:	O.K.

The following conditions must obtain before the utterance 'I'm in a hurry' can be interpreted as an order not to transfer the call.

1. Firstly, that it is desirable that the action of not transferring the call be done.

2. Secondly, that the hotel guest has the right to ask the receptionist to do the action.

3. Thirdly, that the receptionist has the obligation to do the action.

4. Fourthly, that the receptionist has the capacity to carry out the action.

It could also be added that in the communicative approach one ought to focus on language which is actually used in everyday communication. Such language is often not 'cohesive' but it can still be coherent, as seen in the exchange quoted above. The meaning comes through once the learner applies his mind to the contextual features of the situation.

Though it is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the teaching strategies which could be used in presenting a lesson using the communicative approach, I would like to touch on a few basic principles which should be considered.

Firstly, a language lesson ought to be planned such that it is made clear to the learner that the communicative skill to be learnt together with the corresponding language structures is to be used for a very definite social purpose. Thus activities such as listening, speaking, reading and writing ought to be shown as social activities which are meaningful and relevant to the learner's experience and world-view. The learner has to be convinced of the authenticity of his addressee and the purpose of the activity he is involved in.

Secondly, since language is used for communication and communication only takes place when the listener/addressee reduces his uncertainty by getting new information, the principle of the information gap ought to be the basis of communicative teaching. To effect communication among learners via the language, teachers should make use of situation and activities where there exists a real need to use the language for the exchange of information and opinion among the learners.

Thirdly, it cannot be overstressed that although the communicative approach to language teaching emphasises the importance of communicative competence, this does not necessarily exclude linguistic competence. Linguistic competence or grammatical knowledge of the language is still essential, the code or language structures to be used being an integral part of the communicative happening.

What is involved in the approach is a shift of emphasis so that learners can match form with function and are able to realise that what controls whether a given sentence

can convey a particular intent is not a set of grammatical rules but a set of conditions which together constitute a rule of use.

Hence for a class of learners who lack grammatical competence, short remedial exercises which focus on structures crucial to carrying out the particular communicative skill set out in the lesson ought to be conducted to prepare the learners for the effective mastery of the communicative skill.

VII. Conclusion

In closing I would like to reiterate the key factors which are important in communicative approaches to language teaching.

1. Communication takes place via language.
2. Communicative teaching involves the teaching of communicative acts which ought to establish the relationship between what is said, what is meant and what actually is done or performed.
3. Language functions and notions are integral to communicative acts, as language is used to communicate our intentions/notions through various functions such as directing, eliciting information, etc.
4. The communicative approach to language teaching is concerned with contextual features, as aspects of the situation/speech event influence both the form and the function of language.
5. A mastery of the code is essential for effective communication to take place as the correct use of linguistic items forms an integral part of the communicative happening.

Universiti Sains Malaya

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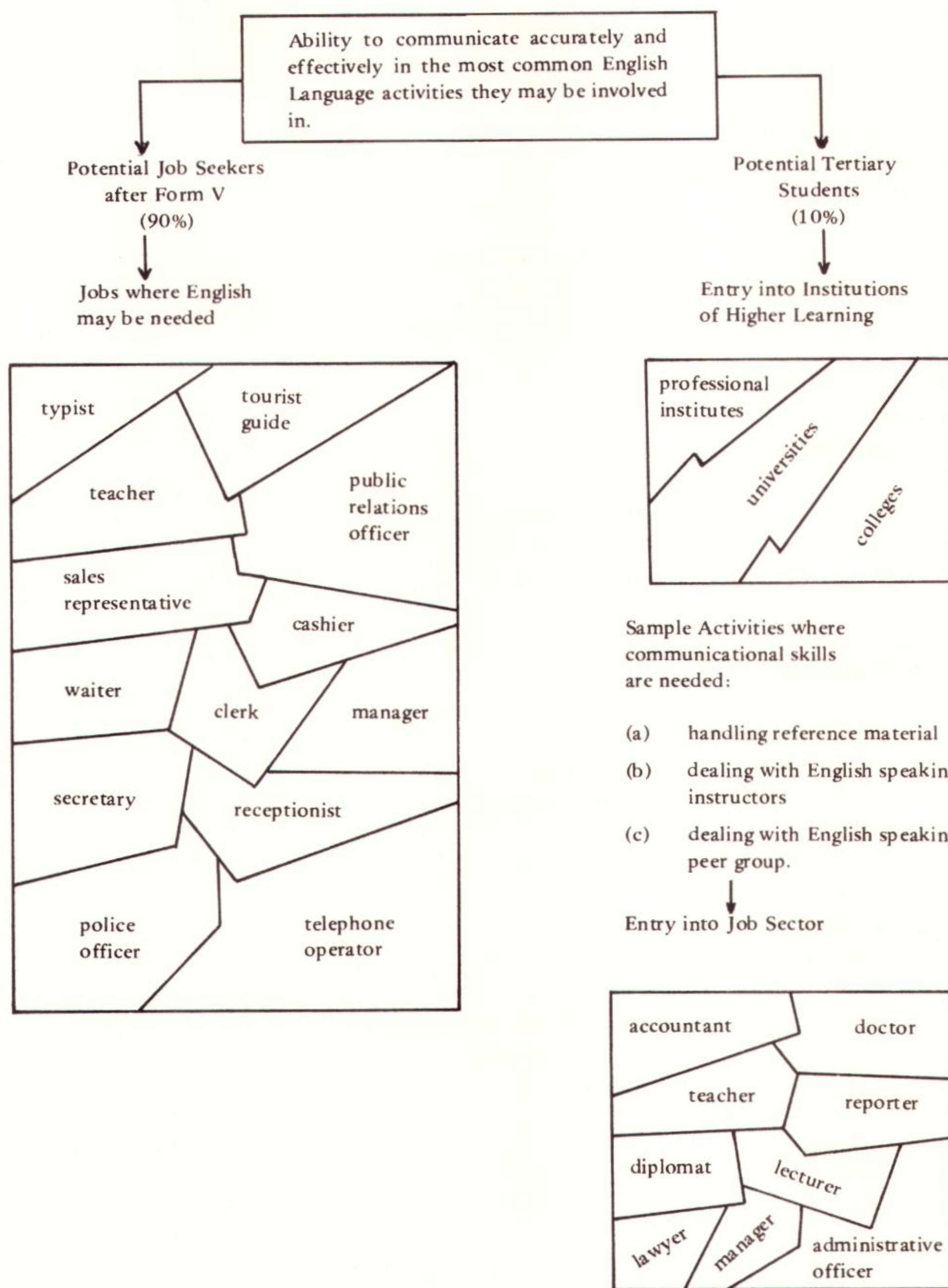
APPENDIX A

INTRODUCTION TO THE SYLLABUS



Resource Book For The English Language Syllabus in Malaysian Schools, Tingkatan IV–V 1979: 10).

DIARY JOTTINGS

if ever now it is,
here, but not a change beyond
the poetry of earth –

this, now,
has to be it, if
anything at all

only maybe better
infinitely
but not utterly other

than here where all's
now temperate
no tropic heat nor glare

as finely now the rain
steadies,
holds, as light fades

there you are,
there, now, even
as you think it:

paradise, this,
of the imaginable
human kind

has to have
a day just like this,
perfect

at the turning
round, ending
in a twilight of

trees–trunks and branches
stilled, listening,
as only

the leaves move,
quivering
to the rain

as the light fades and
you, dinner done,
coffee waiting,

listen to the trees
listening, rapt,
to the falling rain

(immemorial grace lightly
insistent
from a conservative heaven)

Ooi Boo Eng

The Literary Situation in New Zealand (2): Maori/Third-World Literature and European Culture

Norman Simms

Introduction and Definitions

We still hear from time to time people talking about first, second, third, and even fourth world nations as though they were quantitative calculations of cultural value or gross national product, and I have even heard people arguing over whether to rank such-and-such a country as first or second world. The confusion is revealing about how those people think, but irrelevant for our present discussion. We work with these propositions in mind. First, we accept the original notion that while the two worlds of capitalism and socialism struggle in their metaphysical gymnasium for political and economic prestige, there is another world, a third world, composed of recently independent peoples striving for national identity and rectification of imposed underdevelopment after decades, if not centuries, of colonial rule. Whereas the two worlds of communist and capitalist nations are clearly that, blocs of independent nation states, states achieved at least during the past hundred to two hundred years of European romantic notions of what a state is, the countries of the third world, though granted status as legal states, are not yet clearly defined as nations, that is, geographically unified, ethnically and linguistically homogeneous, and ideologically coherent groups of people living under the aegis of a centralized bureaucratic government. While it is true, of course, that even such longterm states as France or Canada still have not achieved *stasis* and coherence, the domination of an intellectual elite in the metropolitan centres think and write with a self-assurance about these matters not to be found in countries where languages are still competing for national status, where ethnic origins are virtually transparent to ideological positions, and where governments fail to achieve security of transference. The third world, as differentiated from the two metropolitan worlds, is stridently nationalistic because its constituent countries are not clearly nation states.

In regard to writing and literature, this kind of definitional situation immediately implies a number of further distinctions. As Chaytor, Ong, McLuhan and others have made us acutely aware in the last two decades, a written literature based on a noetic of fixed texts is the traditional precondition for the emergence of those civil and economic institutions which constitute the nation state; while the rich oral and manuscript cultures of third world countries resonate through other mental and social structures. Ironically, of course, to point the key contradiction, the interference of European states on the historical development of their colonial and exploitative empires came precisely during a period when the basis of the book-based European culture became most ambiguous; or to put it another way, European nations underdeveloped their colonial possessions to serve metropolitan centres which were in the very process of no longer needing or being able to sustain such imperialist structures. The writer in a third-world country, then, finds himself doubly alienated and doubly-bound to a complex intellectual and political situation. Such a writer is, as a writer, alienated from the intrinsic oral and manuscript noetic, or system of knowledge, of his own ethnic, linguistic, and religious people partly because he is a writer, that is, a person who chooses to write rather than speak, and to write towards the impersonal audience of a fixed printed text, the book. He is also alienated from the urge towards coherent nationalism expressed by the political mass of the emergent nation

state because, in the latter part of the twentieth century, such expression tends to manifest itself in what McLuhan and the others would see as a post-book electronic system of knowledge dispersion. Alienation in both these senses is not necessarily a pejorative situation because the distancing created aids the writer in perceiving and articulating currents of feelings and ideas coursing through the upheavals of the nation-creating experience.

The third-world writer is also, as I said, doubly-bound to a complex intellectual and political situation. Not all writers born or living in third-world countries choose or are satisfied with the nationalist demands of their situation, and insofar as their training intellectually was usually under colonialist administrations or in the very metropolitan centres of Europe or North America or the Soviet bloc they may wish, or find themselves unable, to do otherwise than express personal, mystical, or political notions appropriate to settled nation states, where writers need not take up the cause of public expression or overt exercises in national identification. The means for expression is bound up with conditions presupposing what is not yet fully developed in the third world, and the sensitive, imaginative author may be drawn as much to political causes which he feels profoundly as true and necessary parts of the nation's history as to intellectual problems unique to the individual thus alienated. Moreover, because the nation is not secure and its political concerns are manifest determinants of mass taste and governmental policy, whether he wills or not, the third-world writer is judged by these considerations, with even withdrawal to some 'neutral' metropolitan centre a significant element in the profile of his readers' experience.

There is one more point I wish to make in these preliminary statements of definition before we turn to the specific problem of Maori literature within a dominant 'Pakeha' or European culture, and that is the choice of language. Aside from the question of French in Canada or Catalan in Spain, for instance, the metropolitan writer need not be concerned with the choice of language *per se*. Whether Finnish, Danish, or Hungarian, the writer from the relatively stable nation state assumes a sophisticated readership in the language area he addresses himself to in the first instance, secure that his subtle command over its nuances and registers serves the functions of literary communication, and he is also secure in his assumption that translation into one of the major European languages will involve more technical than cultural problems, insofar as nation states tend to be variations on one another, rather than distinctly radical cultural entities. The third-world writer has none of these assumptions. His initial choice of language is fraught with political as well as intellectual implications, involving as much the kind of audience he can expect in terms of class, region, or educational attainment as the complexity or richness of linguistic resonance he can call on. Moreover, to choose a metropolitan language of the former colonial government, while ensuring both an overseas audience and a field of allusionary history, is an overt rejection of particularist and local groups within the emergent nation state, a further distancing from non-literate classes or ethnic groupings within the state, and a loss of traditional allusions and echoes. To choose a regional language or an asserted national language is to restrict potential audiences immediately to the nation itself, and perhaps only to activist elements within it, and to risk a parochialism which will not be sustained as valid within potential translations. Just as pre-national states in Europe were dynamic conglomerations of dialect and regional customary groupings, the complex of areas chosen to be nation states or overlapping such post-colonial boundaries arbitrarily drawn are far from coherent and lack the similarity of variants on a single theme of nationhood shared by the metropolitan countries. On the other hand, of

course, there is one common theme to all third-world writers and it is precisely this dilemma they find themselves in, the theme of the intellectual seeking valid articulation of nationalist aspirations against the particularist tendencies of his own upbringing and the metropolitan ideologies of his craft as writer of books.

The Rise of a National Maori Literature

When we turn to the Maori situation we find that it is not clearly within the parameters of discussion outlined above. There is certainly no Maori nation state in existence, unless one stretched the point to take in The Cook Islands, and no such state contemplated, even by the most radical of 'nationalists'. Rather the attempt today is a three-pronged effort in New Zealand to assert the validity of Maori as a language, to restrict further alienation of Maori land and return as much as possible to tribal control or ownership, and finally a more amorphous attempt to develop Maori perspectives and attitudes within the institutions, formal and informal, of the dominant culture. For this reason, as we shall see, the situation of the Maori writer is multi-valent and he must address himself as much to a Maori audience thinking of itself as Maori as to Maoris who think of themselves as part of the dominant culture and also to the members of the dominant culture who wish at various levels to participate in the Maori experience.

Some history is in order at this point to make the above situation clearer. Though Maori language and culture still function today in New Zealand, the nature of the language and the culture have been severely altered through contact with Europeans. This alteration extends to the still extant – and may I add, still being composed – oral culture, and to the way Maoris perceive themselves and their history. Perhaps because the language, the culture, and the self-perceptions have been so accommodating to the European domination the Maori exists as a distinctive new variant within the superstructures of the European nation. And because the oral tradition has been generally graceful in its transformations, so that it functions today as a key ceremonial articulation of the culture's aspirations, the role of literature as such, that is, fixed-text authorship, is only now beginning to appear as a component of the Maori mentality and the general configuration of New Zealand culture.

Contact between Maori and 'Pakeha' or European probably begins in earnest in the final years of the eighteenth century following Captain James Cook's voyages. Though the actual numbers of Europeans in New Zealand up to the 1830s was extremely small, and usually small transient whalers, sailors, and missionaries, the impact of the meeting between two divergent cultures seems swift, with Maori reception proving to be incisive and selective. Maori societies, generally, were inherently alert, it seems, to the historical problem of adjusting Polynesian customs and perspectives to the colder, harsher, and larger domains of Aotearoa; so that by rite and myth, Maori people were sensitive to the difficulties of change in their environment, the need to confront strangers in elaborate ceremonials of war and friendship, and the strategies of complicated social arrangements. As such, virtually from the first contacts with the 'Pakeha', Maori groups learned the importance of gaining European weapons, the efficiency of settled farming techniques, and the prestige and power of conversion to Christianity. Even before the land wars of the 1860s it was apparent that Maori society had produced leaders and strategic methods of handling the settlers which kept them in effective control over their destinies. The violence of the wars, of course, could not be fully resisted, and huge tracts of land were confiscated for European use, domination of land use and imposition of a money-economy put 'Pakehas' in the ascendant over most of the country, and official policies

for education and legal custom reduced Maori tradition to a subordinate position in the whole of the new national state that was imposed by colonial rule. Nevertheless, both because of the nature of European settlement – led by liberals, reformers, and missionaries appalled by what was going on in Australia – which sought to make what in nineteenth-century terms were gracious accommodations to the Maori as he civilized into a part of the nation and because of the resilience of the Maori culture itself to adjust to the new conditions, the result was that by the opening of the twentieth century New Zealand became a state dominated by European values and institutions but, in varying degrees of reality, including a professed Maori component. Despite condescension and misunderstanding, the Maori culture began to articulate itself as a new sub-national phenomenon called Maoritanga.

MAORITANGA

Maoritanga is a concept which consolidates and normalizes the experience of the many tribal and dialect areas of New Zealand Maoris. It arises towards the end of the nineteenth century and becomes an increasingly major force in the twentieth, particularly in the period since about 1950 when there is a radical shift in the Polynesian population from rural to urban areas. Maoritanga also involves, in its early phase, adaptation of 'Pakeha'-created myths and a new set of generalized singing and dancing styles based on imitations of imported models; and, later on, the creation of a Maori literature written in English as well as in Maori.

Let us go through the main points just mentioned, not as anthropologists or sociologists,[1] but as literary critics concerned with the historical dynamic of an emergent variation on Third-World letters. First, Maoritanga consolidates, normalizes, and develops a discourse of Maori language and thought which is based on European paradigms. The consolidation arises from the fact that, as increasing numbers of Maori people learn their traditions from books rather than by oral instruction in the houses of learning, the records made by Europeans take on primal importance. A few early missionaries, but mostly politicians like Governor George Gray and amateur anthropologists working part-time from government jobs, provide written authority to the Maori people themselves of their new trans-tribal identity. Often trained formally or informally on conceptual bases formed elsewhere in the Pacific or even working towards proof of theories intrinsic to late Victorian racial nationalisms in Europe, these 'Pakeha' authors rarely allowed the voice of their Maori informants to be heard clearly and distinctly. Legends were smoothed out, in order to suppress tribal or regional distinctions. A sense of novelistic narrative consistency was imposed on saga and myth, while concern for individual personality altered the configuration of exemplary figures in Maori history. Most significantly, as recent studies have shown, three main myths were imposed on all Maori people, so much so that it is only with difficulty that any Maori will himself come to accept the recent Europeanized origins of these defining image-structures. One is the myth of the Great Fleet, a deliberate voyage of settlement from the otherworld homeland of Hawaiki, in which the ancestors of the present Maori tribes arrive in thirteen canoes, make landfall at particular points around the coastline, and engage in a generation of exploration and homesteading. Consolidated from a diversity of conflicting and fragmentary local legends, the current myth postulates a form of Maori settlement that precedes European arrival with parallel instances. It also stresses a chronological and progressive view of historical event by ignoring traditional modes of simultaneity and mythical fluidity of event. Part of this myth postulates, as well, the grounds for justifying European alienation of the land and

cultural dominance. Before the Great Fleet one or perhaps two early Polynesian explorers in the ninth and twelfth centuries touched New Zealand but did not report that there was a primeval primitive folk already in occupation, the Moriori. When the Fleet arrived, the early groups had to defeat, kill off or absorb this aboriginal group; hence, the Maoris have no more right to the land than any other conqueror – to the victor belongs the spoils! Moreover, Europeans have been far more just and gentle in their conquest than the Maoris were to the savage folk they found in Aotearoa.

The second myth that Maoris seem to have accepted as part of their new concept of themselves as a nation rather than a disparate conglomerate of tribal groups and sub-groups is the notion of intellectual and racial superiority. Arising from Victorian obsessions with race, the European writers at the turn of the century were anxious to prove that the Maori were closer to white Europeans than to coloured Islanders, certainly not African or Melanesian, and perhaps even one of the lost tribes of Israel. This myth includes some fatuous theories of migration from Egypt by circumnavigation, direct routes through southeast Asia, and strange journeys from Latin America. More incisively, the myth purports that the Maori, despite cannibalism and constant warfare, even with their slaves and their hierarchical social structure, were at best genuine Noble Savages: they had an esoteric religion which was Christian in all but name and once released from technological isolation they possessed generous, liberal, and perceptive souls. Hence, the task of civilizing the Maori was both a reminder of the past stripped of its gross barbarism and a polishing of a rude exterior. Intermarriage was and remains a basic premise of New Zealand relations between Europeans and Maori. Maori people tend to accept this but add, as many would-be Maori Europeans encourage them to, that there is a mystical kernel of Maori experience that contains a fine essence of spirit Europeans would do well to emulate–something the burden of modern technology has effaced from the 'Pakeha' soul.

Third is the myth of the soul, the belief that the heart of Maoritanga is a love of traditional land, the place where ancestors lie buried, dead but still part of the present. While this is part of a complex of beliefs certainly intrinsic to classic and archaic Maori tradition, the modern version derives from English customary usage concerning land-usage and the evidence acceptable in the Maori land-courts set up by government to adjudicate boundary disputes, ownership, and questions of sale and alienation. The myth regularizes tribal beliefs making them accommodate to European legal and economic book-keeping, with consequences for co-ordinating *whakapapa* or ancestor lists to chronological sequence and other smoothening modifications of traditional modes of discourse. Further, I would suggest, that this stress on the soil as sacred and the Maori's primal concern for attachment to the land leads to a devaluation of Maori intellectual dynamic and variability, an excuse for perversions such as 'They are a happy people, have no regard for time, and cannot buckle down to necessary budgets for living', and a rationale for diverting attention from key political and social issues. Not that land is unimportant, but the desire to retain tribal ownership of the land is no more unique to the Maoris than to any other agricultural people.

What is important for our discussion, however, is not the political validity, even the historical accuracy of the myths referred to, but their impact on the creation of a new mentality of the Maori as a nation seeking recognition within the structures of the New Zealand state. These three myths give the Maori people a common history and claim on the land, a pattern of thought and belief which is coherent and recognizably admirable in European eyes (particularly those Maori eyes which have learned to read in state or church schools), and a self-image as a people who stand out from their more primitive

neighbours in the Pacific Islands. All too often, woefully ignorant of any alternatives to the bland second-rate colonialism of the dominant English model around them, Maoris and their 'Pakeha' supporters promote as unique qualities of life and custom which are merely the general characteristics of any close-knit community, any traditional folk, whether European peasants, Jews in the ghetto, or Trobriand Islanders. *Aroha* or love as a communal bond, respect for elders, flexibility of family ties, affection for the physical landscape – all these are characteristics of the Maori because he is a member of a small traditional culture and not of the 'Pakeha' because he is a suburban worker infectiously part of a consumer-oriented welfare state.

Before we go on to explore the implications of these myths for some of the literature that has started to emerge from Maori writers, whether in English or Maori, we need to turn to the ways in which Maoritanga has articulated itself in the past fifty to eighty years in terms if not dictated by at least copied from European books.[2] In no way, of course, does what follows imply a diminution of the quality or value of what has been created. But it is important to note that when, today, Maoris gather for entertainment, whether on a *marae* or in a school hall they are singing songs in a melodic and harmonic structure derived from European models, as much hymns as recruiting songs as current commercial pop-songs, and voicing sentiments first found amongst those leaders of the integrationist movements of the pre-World War I era that advise pride in race, deliberate learning of European technology, and personal emotions that may contradict strict tribal etiquette. Sung and danced to imported guitars, the new genres of action-song and lyric utilize gestures that the leaders of the Maoritanga group brought home from travels to Hawaii and other Polynesian states. The gestures and rhythms have been regularized, with men and women participating, more to extol pedagogical and trans-tribal values than to celebrate traditional values and interests of local groups. Rarely does one hear or see songs and *haka* (dances) of the pre-contact period, except on highly sacred occasions, such as *tangi* or funerals. For the most part, the discourse of Maoritanga is not traditional but creatively modern. Songs today are written by university and high-school teachers for particular occasions at which student parties are invited to perform.[3] The latest American or British melodies are mined for material, and the results are often superior, at least in poetic content, to the originals; so that very much the voice of Maoritanga is a melodic and lyrical one, but a Maori voice singing imported tunes in a style less than a hundred years old.

More important than whether the tunes are old or young, the words are in Maori, and that means that the past several generations of Maori people have known their language in only two places. In this rich field of entertainment genres are mingled emotive appeals to personal love and public messages on the values of tribal loyalty, love of the land, respect for elders, and the consolidated, novelized myths and legends we have mentioned before. The other occasion on which Maori is used is at the *hui*, the ceremonial gathering on a *marae*: occasions in which elders preside and the contours of formal etiquette are observed. Here, in addition to some classical and archaic songs heard or alluded to, the primal discourse is that of oratory. Yet even the eldest of the elders, men in their seventies or eighties, are Maoris who grew up long past contact times and well into the advent of Maoritanga as an articulate discourse; at best their direct knowledge of pre-contact culture is second or third hand. The reality is that Maoritanga today is as valid as confirmation by living elders and their recollection of instruction from their elders can make it. When they deliver speeches on the *marae* their language and allusions are only partly to the classical and archaic culture. By classical we mean the Maori songs and legends, as well as social structures, as they existed during the contact period, from

the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries; and by archaic, we mean those songs, customs, and legends reflecting earlier periods, even those purportedly remembered from the time of the settlement or prior to that in Hawaiki. Significantly, these recollections exist in a language filled with archaicisms, words found nowhere else. More often, the oratory of the elders is that honed in Christian sermons and political speeches by the great leaders of the Maoritanga foundation period.[4] Books printed between 1880 and 1902 seek to provide authority to Maori history, myth, and legend, rather than the diversity of particularist interests, though certain groups, like the Tuhoe, resist more than others. Though the patterns of ceremony and speech-making are traditional now, they are regularized and simplified or rationally elaborated versions of what can be found described in early or mid-nineteenth century accounts.

Maoritanga stresses respect for these customs and for the elders who perform and instruct in them. The *kaumata* and *kuia*, the old men and old women, of today are often children of the activists of the past, are certainly persons who are literate if not always articulate in English, and who are Christians, retired participants in the dominant culture of the European. Hence they speak from within a Maori nation which finds its physical and social parameters, and much of its spiritual beliefs, set by European standards. I stress this because the emergence of a Maori literature is not a leap from unadulterated oral tradition to writing but a crystallization of mentality shaped by over a hundred years of intellectual and emotional interaction.

There is also a substantial tradition now of writing in Maori as well. But only recently, as we shall shortly show, is there a literary tradition in writing. From almost the beginning of European contact, there have been Maori writers, men and women who write letters, write speeches to be delivered to government agencies, and those who write for their own families the elaborated *whakapapa* which explain the geneological lists necessary to sustain land and other rights in the white man's world. Sermons and manuals of piety, dreambooks and other popular works appeared in Maori. Nevertheless, by and large the discourse of Maoritanga remained oral, but oral with a difference. And this difference has proved and still proves a stumbling block to the full maturation of the Maori nation as such.

Not to sound like a condescending colonialist, I use the word 'mature' not in racialist terms, but to cover only the concept of nationalism, which belongs intrinsically to such an organic metaphor of development. Within a dominant book-based European culture, the Maori people have shifted away from an oral noetic, from a system of knowledge based on the techniques and pedagogies of orality. As I have mentioned, their basic myths and legends, their concept of imaging themselves and their vital belief in *aroha*, in *Io* or Jesus, or in entertaining and comforting one another in times of stress are a Maori version of European book-based materials. Churchmen, politicians, and teachers provide written authority to Maoritanga, and the performance of action-songs and haka, the oratory on the *marae*, and the casual anecdotes of daily life reflect this written base. Because of this, the low attainment of Maori children in schools with the consequent low attainment in the workplace keep the Maori people at the bottom of the economic ladder in New Zealand society; the myths we have spoken of, while they can create a sense of valid self-definition that, by virtue of its special connections with pre-contact Maori society, properly distinguishes the Maori nation as distinct from the 'Pakeha',at the same time fuels the prejudices and inequalities of the dominant culture and reinforces Maori children's sense of alienation from the values and rewards of the European system. In short, by deliberate and unconscious means, the European society has created a situation, which too many Maori people acquiesce to, in which the illiteracy of the Maori people's

struggle to come to grips with a modern society based on intellectual principles is misnamed traditional oracy, in which nineteenth-century racially-inspired myths are used to restrain Maori ambition and imagination, and in which the whole difficult problem of urbanizing a rural people is overlooked in terms of pseudo-mystical notions of love of land and the sanctity of language structures. So long as the majority of the Maori people lived in rural areas and were subject to the hierarchical etiquette of elders on the *marae*, the oral discourse of Maoritanga, acting as a buffer between a lost but affectionately imitated oral heritage of self-definitions and a dominant but not hostilely intrusive 'Pakeha' culture, could sustain most people. Since the 1950s, however, with more and more Maori people living in the towns and cities of New Zealand, and with a larger number educated to European-based intellectualism, the need for a written discourse becomes evident, and so we see today the development of a literature – verse and prose – in both English and Maori which addresses itself not to the articulation of Maoritanga but to the problematic existence of such a nationalism within the nation-state of New Zealand.

Maori Literature Today

Looking through the Maori material written over the past thirty years, it strikes me that generally there are three main concerns[5]. This is true for the verse as well as the prose, at least since we are discussing only those works meant to be read, thus open as much to European as Maori audiences, and not those intended for oral performance at a Maori entertainment or ceremonial occasion. The first concern, bridging the gaps between the kind of refractive oracy described above, is nostalgic: a description and celebration of Maori customs, points of view, and characters. In lyrics, it may be seen as the rewriting of traditional modes, such as in several of Hone Tuwhare's poems that begin by being paraphrases of material he finds in the standard anthologies of traditional Maori verse; or in lamentations by writers such as Katerina Mataira for the loss of the land.

In prose, we can find it in stories which describe comical incidents, such as Patricia Grace's 'The Dream' *(Waiariki,* Longman Paul 1975) in which a young man tries to discover the symbolic meaning of his vision in order to place a bet on the horses, or Katerina Mataira's sentimental 'Home Away from Home' *(Contemporary Maori Writing,* ed. M. Orbell, Wellington 1974), in which the virtues of *aroha* are depicted, a story ending with the characteristic line 'They felt again the warmth of the Maori home'. More explicit even are the lines in Rora Paki's tale 'Roll Back the Years' *(Contemp. Maori Writing,* ed. Orbell):

> That night I was on the all-night sleeper, heading south. Next morning I saw all the old familiar landmarks come into view and I was filled with nostalgia . . .

In other stories, a character returns to his home village, and though he cannot understand the language, feels comforted just to listen to the others speaking in Maori. Such tales tend to look backwards, characters recalling their childhood or travelling home for funerals, or some other semi-mystical impulse of return. Occasionally, as in the Mataira tale referred to, there is a realization, in the midst of the confusion or squalor of the present, that a Maori essence is at work and it eclipses the sense of inadequacy caused by trying to measure one's life by European standards.

A second major concern is similar to nostalgia but has a more active function. It can be seen in the words which follow on from the opening lines of Rora Paki's story cited above. It is the concern of the journey back:

But my journey took me further on, to the place where my dear old relative was lying in state; and for the next day or so I was caught up in the ritual of a tangi and funeral, and met many dear folk that I had not seen for long years.

The journey back, best exemplified in Witi Ihimaera's novel *Tangi* (Heinemann 1973), involves several sub-themes that are common to many contemporary Maori writings. There is the journey itself, either by car, train, or plane, which provides a progressive narrative frame for the story, and which may if desired be used to hang flashbacks and exemplary digressions on to. The journey is backwards in time as well as in place, and it takes the protagonist from life in the dominant society back to the space of traditional values. Once there, having been prepared usually by the disequilibrium of grief for the passing of a loved one, the protagonist comes under the influence of the Maori spirit. The rituals, the legends, and the sheer physical presence of relatives and friends pressing on him cause changes in the course of his life, even if only temporarily. Thus this major concern is distinct from nostalgia in illustrating the inner dynamic or perhaps the mystical force of Maoritanga in controlling people's lives. The mystical force may inhere in things as well, as we see in Ihimaera's story of 'Pounamu, Pounamu' *(Pounamu, Pounamu,* Heinemanm 1973), the ancient heirloom of his family, a greenstone *mere* that emanates a heat and compulsive power, convincing the young hero of the authority of the legends he has heard. In Patricia Grace's novel, *Mutuwhenua* (Longman Paul 1978), a young girl married to a European husband, finds she cannot live in a house built on an ancient burial ground, and tries to explain to her husband the aura of things that Maoris believe in, a sense of a *mauri* or life force that must be respected. Luckily, she has a liberal husband – a good Pakeha – and he respects her beliefs, fumblingly articulated as they are; so that her journey back, with him, is also a journey forward to a new kind of accommodation to the dominant culture.

That brings us to the final major concern I see in contemporary Maori writing, and that is the problem of intermarriage and integration with the Europeans of New Zealand. Certainly, in the past fifty or more years, one of the key aspects of writing about the Maori by 'Pakeha' writers has been this erotically-sensitive question of 'mesalliance'. Maori writers have tended not to focus on the erotic elements, and usually not to sensationalize at all, but because this is something so central to the fears and misapprehensions of the European majority the results in Maori literature have been less than successful. Grace's *Mutuwhenua,* for instance, works only because the white husband is passive and generous: he had grown up in a small rural community, close to Maoris, and accepted unquestioningly his wife's vague, hesitant remarks about the spiritual forces that must be respected.

Yet the question of integration is not always touched with the sensitivity of sexual relations. Ihimaera's *Tangi* not only has the young hero Tama deciding to give over his career in a government office in Wellington to pick up his family responsibilities in the rural village on the East Coast, but recalls in flashbacks his parents' struggle to live within the strictures of 'Pakeha'-dominated society. The tales in Ihimaera's last collection of stories *The New Net Goes Fishing* (Heinemann 1977) cover the life time of a young man from the time his parents move into the city until he decides he can make his own compromise between Maoritanga and the European lifestyle. Some stories treat the difficulties comically and some look at them nostalgically, with tears ready to gush to solve the unsolvable, but none yet, in my opinion, has given a sustained mature treatment, such as, for example, the Samoan writer Albert Wendt in his latest novels.

Before I conclude, I would like to indicate some other tendencies or themes in Maori writing, none of them yet major currents, but which strike me as holding out the pos-

sibility of mature development. One is an approach to the feelings and customs of Maoritanga itself, not as anthropologist or sociologist, but as poet. This means exploring the experience of Maori custom and belief, the very material that, say, Anne Salmond treats in her scientific study of Maori celebratory occasions, *Hui:* (A.H. & A. W. Read 1975/76); or others in their analyses of the place of women, of funerals, of pharmacology and so on. A leading effort in this direction was done by George C. Howe, writing under his Maori name as Huruata, in a volume of verse called *Pataka: Storehouse* (of Knowledge) (Hamilton: Outrigger Publishers 1979). In rather pedestrian verse, Huruata writes for his sons and the children of friends rhymed versions of legends, but more significantly directions on what to look at, what to feel, and what to do on the *marae* and in various particularly Maori situations. If of no particularly literary merit as yet, this kind of creative poetry does offer insight into those aspects of Maoritanga that other writers leave to vague implication and cloying allusion to mystical forces.

Another trend, not very common yet, though likely to lead in dangerous directions unless done with control and knowledge, is protest verse, a kind of complaining polemical verse that adopts the stridency of American beat and hippy poetry of some years ago, but still popular amongst young poets in New Zealand. At its best, we can see this verse in the collections of Hone Tuwhare, and only occasionally with flashes of imagination in Apirana Taylor. In effect, this is the kind of relevancy which, quickly leaving the Maori tradition, becomes simply minority protest in English with some Maori allusions.

The last trend that I wish were more prevalent is that of the Maori narrative. This kind of writing deals with historical or current Maori rural people in a sustained realism. Unlike nostalgia writing, the attempt here is to depict as self-enclosed the space of Maori mentality; it avoids the clash with European standards and does not require the journey back since it is already there. There is one historical novel written by a Maori that I know of: *Behind the Tattooed Face* by Heretaunga Pat Baker recounts a tribal war on the eve of Captain Cook's landfall. Though somewhat sensational – as in the opening scene where prisoners are sacrificed to the building of a new fortified village *(pa)* by being placed under the sharpened pallisades driven into the earth, or in accounts of rape, homosexuality, and cannibalism – Baker nevertheless attempts to depict a world which is totally Maori. Of course, the whole conception of the narrative is redolent with European generic preconceptions, and the text is in English so that the illusion of Maoriness is precisely that throughout. At a higher level of narrative skill and with a more genuine sensitivity to the Maori soil is the long story 'Hera' by Apirana Taylor *(Pacific Quarterly* IV 2, 1979) which tells of an old Maori woman's attempt to climb a mountain and catch an eel. Like Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea,* 'Hera' belies its own simple structures, and becomes a marvellous depiction of Maori character. The mysterious spirits of the world, in the eel and the birds which shriek around the action, arise as inevitable parts of the landscape, and Taylor need not belabour the special qualities of Maori perspective. He depicts them in English and in a narrative frame belonging to a book-based culture.

Finally, to end this very brief survey, I would like to point to two plays, so far unpublished, by Rowley Habib. While they deal with themes we have already shown as current in Maori literature, Habib breaks new ground in two ways. One is in creating a Maori drama, as there is no traditional genre even approaching the theatre in Maoritanga, unless we counted action songs; and this allows for Maoritanga in the literary sense to move away from books, where most Maoris will not read it, to the stage and to television, where it will have a greater impact than all the works we have mentioned so far. Second is that drama is an oral literary form, and stands as a discourse more flexible in imitating the traditions of traditional oral culture. Thus in Habib's first play, *The Death of the Land,* a

trial scene is presented as superimposed by ghosts, oratorical customs, and the cohesive force of *aroha.* In the next play, *The Gathering,* a tangi is held in a slum apartment, and the journey home, nostalgia, and integration themes all interweave in one sustained dramatic image.

Conclusion

Through writers such as Witi Ihimaera, Patricia Grace, Apirana Taylor, and Katerina Mataira, Maori literature is beginning to have an independent voice, a national voice of its own within New Zealand writing. It is a voice that articulates the discourse of Maoritanga, and though that is the product of Maori leaders making something new from European models and the echoes of the Maori past, it is a valid national voice. With Maori language still alive and functioning, but increasingly only within the creative realm of song and dance, and especially as the ceremonial occasion for those times when, from their diverse roles in European-dominated society, Maori people come together to mourn and affirm their identity as Maori, the English language literature that now is emerging is a distinct national entity. Though in English so often, it not only uses many Maori words – to the point often of becoming a form of macaronic text – but also allusions to legends and myths specific to Aotearoa, and it is national in the sense that it addresses itself to issues vital to the concerns of the Maori people and in frames of reference specifically their own. If it has a burden of polemical nationalism it is not directed to the founding of a new national state, but to the adjustment of the dominant culture to the reality of one of its constituent elements: the dynamic entity embodied in Maori writing.

Hamilton, New Zealand.

NOTES

[1]See for what follows, M.P.K. Sorrenson, *Maori Origins and Migrations: The Genesis of Some Pakeha Myths and Legends.* Auckland: Auckland and Oxford University Presses, 1979; also David P. Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition: Quest for a Chimera* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 100–104.

[2]This is discussed in greater detail in the final chapter "Changing Styles" of Barry Mitcalfe, *Maori Poetry: The Singing Word* (Wellington: Price Milburn for Victoria University Press, 1974), pp. 172–196. For more traditional Maori poetry, see the introduction and notes to Margaret Orbell, *Maori Poetry: An Introductory Anthology* (Auckland: Heinemann Educational Books, 1978).

[3]These modern songs and dances are occasionally to be found in tourist-oriented pamphlets and song-books. Many are the stock-in-trade of popular record albums sold in tourist and curio shops.

[4]Translations of some nineteenth-century political speech-making, sermons, and letter-writing may be found in John Caselberg, *Maori is my Name* (1976).

[5]Cf. Norman Simms, "Maori Literature in English: An Introduction," *World Literature Today* (1978) 223–228.

Reunion

When I left this village, I didn't dare think of the day when I would be back again. Then my little boy was crying. Perhaps he was hungry, or perhaps it was because his mother was leaving him with a strange pig-farmer's wife. I'll never know why. Now I didn't want to think of the little girl I had left the night before. I had patted her to sleep and she had held on to my thumb in her usual way, so that I wouldn't be able to go away without waking her up. I hoped my aunt wouldn't tell her that I had forgotten all about her. My aunt sometimes had a sharp tongue, although she was a kind woman, and would sometimes say things she didn't mean, often just to tease a child.

That aunt had met me at the Ampang Street bus station, four or five years ago now, when my ears were still full of my baby's cries. She told me how lucky I was. Nobody would have agreed to employ somebody like me if I hadn't been the relation of an old and trusted servant. I was to remember this and was not to behave like a fool again. I knew she was right and remained silent, and this pleased my aunt. She liked others to keep quiet while she talked. 'Behave yourself, do your duty, and nobody will be unkind to you.' I had done what I was told and found that she had spoken the truth.

I approached the little house and could smell the pigs. There were a few children running around in their bare feet and they crowded round me, staring at me. One of the oldest ran to find his mother, the woman I was looking for. I tried to pick out my son, but none of them looked like him. They were all dark-skinned and dirty. Then I saw the woman coming round from her vegetable patch at the back of the house. We knew each other straightaway although we had both changed, each in her own way. She'd had more children since, I could see that. She motioned the way to her house, and I followed her, neither of us saying a word. Like me, she had never been one for many words, I remember, and that had been one reason why I'd placed my boy with her. I'm sure my aunt would not have recommended her if she had been talkative. Her husband was still feeding the pigs and would not be in till long after I had gone away with my son.

She made a cup of ovaltine for me and put it on the oil-cloth on the table. I pulled out a stool from under the table and sat down while she sat in a chair opposite me. An older girl unfastened a baby from her back and brought it to her mother, who started feeding it. Then I saw my son. He was rough-featured but, like my pretty little girl, fair-skinned. He was mine. I too am fair-skinned. That is my one beauty. What would he think, I wondered, if I showed him the toys that I had brought with me? But not here, not in front of the others. I noticed that this woman had many sons. The gods are very strange in granting their favours. To those like ourselves, they often send sons. I thought of my pretty mistress and her longing to have a son. Had it been my fault?

She was a helpless little thing, my mistress, and should have had her baby before I arrived, according to my aunt's calculations. My aunt had nursed her from babyhood and handled her easily. Even the master was a bit afraid of my aunt. It was my aunt's idea that I should go to the temple to make daily offerings to Goon Yam, the Goddess of Mercy, so that the mistress would have a baby boy and recover quickly. I knew my aunt had worked out in her own way that the baby would be a boy, and since she knew that she would be looking after the mistress herself and that there would be no danger, this was her way of ensuirng that I would be accepted by the other servants when the Goddess granted those favours to the family. I was glad to do whatever I could to please my aunt and the family, though I wondered at my aunt, sending somebody as unworthy as myself to make offerings for such important favours. As I watched the incense papers curling up in the low pagoda-shaped open furnace in the courtyard of the temple, I

counted the years that could separate me from my own baby. Was it my fault that our mistress had a baby girl instead? It was a beautiful baby, but it was not a boy. My mistress wept, but she said that I had done my duty and she would not blame me. My aunt was furious with me. I was a good-for-nothing, and would probably be sent packing, as I deserved to be. But the other half of my prayers had been answered, for the young mistress recovered in a few weeks' time, with my aunt's nursing, and my crime was overlooked even by my aunt, who bustled around the mistress, whipping up almost as much adverse wind around her as she succeeded in keeping out with blankets and wraps. I was sorry for the mistress, but I was quite glad to become the wet-nurse of a little girl instead of a little boy, who would have reminded me too much of my own baby. She was given to me to suckle within a week of my arrival. Then after she had stopped needing a wet-nurse, I was kept on as her nurse. I didn't know then what years of looking after her would do to me. Still, nobody can love another child better than their own.

My ovaltine was getting cold. The woman was saying something to me. She wasn't being inhospitable, but she wanted me to leave as soon as I could, so that we could both get it over with. She knew I had come to take her boy, my boy, away with me. He was holding the little baby's thumb while it sucked at his mother's breast. In a few minutes, he would be reunited with me, away from all this, and we would be able to start our new life together. He would not have to share what little I could give him with all these dirty little children. He would be better off. My mistress had given me enough to start a little stall of my own, and I had saved enough to send him to school one day. He would be able to help me at my stall after school. One day he would be able to see for himself that I was only taking him away for his own good. Now it might be a little painful, but children always forget. Then one of the younger ones fell down and started crying. My son ran to him and said, 'Here, come to your big brother.' The little toddler stretched up his arms to my son and my son lifted him up clumsily, patting him to calm him down. 'It's all right,' I said to the woman, 'I'm going away now, and I'll keep sending you some money every month.' She didn't say a word, but went on feeding her baby while I walked away from the smell of her home and her village.

I have now given up the idea of starting my own stall. A friend of my aunt's has found me a job in a place that makes paper things for offering to the dead, next door to a coffin shop, in a little town miles away from my little girl. I earn enough to send some money every month to my aunt, over and above all my other expenses. My young mistress would always welcome me back, but I'm not going back there again either. And nothing will ever induce me to marry and have children.

. . . .

Everybody called my nurse Ah Gau because she was the ninth child in her family. I called her Gau Chieh. She had always been there ever since I could remember. I knew her smell, and the feel of her cool, pale skin, so unlike the colouring of the rest of the servants. Then one day she vanished. When I saw her again, after I'd been at school for five or six years, she was married and had three boys of her own. She was much stricter with them than she had ever been with me. My mother's old nurse, whom I called Poh Poh, although she was not my grandmother, had come with us on holiday to Ipoh. In those days there were still twenty-eight miles of winding road before you reached Slim River. Poh Poh took me to see Gau Chieh. They were related in some way. Mama had given Poh Poh some money and presents for Gau Chieh and her children. I noticed that when the youngest boy, a baby, held up his arms to be carried in the way that I had often

done in the past, Gau Chieh took no notice at all. I would have been very annoyed. Also, she let her children open up peanut shells for themselves instead of doing it for them and popping the peanuts into their mouths.

Her hair was different. One of my earliest memories was watching her do up her hair. She used to have hair down to her waist, and every morning, while I lay on our bed, after she'd got up, I would watch her combing her hair with an old bone comb. She always sat on the floor in front of the window, with one leg stretched out. She had a complicated way of holding one end of her long black hair between the big toe and the second toe of the stretched-out foot, while she combed and plaited the taut hair into a thick rope. She then tied it up neatly with a short length of red silk thread, and packed her comb and pins away in a small tin which she put together with her clothes. By then the room smelt of her hair oil. Next she would come to our bed to wash and dress me, and I would put up my arms to be lifted up and crooned to. I thought her repeated 'oy oy, oy oy' as she rocked me the most musical sounds in the whole world. Now her short hair was permed rather frizzily, and she looked quite strange. She didn't look more like Mama and her friends, who also had permed hair. They somehow looked right with their permed hair, playing mahjong, but Gau Chieh looked odd with her permed hair. I suppose it was partly because I had never seen Mama and her friends with a single plait down their backs before. Nor could I ever imagine it.

Gau Chieh had also changed her black trousers and blue jacket for an ordinary samfu, and this made me almost too shy to look at her. I wondered if she even used make-up these days. I used to be able to jump up and down on her without her ever saying 'don't'. Maybe black didn't show the dirt? I wondered if her sons were allowed to jump up and down on her lap. Of course I wouldn't have done the same thing on Mama's lap, so maybe they didn't either.

I wondered if she still went to the temple to burn incense papers. One of the things that I had enjoyed most was being taken to the temple where she had to make all sorts of offerings on Mama's behalf. Against one of the outside walls of the temple was a golden-green coconut tree, and the late afternoon sun filtered more gold through those leaves, to blaze against the white-washed wall. I would hold on to Gau Chieh's hand and jump up and down with joy at nothing in particular. It was enough to be together. There was a beautiful gold-fish pond in the courtyard, with steps leading down to a stone edging round the pond, surrounded by a pretty walk. I used to be allowed to sit on the edge of the pond watching the gold-fish swimming round and round while Gau Chieh bought whatever she needed from the woman who sat behind the counter at the entrance of the temple. I couldn't fall in as there was a piece of wire-netting covering the pond. On feast days I was given pink and purple rice-cakes, which I shared with the fish when no one was looking, dropping bits of cake in between the meshes of the netting. Then she would call me, and I would go round the whole temple with her while she put joss-sticks into large shining urns and poured oil into a small red lamp high up in a tiny niche in a dark corner of the temple. Sometimes I had to kneel on a small cushion for a while. I felt hungry then because I could smell the roast chicken and roast pork that people had brought and placed before the gods, and these smells were all mixed in with the incense and joss-sticks. In after years when I thought of Gau Chieh, those smells used to come back, together with the smell of her particular brand of hair-oil.

But the final climax of our visit to the temple was when she lit a cunningly-arranged pile of incense papers with a burning joss-stick placed near the entrance of the temple. I had to keep out of the way at this point. Then she would carry it deftly, the flame getting bigger and fiercer every passing moment, towards the open furnace, which was shaped

like a pagoda. Once it was safely in, she would let me run to her, hold her hand, and watch the flames rising higher and higher as they crept round each layer of incense paper. 'Can you count?' she used to say. 'See if you can tell me how many layers of paper are left.' After she left us, I sometimes went with Poh Poh to the temple, but I would wander off to the gold-fish pond whenever it was time for her to feed the incense papers into that furnace. I couldn't bear to watch the incense papers burning.

It was a rather boring visit, and I felt embarrassed about not feeling more enthusiastic about Gau Chieh and her children. Gau Chieh asked me how I was doing at school and how my parents were. Poh Poh talked about all sorts of things while we listened. Now and then, when one of the boys started making a noise to attract her attention, Gau Chieh absent-mindedly reached out to smack him. I wonder now if I had really missed her that morning when I woke up and found that she wasn't sitting in front of the window combing her hair, although I thought the smell of hair oil was there in the room. That was another thing. She no longer smelt of hair oil. Perhaps hair oil didn't go with permed hair. I remember I had looked for her tin with her hair things in it when they told me she'd gone home to look after her nephew. Home? I'd always thought her home was with us. But when I found that the tin had gone I knew that even Poh Poh wasn't merely teasing me. That day Mama let me build towers with her chips during mahjong, something I wasn't allowed to do normally because it brought bad luck to the player. I pretended to enjoy myself just to please Mama.

And now Gau Chieh had moved again, into another home with her husband and family. Her husband was not there. He made coffins in Gopeng. Poh Poh had pointed out the shop to me in a side street as our taxi went up the High Street in Gopeng. I could just make out the relentless shapes of two carved coffins casually sticking out on to the pavement on the shopfront, surrounded by wood-shavings, as we passed that street. So I didn't see Gau Chieh's husband. I was quite glad not to as I wasn't sure whether to call him Lau Goh or Lau Sook. Should he be regarded as a kind of brother or as a kind of uncle? However, I'd never held anything against him since I'd always known that he hadn't been the cause of Gau Chieh's sudden disappearance.

And now I was very glad I wasn't going to live with Gau Chieh in Tambun. It was a relief when Poh Poh rose to go at last. It sounded absurd, but somehow not unexpected, when Gau Chieh said to Poh Poh as we were all standing up, 'She's much taller than when I last saw her.' On the way back to Ipoh, I knew that Poh Poh would point out the coffin shop again. I looked out automatically and saw the same two coffins, now seen from another angle, still surrounded by the wood-shavings. I idly wondered how those shavings would look if they were burning in that open furnace. Would they also layer as they burnt?

Siew-Yue Killingley

Singapore/Malaysian Poetry:

At Least Something And Less And More

(Part 2)

Ooi Boo Eng

If poetry, apart from exceptional instances, is perception and feeling in language with the quick of life in it, and if this means a commitment to writing in the idiom of a living speech – or, at any rate, in a language whose inner cut and thrust or gesture and pulse are likely to survive the changes which its outward forms may undergo in the course of time – then it must be said that in this general sense at least Shirley Lim, Lee Tzu Pheng and Edwin Thumboo have achieved poetry in *Crossing the Peninsula, Prospect of a Drowning* and *Ulysses by the Merlion* respectively. They write of today, this century -- of 'May 1954'; of the Regional English Language Centre where 'our languages have a home,/ Discover themselves, root and bole' *(Ulysses,* pp. 14, 20); of the poet's self realizing itself in the affirmation of an adult-and-child (niece) relationship: 'So for this time,/as long as you need/an arm about you when the dreams come,/I will be here' *(Prospect,* p. 36); or of the poet's self as at the time of writing, acknowledged for its authenticity, unattractive as it is: 'Smoke covers me: my skin is stained/Chinese yellow; my teeth are rust;/My hair is foul with ash' *(Crossing,* p. 74). Or they write *from* today, looking back, of the past – of a Singapore past and gone or fast disappearing but rendered in the present tense of a picture-frame existence: 'Mangrove and palm/Unfold in brittle shades of green./Houses on stilts, boats drawn up/The sand, the makeshift pier, village shop,/Smoke from kitchen fires,/All frame a picture' *(Ulysses,* p. 16); of Malacca ' . . . forty years ago,/When nyonya married baba' and, 'Sarong-wrapped they counted/Silver paper for the dead' *(Crossing,* p. 90).

More often, and better still, they write of that very human tendency to hold back from the experience of life and 'like an oyster'

> repose in the shell,
> hearing only the dumb
> scream of the sea-surge
> outside
>
> (T.P. Lee, p. 1);

of 'the many autumnal ways/Of dying . . .' (S. Lim, p. 36); of time and process and human living and

> such knowledge as we have found,
> the early quickening to long waiting
> underground
>
> (T.P. Lee, p. 33);

of soundless speech, rapport established effortlessly,

> So delicate
> This silence we fall upon;
> It feeds a mutual thought
>
> (E. Thumboo, p. 27);

of that 'Immemorial game' we like to deny as a definition of life:

> Between
> Those who eat, those who are eaten;
> Between
> Those who get a good shot,
> Those who are pushed aside
>
> (E. Thumboo, p. 5);

or simply this, as ordinary as it is significant:

> To the gate down the road
> a schoolboy comes,
> drenched to the skin,
> but with a gleam in his eye,
> and whistling,
> not knowing why
>
> (T.P. Lee, p. 6) –

but the reader knows, if he's human, with the child alive in his adult awareness.

They write, in sum, of this or that which is always today because it was, is, and is likely so to be for as long as there's world enough and time remaining finely or dubiously, satisfyingly or sadly human. And they do so using diction and phrasing, and motifs and gestures which come from and comment on the every-day world of our seeing and feeling and thinking. In this they are like Arthur Yap in his *down the line* (see pp. 58–59 of Part 1 of this essay, *S.A.R.E.* I 1); the poetics of their poetry implicitly insisting that poetry with real life to it can only come tuned or shaped – or at times ingeniously or hopefully assembled in collage fashion – from the current content and expression of prosaic life, speech and writing. There is, though, a significant difference: Yap likes to explore the expressive possibilities which may result from' de-tuning what is already ordinary, sometimes stripping language, for example, bare to its grammatical structure or nerves (see Part 1); and, of a piece with this tendency, he would rather be caught dead flat-footing his verse than be suspected of indulging in the poetical, especially that romantically coloured or gestured variety which in the popular conception signals Poetry. In Thumboo, S. Lim and T.P.Lee there is nothing like the tendency to experiment with 'bare-grammar' verse; and while they also prefer the quality of their diction, the feel of the line and the run of their phrasing to be, or to seem, as near some available norms of the casual and the prosaic as possible, they don't go out of their way to avoid hitting the high note, intensifying a contrast, achieving eloquence and the like.

Even Shirley Lim is capable of taking off into the lyrical, the romantic, the more obviously poetic in one way or another. Even? Because she is in a way the most down-to-earth sensibility of the three poets under consideration here. If, for instance, there's any promise of pleasant day-dreaming stuff to come when a poem of hers ('Women's Dreams') begins, smooth-flowing, with 'Women spin dreams all hours of the day', it is rudely shattered into bodily actuality in the next line and a half: 'At night the naked light spits its light/On our hairy parts . . .'; and the poem ends — a high epigrammatic note, this — with a Yeatsian earthy realism defying contradiction:

> Even flat and ugly may stir a cock
> And lord it for a day and a night.

The phrase 'a day and a night' isn't there just to help a line of monosyllables thump out a firm, resistless movement; it complicates with irony the confident realism of the statement — as if to say, a man's a man for all that a woman may be ugly, and sex is sex, even if only for a day and a night. So there!

Of the three she's the one most given to telling it like it is; her verse is the most rawly marked — and hence access of vigour, if also the risk of being flawed — with the messy stuff of life. In 'A Life of the Imagination' (p. 25) there's the preoccupation with the brute fact of life in time inconsiderately making its presence felt against the artist's 'immaculate yearning' — a phrase before which perhaps A. Yap would quail in some embarrassment because the patterning of the words in it may seem an immaculate conception, rather selfconsciously set apart from the collocational behaviour of words in everyday speech — for formal perfection:

> Details got in the way:
> A sinus congestion,
> Waking flushed in the night,
> Dreading the family disease.
> Who would have thought he
> Could so wonderfully
> Concentrate his mind
> On form? . . .

Or for that which is *in* life itself, which in a sense *is* life, the very quick of it, and which yet paradoxically offers a way of silencing and dissolving the many distracting claims of life in its more usual aspect on one's attention: that ecstasy lifting temporal creatures out of existence in time:

> Dreaming of a bridal chamber,
> He burned in a pure
> Fever, descrying lovers
> In sensual embrace;
> . . .

Clearly Shirley Lim is sympathetic to the yearning for the experience of timeless being; to the urge, as spelt out in the somewhat wordy rumination of 'Thoughts on a Cezanne Still-life' (p. 27), to

Arrest movement to gesture, time to moment;
Turning neither left nor right, but standing still,
To make stillness, and stillness a vocation;
Selecting of the world's pieces, one:
. . .

The sympathy, though, is a qualified one: the attempt to make a 'still-life' out of life can go together with the possibility of ending up with no more than

A beauty to set on a shelf, to gather
From the quiet air a fine film of dust,
. . .

In a better poem, 'The Painter, Munch' (p. 28), the itch of the artist to get life to stay still to fix it for contemplation of its beauty or peculiarity becomes the subject of ironic questioning. In an ease of articulation which approaches an eloquent clarity the poem intimates that life is too fluid, dynamic and unpredictable for the artist to discriminate and capture. Until the last four lines the mockery of the artistic enterprise is gently ironic and compelling:

The painter caught the dumb mouth,
Fixed wide, in a man out walking
Down a road. One moment past,
He was pleasantly musing
With the sun shining south
Behind him. Air and hills
Are drawn together
In blue and green paste
When the painted mouth is stilled.
Afflicted by knottier
Pigment, the eye, off-guard,
Suffers and goes mad,
In *rigor mortis.*

Up to the ninth line this is a poem which amounts to much more than being at least something. Several features in it give pleasure; not least being its beginning: the painter's action is narrated in a matter-of fact way but the verb 'caught', with a glance at the word 'fixed' in the next line, seems not only to state something done but also to suggest some sense of triumph accompanying the fact of successful accomplishment; and not only the triumph of ease and timing in the execution of artistic expertise but also *perhaps* the triumph of the painter's successful waiting in ambush to 'fix' forever an unflattering expression of a human face. Poor thing – that mouth, dumb, 'Fixed wide'! Then there's the shift of focus to notice: with a deftness perfectly natural the reader's attention is guided from focussing on the painter as subject or 'actor' and the man or his mouth as the 'suffering' object to the man as subject, a free agent, restored from being merely a 'dumb mouth' to a man alive to the genial warmth of nature, leaving behind the painter with his object. Poor catch! And small beer, the painter's art, compared to nature's art in drawing together 'Air and hills/ . . . In blue and green paste'. On this note of nature's triumph as in

its working of sustaining grace and harmony it up-stages man's art the poem could, and should perhaps, have ended. Instead a rather violently dramatic ending is allowed to push aside a fine one of a quietly evocative quality. In the last four lines we have something like a *deus ex machina* suddenly brought in to enforce an-eye-for-an-eye poetic justice – to punish the painter for having acted as if his eye were the measure of what it sees!? This ending, however, can be retained separated, or bracketted off, from the preceding lines to confirm it as an afterthought, rather arbitrary but expressive of the coming to awareness, at the last, of the poet's derisive attitude to the subject.

From the derisive attitude just mentioned I wouldn't rush to the conclusion that Shirley Lim is against art. What she is against generally is rather a certain use of art. She's also raising the question whether mastery of art is identical with mastery of life or nature. And there's, too, this related question: Does a commitment to art necessitate or justify a retreat from life? In another poem (p. 29, 'The Painter') we have an artist who 'always liked mirrors'; 'he glimpsed numerous/Folds of the world, unseen/Himself'. The poet wouldn't like to do the same. If art offers windows on the world, she certainly would like looking through them but, unlike the painter who '. . . could not', as the final line quietly states, 'step through them', she would also like to get out there and be in the thick of untidy life – in, for instance, the world 'as is' of 'Night Perspective' (p. 33) where

> We do not choose the light which shows
> The street before us, or the street
> Where ramshackled houses sit
> Becalmed in a dim refraction

and where

> Our attention is claimed by grey snow,
> A corner, the railroad horizon
> Distorted by timber, made forlorn
> By spacings of light, by desertion.
> The world claims. Its geography
> Gives us the shapes we have this night.

As in the water world of 'Crocodile' (p. 46), a world of nature messed up, outrageous to any acceptable aesthetic sense, but made do with by the crocodile –

> . . . Green leaves pass by her mouth
> Like fishes; they too are native, going down
> To sea. Jaws, empty and ravenous,
> Glide in brown water, turning up crowns
> of weed, mud, rusty cans. An old tire
> Springs from its bed like a corpse escaping:
> . . .

– so too what we have in 'Night Perspective' represents in small the world as found, available. Not without the occasional, unexpected intimations of some kind of beauty or strangeness, it is there for convenience rather than answering to any coherent, formulatable sense of the good, the true and the beautiful. It is the here and now, marked by

process, by accident and change (the snow isn't virgin white), and quirks of perspective.

Very much of the imperfect here and now – though here, now, or sometimes, imperfection can put on perfection and

> . . . to air and light
> Homes, trees and highways seem sensible
> Moment to moment, . . . (p. 34)

and 'Late fall . . .' may be 'imaginable/as bliss, and sensible' (p. 35) – are the people Shirley Lim claims for attention. Even the most heroic of them all (in 'In Praise of a Master', p. 23), with about him something larger than life which the verse gets the measure of in an eloquence of calmly assured phrasing and concision of sense –

> We thought when first we saw him,
> It was cold which made him colder
> Than he was. Against the wind
> He had set his smile. Behind
> His back, the weight of winter
> Fell on stones and frozen birds

– even this man of stoical, even (as certain details in the stanza suggest) elemental, strength is

> . . .   Human
> And frail, with woe and love no less
> Than with what's passionless
> He lived; . . .

The others – the others are a part of the motley stuff of the real, of life ragged, contrary, blemished. The nearest in moral stature to the 'Master' is Mister Varley (p. 43, 'Character-Sketch'), who's credible precisely because he's no (or no more a) perfect physical specimen ('Stooped, six-foot and a half,/Bad teeth, age-freckled') but who can claim attention for trying ' . . . living pared/Down to beauty'. Or there's the type ('Simple Simon') for whom ending life is the only meaningful thing to do although there's physiological perfection to go on breathing and moving with: ' . . . blood/Ruby fresh, lungs uncorroded/By hateful living . . .'. On the other hand there's the man in 'Potions' (p. 40) who would try everything to repair a life battered by bodily malfunctions. There's the 'Dulang-Washer' (p. 32), worth a thought of pity – 'The sun mocks her with false gold' – but, please, no sentimental idealization: no exotic or quaint Oriental, she's a woman ' . . . squinting like a witch,/Squats with a rag-wrapped head and begging bowl'. There's the 'Stranger' (p. 19) at whom – recoiling from, kept at arm's length – the pattern of the phrasing and lineation points a finger:

> Stranger, he,
> picking his nose,
> alarms

– but regarding whom at least there's no doubting his unselfconscious assertion of his existence: he's all there, the whole works:

> He, hunched in place,
> Himself, bone and
> touched flesh and
> stubbles, teeth,
> tongue within, whole.

There's 'The man upstairs' whose whole being has been reduced to what he's obsessed with:

> The man upstairs is walking in his boots.
> Naked, testicles swinging, he stomps on my ceiling
> And wakes me. It is three in the morning.

No comment is offered, no expression of feeling; the understanding or compassion which can be sensed coming across is implicit: the straight descriptive account –

> I hear the boots knock corner to corner:
> They are round-toed, black leather, Army and Navy
> Surplus boots . . . .

– the title 'Danny Boy' (p. 44), and the two-word phrase (the nearest to a comment) rounding off the poem –

> Left! Right! swearing Jesus! being Danny

– these together say it all.

Among the people attended to in her verse is the poet herself; looked at with neither pride nor prejudice, as in 'In Defence of the Crooked' (p. 82):

> I am bowed, tangled; worse,
> Not seeing straight, but hinged
> And glassy-eyed, to squint in light.
> My body is out of cinch:
> . . .

There seems to be some exaggeration tending towards caricature but this may be not so much the result of an excessive determination not to be seen to be less than objective in the self-portraiture as it is the effect of singling out one feature at a time for looking at out of a whole:

> Mouth dragged down to the side;
> Breast lumpier than the other.
> One rib bone curves high and hangs
> To the west . . . .

The overall impact, at any rate, seems both factually objective and cheekily uninhibited. Unflattering as they are, things keep tumbling out –

> . . . Nervous, I stutter.
> The last toe and companion curl
> Like callouses. I bowl into gutters

– a little giddy with the relief of being openly acknowledged. No poet in this region has been as engagingly frank in this 'self-confessional' strain as Shirley Lim is here, and as she equally is in the more soberly pitched 'Smoking' (p. 74):

> The whole house smells of my smoking.
> You hate the stink, hate thinking
> Of the germ which will devour me,
> Your wife, and of your loss. And just
> So, you hate me for your pain.
> I will say I am sorry.
> . . .

There's a certain dignity of statement here, and yet, instead of language standing on its dignity, there's language at ease; the diction is everyday. A few things in the verse may be worth some close pondering on – the repeated 'hate', for example, or the parallel clauses of the second line and the manner of their transition from one to the other – but I confine myself to the general remark that this bringing off of a tangled matter – the complex psychology of love and hate and pain at work in such a situation – in uncluttered verse perfectly clear in sense and firmly considered and considering in tone is worth the doing. It is no easy thing.

Perhaps it is less difficult, though not therefore less worth doing well, than that very different thing exemplified in such lines as the first two of 'Winter Air' (p. 61) and representing no doubt for some readers what is considered nearer to being poetic:

> When in a dream, unsought, you came and touched,
> I in such bliss refrained from waking
> . . .

– lines in which the pattern of sound and pause and the rhythm of the phrasing sustain a breathless feeling of wondering awareness of a state suspended between sleep and waking. Even this, however, may not satisfy some readers panting for *the* poetic throb, that transport beyond the mundane, such as may be found here:

> To shake the unshakeable-seeming firmament
> And dance amuck, solitary among the stars.

The thing here may well be to date the most excitedly tuned-up 'romantic' note in Malaysian/Singaporean verse, but these lines from 'No One' (p. 60) are no more than a bravura piece. It succeeds, yes, as a contrast to a love relationship too carefully nursed and watched over –

> Fearing to move abruptly or far
> Lest I should lose you . . . .

– but isn't it nevertheless too self-consciously dramatic a contrast? Isn't 'solitary among the stars' a cliché, pleased with its own sort of romantic evocation? The whole thing, though, may be justified as intended as an example of dubious romantic value?

For other kinds of bad writing included in the volume there can be no justification – only an exasperated wonder how or why an undoubted talent for poetry like hers can allow publication to lines like (p. 19, 'Stranger')

> My handhold, foothold,
> wholeness, where?

or (p. 23, 'In Praise of a Master')

> . . . living, was what man,
> Making, his self may master.

Even Hopkins isn't always successful with this kind of distortion of syntax for emphasis or intensification; and, more to the point, even when he is, the success often seems an over-excitedly willed thing. As for the kind of syntax and lineation exhibited by a sequence like ' . . . sprung by delight as move/Gulls . . . ' in the first stanza of 'Song' (p. 65), Hopkins can't be invoked as precedent. The inversion is a betrayal of good prose with no poetic gain secured thereby; getting 'move' to (eye-)rhyme with 'love' (first line) is worse than there being no excuse for the manipulation; and it irritates every time it is read because the sequence led up to should be ' . . . sprung by (such) delight as moves/ Gulls . . .' rather than the one given (?). The last stanza is flat-footed; syntax and sense are rather strained for the sake of the rhyme scheme. With such bad versing in two stanzas out of three, the poem is less than something or worse than that. Not incompetence (or lack of poetic scruple?) but ingenuity given too much rein seems the trouble with the opening of 'Monsoon History' (p. 90) which otherwise is at least something:

> The air is wet, soaks
> Into mattresses, and curls
> In apparitions of smoke.
> . . .

Good descriptive verse, this, deftly turned; but what follows is an exercise in simile-making:

> Like fat white slugs furled
> Among the timber,
> Or silver fish tunnelling
> The damp linen covers
> Of school books, or walking
> Quietly like centipedes,
> The air walking everywhere
> On its hundred feet
> . . .

One – or two? – too many surely? The three similes distract, tempting the reader to ask in what way(s) the wet air (or 'apparitions of smoke'?) is like fat white slugs as well as like (and unlike?) silverfish *and* centipedes. What seems required is the creation of a sense of the damp-saturated atmosphere of a monsoon season. Not the challenge of some sort of logical analysis. In 'Speech' (p. 17), however, being logical or making the necessary sense-distinctions clearly is important because the effectiveness of the structure of the poem's meaning and emotion depends on the reader quickly fastening on the distinctions between one sort of silence and another, one sort of speech and another and between speech and silence. And I think the reader will find it difficult to do so. In the first stanza, for example, it isn't immediately clear that the speech 'which should lie silent' is speech uttered for the sake of speech. Or is it this in fact? More seriously, when 'Speech which should lie silent' is not silent but 'falls', why or how is it – or its 'falling'? – 'like an ocean without sail'? And why, specifically, *'without sail'?* Speech without meaning or truth is like 'an ocean without sail'? If this is the comparison intended it is arbitrary, without a basis in natural feeling. While an ocean with 'sail' can, by some stretching of the imagination, suggest an ocean invested with human meaning/activity, it can't be negated (i.e., minus 'sail') in order to make it empty and thus be like empty speech: 'an ocean without sail' is a perfectly natural or proper state of affairs, with a meaning or beauty of its own. The whole poem, in fact, seems vaguely troubled by some lack of logic, or common sense. Let me put it this way: if the situation lamented of in the poem is such – 'between you and I is nothing' – that even keeping silent won't do, because such silence isn't the kind which is a communion of wordless understanding, then why fuss over the impossibility of speaking meaningfully?

Speech or language is of course a fundamental concern of poets and their critics, and 'Speech' is the kind of poem which, because of its theme of the truth of being in human relationship, speech, and silence, a critic can particularly warm to and wax eloquent over; talking of how very human the poem's outlook is, how interesting its allusion to the notion of true speech continuing meaningful silence and receding into the being of that silence when it ends – 'to tell of silence' rather than become merely a 'gap', the great yawn of noncommunication, between speech and speech. But if a poem, such as this, is flawed in its overall structuring of sense, is there a *poem* to talk about? Or *where* is the poem? Not in local felicities and insights, which may be *poetry* but which must cohere strongly and clearly if not also subtly in language into a whole – the poem – in which they have their particular mode of being, their delicately precise or at least clear definition of status, meaning and value.

This business of knocking things together into a coherence of existence which a poem is before it can be anything else is perhaps especially troublesome when one tries to grapple with thoughts or ideas directly. Unless, that is, one is a Donne, an Eliot or a Thumboo – though even Thumboo can come up with a poem ('Ulysses by the Merlion') which seems to have a central or fundamental contradiction in it (see Part 1) – or unless one is prepared to take enormous pains to ensure soundness of sense or logic. Whatever the case, it is when Shirley Lim moves from being down to earth, descriptive or reflective to conduct an argument in verse, or to be semi-metaphysical as in the poem commented on above, that things are especially liable to fall apart. In 'Early Poem-2' (p. 15), for example, the proposition that

> Words are
> true only
> to themselves

are far from being explained with any sense of rightness by the comparison

> as birds are neither
> nesting tree nor sky
> . . .

The reader should also look at 'To What Ends?' (p. 5) and see what clarifying connection(s) of sense there can possibly be between the statement (lines 1–4) and the illustrative image (lines 5–11). As for a piece like 'Imagine' (p. 4): it settles a question clearly but inadequately. If one can

> Imagine –
> a sheet of glass
> reflecting nothing
> but itself

instead of associating it with reflecting something else, it doesn't seem fair to expect one's thinking of words to be limited to the assertion that

> words are only significations
> of things other than

instead of thinking of the idea of words being true to themselves, reflecting the universe of discourse they create. There's too much simplification to make the poem come out right; the coherence achieved is at best fragile.

Impossible, of course, to predict either how much simplification is too much or, on the other hand, when or why some simplification may seem called for. One may argue, for instance, that when Lee Tzu Pheng's 'A Thought' (p. 1) moves from its effective focus on the speaker's awareness of the oyster and its situation –

> Must I like an oyster
> repose in the shell,
> hearing only the dumb
> scream of the sea-surge
> outside

– to bring up rather abstract considerations ('knowledge', 'will') in the following four lines, there occurs some unnecessary complication. Ignore the middle four lines, move straight on to the last five –

> or shall I let in, now,
> a small grain of sand,
> suffer its torment
> and harden this sickness
> to pearl?

– and the poem would be better than the good little poem it already is. More simply of a piece, more 'A Thought' single and strong. But what I regard as distracting complication may seem to other readers to be something of an enriching complexity. Here the matter would have to rest – a matter of taste; leaving me with nothing else to say except to assert that I prefer a poem of this type, the gnomic or epigrammatic expression of a commonplace – the choice of a life protected but sterile, or a life vulnerable but offering possibilities of growth and perfection in suffering – to be memorable by way of making an impact as briefly and strongly coherent as possible.

One can be on surer ground with a poem like 'You're So Quiet' (p. 11) – very typically Lee Tzu Pheng – in which the coherence one is finally left with as a taste isn't a matter of paraphrasable thought; it is much more a pervasive, an all-encompassing feeling one gets of the poem's speaker being all absorbed by coming upon the situation of someone 'so quiet . . .' –

> sprawled in that chair
> evening dropped you in

Anything that breaks the spell of concentrated awareness created breaks coherence in such a poem. This happens in the third stanza (and perhaps also in the fourth?) because here one gets not the mind reflecting but the abstract reflection, betrayed by the hackneyed expression: 'the equilibrium point'/'the fulcrum of life'. The poem is finer without it; it doesn't say anything which the poem can't do without; and how flat in movement it is, how coarse in idiom and tone when compared, especially, with the final stanza. The first three lines of this –

> you're so quiet
> I am afraid
> to tie you to time

– say something tremendous, something of a daring conceit come up to the reader with such utter simplicity, and in the tone already established of quietly intense feeling, that it entirely convinces of its seriousness – a seriousness, though, not unleavened by the modulation in the last two lines –

> please look up,
> when you're tired of eternity

– into a mood of leg-pulling, at once ironic and tender.

'You're So Quiet' is a private poem, in which tone-and-feeling can be all; and as long as that isn't appreciably affected what's included or excluded is entirely up to the poet. The same cannot be said of a public poem which, like Thumboo's 'May 1954' (p. 14), has to do with history and politics, volatile stuff which can prove caustic to the value of the coherence of such a poem. Include too much, and you may have trouble with pulling everything together; exclude, simplify, and you have your coherent point of view but a partisan one. 'May 1954' takes the second alternative. It is a poem that looks back in anger at 'The bitter, curving tide of history' of colonial times. The anger, one not without a dignified bearing to it, comes across very well in such lines as

> We do but merely ask
> No more, no less, this much:
> That you white man,
> . . .

or

> Do not ignore, dismiss,
> Pretending we are foolish;
> . . .

or

> My father's anger turns my cause
> . . .

What is the basis of such anger? This:

> You whored on milk and honey
> Tried our spirit, spent our muscle,
> Extracted from our earth;
> Gave yourselves superior ways
> At our expense, in our midst.

Colonial history, certainly, wasn't all sweetness and light, paternal benevolence, enlightened despotism and all that. But surely this – this living it up like lords of the earth, this swaggering, this emasculation of native manhood, this economic exploitation, this grabbing, nothing given in return – this is the other extreme view of colonial behaviour. It sounds, at any rate, like a poet's version of the politician's version of colonial history, useful to turn on for public consumption from time to time in post- colonial countries. This may account in part for the fact that the attitude of dignified anger referred to above can suddenly change to this:

> . . .
> Boasting of many parts,
> *Some talk of Alexander, some of Hercules*
> . . .

– which seems to me no more than being merely smart; or the angry tone can collapse into what comes near to snide chauvinistic sarcasm:

> Some broken not long ago
> By little yellow soldiers
> Out of the Rising Sun . . .
> . . .

And there's some uncertainty of tone at the end:

> We may still be friends,
> Even love you . . . from a distance.

The 'distant' love promised – is this being whimsical, witty? or sarcastic, condescending?

'May 1954' is the poem mentioned of in Part 1 of this commentary as puzzling. The puzzle isn't the uncertainty of tone just referred to. Nor is it that though the poem is far from being badly written it is in the final analysis not a good one; we have seen why this is so. Nor yet is it the question of audience; it can only be conceived of as written to the gallery, appealing to that sense of identity which includes in it some alleged need for Singaporeans/Asians/Third-Worlders loudly and assertively to voice their freedom from being cowed and mesmerized by their erstwhile colonial 'master's voice' and thus to be more aware that now 'There is an Asian tide/That sings such power/Into . . . [their] dreaming side'. The puzzle is, who's the speaker of the poem? Not Thumboo; he is – and I say this without irony – more intelligent and discriminating, more open-minded and gracious, than what the poem's outlook would seem to indicate. There's only one solution to the puzzle: the poem as a dramatic projection not of the poet's own reading of the colonial episode but of a recognizable type of Singaporean/Asian/Third-World consciousness vis-à-vis colonial history, and presented not for our easy identification with but for us both to understand and be critical of. Unfortunately this solution is only theoretically available, there being no clear evidence in 'May 1954' that it is intended as that sort of poem. It represents, then, Thumboo and his view of the matter.

A Thumboo, surely, a good deal below his best? Certainly not the Thumboo of *Gods Can Die.* In that collection can be found some of the best 'social-conscience' or socio-cultural poems in English extant in this region; the title poem being likely to remain long a fine achievement of its kind. Indeed, generally speaking, taking the measure of Thumboo's *Ulysses by the Merlion* with that other volume in mind, it is difficult to resist the impression that there has been a falling off. The skill is there, if anything more in evidence; the verve not the less so, the elegance more elegant, the expertise instantly applicable. But sometimes that is precisely *it:* only the manner, the form. I am conscious here of exaggerating but also of doing so in order quickly to suggest what seems the trouble – or the trouble one has – with the present volume.

The trouble one has with the first poem (p. 1), for instance, is that of finding it difficult not to allow the consciousness of its being a poem done off the top of the head to limit one's assessment of it. Rather than being something lived through, it seems to be a strategy executed: first, a general statement –

> Julian and Claire
> Take separate dreams

– next, ironic qualification of the 'dreams' with some prosaic stanzas; finally, departure from the prosaic, an offer of the 'romantic':

> They are preparing.
> I pray they wake
>
> To find the gifts of the
> Moon intact, the stars there,
> The night flamboyant,
> Extravagant with peace.

The neatness impresses, the professional efficiency. It is all definitely more than merely something. How much more, one hesitates to ask.

Expertise, expertise in abundance: how quickly, confidently, Thumboo can formulate a type!

> Mr. Ang, man about town,
> Married bachelor, gay, affable,
> Enjoys regular, predictable welcomes
> . . .

So 'How To Win Friends' (p. 6) begins: effervescent, snappy, the phrases and clauses pick off Mr. Ang's traits and habits; so it continues: a local name ('The table at the *bah koot tay'),* or a sally of wit –

> Even the resident fly
> Is kept safely out of sight

– is easily taken in stride; and so it ends, the snappy procedure maintained:

> Mr. Ang, man about town, popular,
> Unperturbed, never delayed,
> Always with a standard smile,
> Quick on the draw,
> Believes in tips.

We have Mr. Ang all right, but – even conceding that Mr. Ang has no inside – we can't ignore, in judging the poem, the impression that the portrait is all done from the outside, with a knowing air.

'Knowingness' is no bad thing but too much of it can make things too easy for the poet, or too easily satisfied, for example, with going only half way in the evocation of a sense of beauty:

> You must believe me
> When I say that sunlight,
> Impure but beautiful,
> Broke upon the bay, silvered
> The unrepentant, burning noon.

Thumboo in these lines from 'Island' (p. 16) knows what he wants to go for but he also knows, it would seem, that informed contemporary readers of poetry can be suspicious of poets attempting to overwhelm them with 'beautiful' poetry, and so with a knowing glance, he asks the readers' indulgence first. A 'knowing' procedure, this being blasé and romantic at the same time. Or, as in 'At the Zoo' (p. 4), there's the procedure of 'Look, I'm not even trying':

> It is again the Serengeti,
> The Mato Grosso, Norongoro,
> The hills of Bengal.

The names roll out, sonorous, redolent of the exotic. Ostensibly the reader is only being given the speculation – swiftly passed off as a possibility positively realized: 'It is again . . .' – that when in the zoo

> . . . the carnivores
> Shake themselves, test their claws,
> Yawn, stretch, shuffle their whiskers,
> Smell blood in the cavern of their jaws

(there it is again, the executing of the necessary minimum: the fitting into place of short clauses seriatim, the details so relayed sufficient enough to create the illusion of a great deal being busily noted by the observer) they may well feel themselves carried back to native grounds. One after another the right hand of the poet-conjuror flicks out bright, coloured handkerchiefs while the left hand is doing something else. There's no denying the impressiveness of the act but it is here, and here and there elsewhere in *Ulysses by the Merlion,* that one feels that certain procedures, certain compact ways of adumbrating sense and certain poetry-potential matters of detail and motif, once struggled with and felt for and achieved in the process of creative activity, have now all become routine, a manner, a repertory of trusted props. Thumboo, in short, is in danger of stultifying his talent by repeating himself in the way of restricting himself, safely, to only some of the things he has once done so well. He needs to set himself new challenges, new ways; to dig deeper into his resourceful, creative self.

I should like to end by putting down here for the reader's sampling two poems, the first by Thumboo ('John'), the second by Lee Tzu Pheng ('The Gift'), each in some ways representative of its respective author's outlook, mode and achievement:

John Watson, John Tan,
John Harniman, John Raja,
John Cawelti, John Waiyaki,
John Sinclair, John Kasaipwalova,
Live by mountain, river,
In the comfort of mythologies,
Condominium, palm grove,
Conical house of reeds,
Hedged by files and duties,
Separated by auguries, civilizations.

I know them all, know they
Can meet, be equal,
Cogitate, break bread,
Apportion chapatis over fish-head curry;
Dine subtly
On Leong's special cold dish, pickled cabbage
At the *Emerald Room,* amidst the Chinese
Orchestra, a taped Claire de Lune
Gently moving into
El Condor Pasa released
By fifty Japanese guitars.

After seasoning a week, a month,
They exchange puns, trade metaphors,
Double-talk, deep laughter,
The occasional growl,
Renewing possibilities
Of sense and sensibility.

There is special harvest
As they incant the resounding genius
Of Yeat's on old age,
Remark upon Kissinger's
Shuttle in the Crypt;
Remember, one painful afternoon,
Christ on the Mount of Olive,
Arjuna's serene charioteer,
Harambee the burning spear,
Li Po lamenting absent friends,
That sad contentment of *dondang sayang,*
Samia Gamal's vibrations . . .
Then trace on the table-cloth
The roots of popular culture.
They find common cause in
The tragic shower of
Post-Vietnam refugees; discuss
British specialists, remedial English;
Or the wise death of Socrates,
Turning all on soft conversation,
Contemplating . . . man, proud man,
Drest in a little brief authority . . .

Among nine friends
There is comfort.

('John')

This is the gift you brought:
how in a short weekend you made
one afternoon hold stronger
than separation's grip
as I held your hand
and said goodbye.

Though we have met just twice
and talked a little,
(at least you did, comforting
me in my shyness),
it is as if I've known you
all my life.

When you put your thoughts into a book
telling the world you had no gods
I knew that they were with you
in your living, in the human love more firm
and more precarious
than those who have their idols.

I felt that love today
in your face, in your voice,
a joyous dialogue with the world.
But most of all, perhaps, Joe
mirrored it, looking at you,
and when you called him 'idiot' tenderly.

How you tripped over your words
big with haste to drive each thought out –
living is urgent for you.
Edda was so amused; we all were.

You have become more busy
with being happily married.
When we spoke of writing you said
happiness had stopped your poetry,
that perhaps only sadness writes –
yet, in your smile
I saw the poem you made,
your loveliest in a while.

(Ah, sentiment, to have only you
to point the beauty in a pragmatic world!)

Hilary, friend of Life,
should the days run too quickly
for those like me,
trapped between selfhood and freedom,
how shall we retain
this gift for living you have shown to us? ('The Gift')

Both, broadly speaking, speak to our human condition, concerned as both are with that humanly simple but also difficult enterprise: being human; both celebrate what it means to be that. Rather than declaiming or pontificating, both talk, one more obviously so than the other; one is more obviously a shaped thing, what shape the other has being one with its current of feeling and thinking; the scope of one is restricted to the personal and intimate, while the other is expansive, ranging widely in its range of reference. Both evidently come up to more than something. I wonder which the reader will find more appealing.

University of Malaya

verse
in
comment

*For 'The Age of Shakespeare' Exhibition,**

All that patriotic business –
'This royal throne of kings . . .
This something set in a silver sea' –
this heart-heaving largeness
of goosepimple-raising
eye-glazing praise –
Goodness! Glory, glory be!
POETRY, yes, *that* one can see.
But the fineness has too much finesse,
or too little to it – feels laid
on a bit thick, though made
to order for its time and place.

Ripeness is all, and the grace
to grant what the case
called for in your day.
What, now, would you have to say?

What's England coming to
these days?
With one voice the world says:
Gone to seed but for two
very English things:
English and you, Shakespeare,
dramatist without peer
(and perhaps the British Council, too).

This is your thing, this
exhibition, this Shakescene.
Never mind Robert Greene.
He was mean –
or just being green
with envy, calling you an upstart crow.
A fit, now, he would throw
to see you, world-wide, an industry
supporting many a professor's salary.

**9 October 1980, the British Council, Kuala Lumpur.*

You were not a University Wit.
Nor a twit.
Thank goodness you didn't feel
like that at all
beside the likes of Lodge, Greene and Peele.

Thomas Kyd had two
hit-men in a play of his,
one called Black Will
the other Shakebag.
Was he trying to hiss
you off the stage
or was he kidding
with back-slapping
affectionate gag?

You were no cretin,
but is it true you knew
small Latin
and less Greek?

What cheek
to ask this
of one who knew English!
Everything English makes possible!
In you was the Word
and the Word was Englished
for England and the world.

You taught English to know itself.
You surprised it into life, greedy
for life from life, ready
to give life to life
that life may know itself,
airy nothing earthed
and named.

In English of course.

Fascinating to watch
you fascinated by
Cleopatra's fascination for
Antony, who can't do without more
of her, maddening as she is, and sly.

You did not let a thing slip by –
the sordid, the poetic, and the rest.
to the meeting of East and West,
enthralled, you responded; earth and sky
could not contain your imagination.
Without anything like condemnation
you judged both, and then translated them high
beyond mortal moan, radiant in your vision,
all else scotched, cleansed, in your poetic fire
and generosity.

Cleo's infinite variety was you –
it was in the language, in your age.
Golden lads and girls, yes, but chimney -
sweepers, too, and the final dust.
Heady the air with new wine; not a few
heads off, piked; heigh-ho and minstrelsy,
daring the thinking, the privateering
patriotic; pageants, pomp and circumstance
and penury, cruel conspiracy
and worse were your renaissance, your age.
But no doubt about it, a splendid page,
an expense of spirit in greatness, in rage
of intrigue, act and imagination.

For the well-placed by birth or accident, or
climbing, it was a time for
giddy power-play
or just courtly play.
Those who could, steered
round to royal favour:
many flattered
sang the current court-topper
danced in due order
Raleigh and Drake privateered.
Those who couldn't, languished or sonneteered
to each other.
You did neither ––
you did better:
you wrote sonnets,
the real thing, and with
one eye on the main chance, one
Muse-mesmerized to
see straight through,
deep, and true,
you touched reality;
you saw a tidy income
yielding from Welcombe
Hills; you wrote plays for money
and all time to come.

Ooi Boo Eng

THREE POEMS by BERNARD BLACKSTONE

Gower Cliffs : A Double Acrostic

Poised there in April's clear and maiden sky
Enmeshed in blue and gold, on wide wings gliding
Gull after gull dropped seaward, fashioning
Galactic glory in the wind's embrace.
Your lips on mine burned all that beauty up.

Flight & Pursuit: A Triple Fugue

you fleeing fled from me; from me you fled
I still pursuing re-embraced the dead

scenting the brown dishonours of your head
true passion dying verbal forms replace
I knew that body once, I knew that face
its intimate disclosures of disgrace

I fleeing fled from you; from you I fled
your dark disclosures of soiled maidenhaead
restored the status of the living dead

we fleeing fled from each; no forms replaced
what body once and mind and heart embraced
the sky was empty now, the land was waste

At the Fair

Let us disport upon the roundabouts and swings.
Let us lose congnisance of all sublunary things.
Motion life's riddle solves
While the bright wheel revolves.'

The brilliant horses of the moon gyrate
In measured motion, pied and maculate,
And in those sightless eyes
Lunatic paradise.

'Here sits the Obese Lady; in this tent
The Embryo Dwarf and Fish-tailed Girl are pent;
How to our taste are made
These dwellers in the shade!'

But on the limits of the naphtha flare
The sawdust circle and the strumpet's stare
That ancient common lay
Silent and dark alway.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

BERNARD BLACKSTONE has been Professor of English at the Universities of Brazil, Istanbul, Athens (where he was Byron Professor, 1952–61), Benghazi, Rhodesia, Beirut, Aleppo, Jordan and Hong Kong. Since June 1980 he has been Visiting Professor in the Department of English at the University of Malaya. Prof. Blackstones' numerous books are well-known. He is currently working on a book on Virginia Woolf and another on Byron and Islam.

EDWARD BRATHWAITE, Professor of History, University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, and editor of *Savacou*, is better known as a poet, among the best in the world writing in English today.

SIEW-YUE KILLINGLEY read English at the University of Malaya, went on to earn herself a London University Ph.D. in Linguistics, and has been for some time in Newcastle Upon Tyne, England, where she works and writes.

S. KON has written a number of plays and short stories. Her published works include *The Immigrant and Other Plays* (1975) and *The Bridge* (1981). A philosophy graduate from the University of Singapore, she now resides in Ipoh, Malaysia.

NORMAN SIMMS is an American academic restlessly at large in New Zealand; he writes (poetry and literary criticism), publishes, translates, edits *Pacific Moana Quarterly* and, among other things, keeps worrying at the nature and dynamics of 'Third-World' Literature(s) in English (vis-à-vis, particularly, 'mainstream' literature in English).

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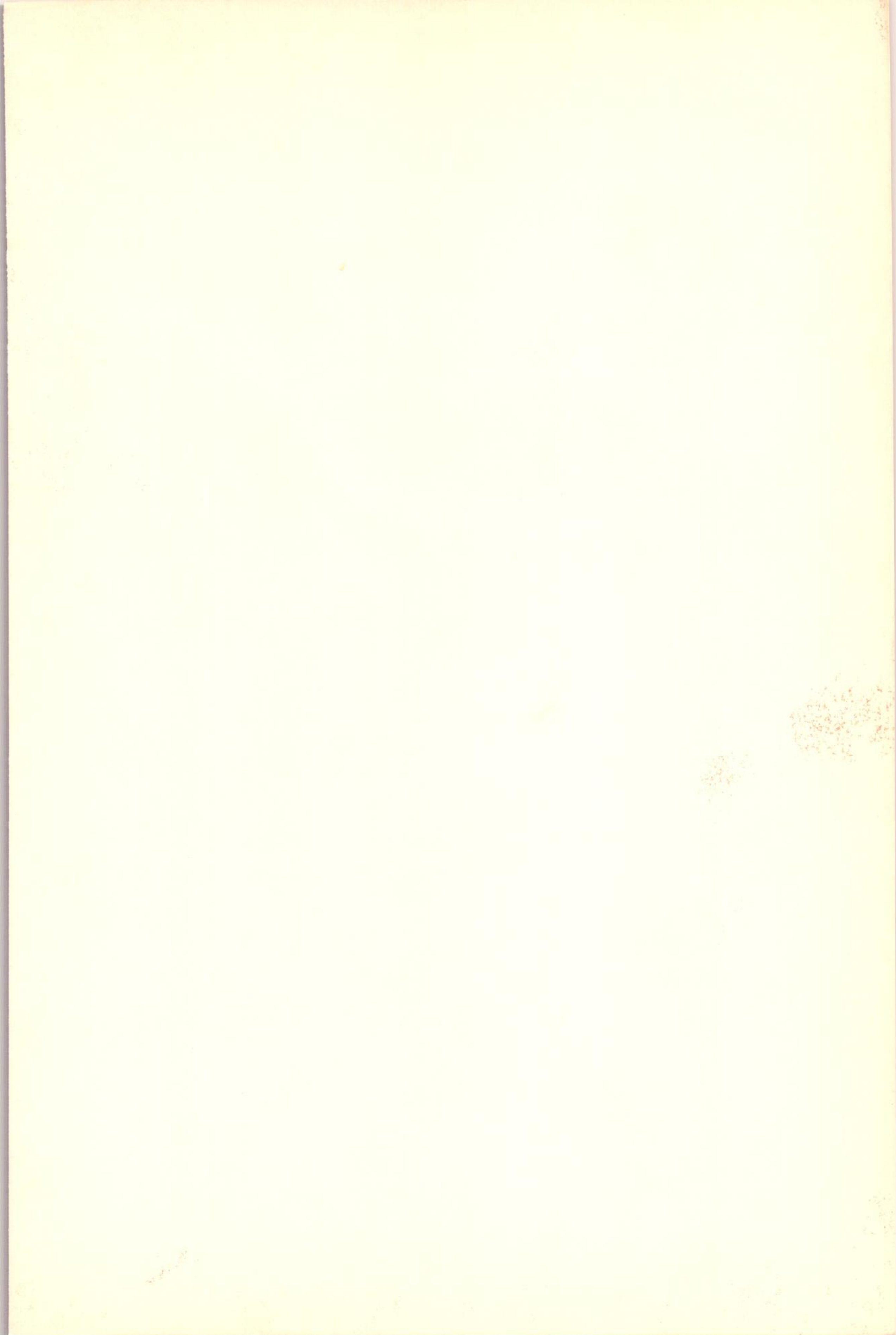
Lazy River by A. Samad Said translated by Harry Aveling
Singapore – Through Sunshine and Shadow by John Bertram van Cuylenburg

Short Stories

The Third Child & Other Stories edited by Lloyd Fernando
ASEAN Short Stories edited by Robert Yeo
Glimpses of the Past – Stories of Singapore and Malaysia by Wong Meng Voon
The Newspaper Editor and Other Stories by Rebecca Chua



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