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LITERARY ENGLISH IN THE SOUTH-EAST ASIAN TRADITION

Malay Literature, that is, literature in the Malay language, has a tradition going back to the fifteenth century at least. Properly speaking, its modern development begins in the nineteenth century, since when there has been a resurgence in Malay letters. Post-war Malay literature has been vigorous and dynamic. The continuity of the Malay tradition with the Indonesian is now more clearly seen, particularly since the withdrawal of the colonial power. The Malay language is used with a kind of 'grass roots' force by more than a hundred million people in South-East Asia in a way that English has never been, and probably never will be. It is necessary, therefore, by way of preface, to draw attention to the lop-sided view of literary problems in this area which a paper such as the present one on English writing alone may tend to give. If what follows is to have any useful meaning, this perspective needs to be borne in mind. To put it succinctly, if the relationship of the various Commonwealth literatures in English to the great native British tradition may no longer be easily assumed, those found in Asia do not obviously belong to a native Asian heritage either.

The comparatively small body of indigenous writing in English in Malaysia and Singapore does not warrant more than a few preliminary observations on the topic of this paper.[1] I am chiefly concerned to clear up some confusions which make it difficult to say what kind of thing local literature in English has become in the past twenty years or so of its existence in an area where the language enjoys at best secondary status.[2] Initial and persisting confusion arises from general labels which have served well up to now. Suddenly we were aware of emergent literatures in English all over the world, and it was a convenience even more vaguely literary than it was vaguely political to group them in the new category of 'Commonwealth' literature. The political connotations of this label led briefly to the exclusion of non-Commonwealth countries, like the United States and the Philippines, also producing literature in English. There is no harm in carrying the flag for a sort of united nations organization of writers and scholars in English if we do not mistake a convenience for an actual entity. Similar reservations apply to that other proposed hold-all, 'World Literature in English', in which there appears to be even less provision so far for examining the degree of conflict and confluence in various traditions, particularly non-Anglo-Saxon ones.

The theme of the present Conference is itself an alert response to such issues. The only thing clear is that long after the Commonwealth itself vanishes—as it seems to be doing these days—some sort of general label may still continue to be a convenient way of referring to the literatures in English which have sprouted in defiance of orthodox ideas about the ways in which literature and tradition evolve.

With any one of these literatures one of two preliminary decisions needs to be made. Is it more profitable to regard it as a more or less amazing proliferation of the British literary tradition? Or is it one which, while using the English language, is more strongly grounded in native non-Anglo-Saxon traditions? The answer to either question will carry—inevitably, for young literatures—a slightly prescriptive air as well. Particularly in the case of countries where English is only one of two or more languages in use, the chief problem is that of disentangling, where justified, the dominant British tradition from the newly or potentially articulate native one.

Tradition is difficult enough to piece together in a reasonably homogeneous country, but the task becomes distracting in countries like Malaysia and Singapore, where four great traditions have intermingled. Researches for a retrospective bibliography of literary items in English now being compiled show that extant material over the last two or three centuries falls roughly into two main categories: texts and studies of traditional Malay life and culture; and a considerable body of minor writing by English visitors, administrators, sailors, botanists, and casual residents. The other major communities of Malaysia, Chinese and Indian, are represented only fitfully. The largely expatriate group of writers in English have produced—as they have done in other former colonial territories—memoirs, autobiographies, and stories of 'exotic' experiences written almost wholly for 'home' consumption. No really outstanding writers of autobiography or fiction have emerged with the exceptions of Conrad, and to a lesser extent, Somerset Maugham, and they were not, in the relevant sense, even temporary residents. It is probably more than a simple coincidence that this stream of reminiscences and, on the whole, minor fiction by temporary residents has more or less stopped now that Malaysia and Singapore have become independent. A scrutiny of the items in this category shows that at first, from about the late seventeenth century, there are accounts by those who touched at different points in this area in the course of longer voyages, sometimes round the world. A well-known example is William Dampier's *A New Voyage Round the World*, published in 1699. There follow reports, more or less official, on the prospects of trade or occupation. Hunters, botanists, and explorers take over in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, minute descriptions of new species, animal, vegetable, and mineral, being laced with a mass of pedestrian reflections and observations on the 'strange' forms of life encountered. A notable item in this class is that report which lost out to Charles Darwin in the evolution stakes, A. R. Wallace's *The Malay Archipelago* (1858).

By the end of the nineteenth century there are people who have not simply gone on expeditions of various kinds but have spent sufficient time to become familiar with the more obvious traditions of life in the area. These, among whom the best are perhaps Sir Hugh Clifford and Sir Frank Swettenham, are never fully sure, even in their most ambitious literary efforts, whether they are presenting faithful records of episodes from 'native' life—largely Malay—or self-sufficient fiction based on actual experiences. That there was this early difficulty in establishing a literary vantage point in English from which to depict life in this region is well illustrated in the tart exchange with which Sir Hugh Clifford and Joseph Conrad began their friendship. Clifford had declared that although Conrad's style was 'a miracle' his knowledge of life in this region was defective. No one has yet successfully refuted Clifford's view that the 'Orientals' in Conrad's works are interesting, 'not because they are really Asiatics, but because they represent the impression scored by Asiatics upon a sensitive, imaginative, European mind. Mr Conrad had seen ... as white men—from the outside. He had never lived into the life of brown people'.[3] Conrad had his own retort: Clifford, he said,

possessed unusual knowledge but he put it to indifferent use.[4] Of course Conrad never really tried to delve into his Asian characters deeper than his novelistic instinct told him was necessary or safe. As a result we know very little, in *Lord Jim*, for example, of the inner life of characters like Jewel, Tamb' Itam, Doramin, Dain Waris, and others. To be drawn into that centre, as Clifford to some extent undeniably was, was inevitably to end in serious loss of controlled perspective, which Clifford's works undoubtedly suffer from.[5] The stuff of life was too new, the challenge of cultural concepts alternative to western ones too demanding for the spiritual well-being and the artistic success of pioneers. Conrad steered deftly round the realities of Asian life; Clifford found himself compelled to sacrifice art in plunging directly into them.

Much autobiographical fiction or fictionalized autobiography that followed, mainly in the first half of the twentieth century, is undistinguished because it took a middle course between these two alternatives. Only one writer, Anthony Burgess, returned to the quest with a modicum of success, but he too has retired from the scene, more or less defeated. Burgess's Malayan trilogy, *Time for a Tiger* (1956), *Beds in the East* (1958), and *The Enemy in the Blanket* (1959) grew out of virtually the same sense of excitement that generations of foreign visitors have experienced on being surrounded by Malaysia's cultural motley. Burgess was rather better equipped than many of his predecessors to capture it, and his novels show at least a sketchy awareness of the amazing diversity of tradition and ordinary life in South-East Asia. 'Juxtaposition of races and cultures was the underground stimulus, the thing that wanted to be expressed', he has since said, 'I really wrote [the Malayan Trilogy] because I wanted to record Malaya.' Yet after his third novel he moved from Malaysia, and an essay of his entitled 'The Corruption of the Exotic' is revealing. He found he had written the novels not chiefly from an aesthetic motive but simply because his subject matter was 'intrinsically strange, fresh and glamorous'. It had led him to think he was writing better than he was. He became suddenly aware that 'the most dangerous temptation of all when writing about the exotic is to trade on the reader's ignorance and to falsify'.[6] Burgess has gone on to acquire a fully deserved reputation as a fine British novelist with an almost phenomenal output. The confusing variety of the Malayan scene now awaits an indigenous Malaysian novelist.

It is not surprising that the tradition—so far as it can be called that—of expatriate autobiography and fiction has little to offer a local novelist in English, unless it is the lesson that he has indisputable literary advantages in writing his own novels himself instead of submitting to being written about by others. The British writer thrived at the very least on his readers' thirst for information about exotic locales, 'strange' habits and peoples. Johnny Ong's *Sugar and Salt* (1965) adopts this expository function sometimes, with unintentionally comic results. Probably the furthest extent to which a record of 'impressions' can be taken was illustrated by Lee Kok Liang's 'Return to Malaya' which dwells, as I have said elsewhere, upon the concrete variety of the Malaysian scene. Its closeness of observation stems, nevertheless, from an intimacy with the local scene which only a local writer can have. Lee is the only writer in English with a book of short stories to his name, *The Mutes in the Sun* (Kuala Lumpur, 1963). Of the small number of stories by others that lie scattered in various periodicals, the best have been gathered together and published very recently.[7] Perhaps because very little in either British or local traditions nurtures the art of the short story, the actual output is quite puny and lacks the vitality which comes from an awareness of the real potentialities of the form.

The reverse is true of local poetry in English. There is little or no tradition of expatriate poetry, and poets have gone directly to the main figures in the native

British tradition for inspiration. Where the development in prose has been fitful at best, poetry sprang up spontaneously in the 1950's and has progressed steadily, so that it is now useful to distinguish between first and second generations of post-war poets. The three outstanding names in the first generation, Wong Phui Nam, Edwin Thumboo, and Ee Tiang Hong, have not only now established local reputations but they continue to write with an assurance that comes from long practice and makes them worthy representatives of local poetry in English on the international scene. Examples of poetry from both generations have recently appeared in a local periodical. Wong, Thumboo, and Ee are represented; there is also work by two younger poets, Pretam Kaur and Omar Mohamed Nor. Wong and Omar show between them two clear alternatives adopted by poets writing now.

All of Wong Phui Nam's poetry deals with preparations for a kind of self-renewal. They take place in a luminous world just behind the senses, only tenously related to the common processes of thought. Here a private drama is prosecuted with stoic fatality in anticipation of an expected disaster—or is it an epiphany?

> The flares strung out to the jetty's end
> burn for your death, burn for a sick consciousness,
> the wharves where the debris of old crates and wagons
> smoulders with its hurt, for the great ship
> crawling out across the water, towards the islands,
> towards the sky, as you leave these tides to beat upon
> estuaries new to this gathering dark.

The effort to make out whether the hoped-for conclusion is to be regarded as disaster or epiphany generates the tension in his work; it is the source of his concern to achieve an exactness in the presentation of "a private landscape" which has public significance.

Wong's poetry develops a visual intensity in explicating emotion in concrete metaphors. Especially in *How the Hills are Distant* (Kuala Lumpur: Tenggara, 1968) one cannot escape the impression of watching a skilfully edited film. A camera-eye picks out objects and scenes in a strange, almost unpeopled landscape, while gradually it is the observer's loneliness, his quiet terror which impresses more than the things observed:

> About the empty market square
> we do not gather like agitated elders
> in expectation of a runner in with the news,
> the invaders held by the few at a narrow mountain pass,
> bearers of good news being no more of the fashion.
> You who would look for signs, or starve
> among a wilderness, of stone, there are only the boulders
> drowning in pits of worked out mining leases.
> From the main street of the town,
> see how the hills are distant, locked in their silences.

In Wong's more recent poems there is a decisive effort to people his desolate landscapes. As he has said, he wrote of people who "find themselves having to live by institutions and folkways which are not of their heritage, having to absorb the manners and languages not their own". In "Remembering Grandma" he makes the difficult shift from atmosphere and emotion to tradition and people:

> When yellow deepened in the cheeks
> of mother's sharp, dry face, Grandma
> knew; a canine instinct

nosed out all the soft parts
that death had slightly smudged.
How would she conduct herself?
Mother would leave her to herself
in the impending wilderness of our house.
How then would she conduct herself
being but old flesh persisting on the bone?
A son-in-law, improbable, yet Chinese.
Off-accent. His *Malacca* sister regularly rose
to plague him, out of the ashes
of a painful past. Grandma had no claim
on their intense, murky quarrels in Malay.[8]

Wong has mastered the art of the packed line without becoming incomprehensible. He has put to quite original use the cultural minutiae which have made us the polyglot community we are today. He breathes convincing life in the English language into 'Baba [i.e. of mixed Chinese-Malay parentage] children/animal and tartar,/breaking out in a strange babel of tongues'. He achieves a precision of image while evoking an intangible air of decay and confusing change. Objectively of tone combines with allusive utterance in the portrayal of the Chinese grandmother contemplating her unlikely progeny. And the father portrayed in the concluding stanza of this poem is wholly defined by his Baby Austin 7, his Pitman manuals, his copy of *Robinson Crusoe*, and last but not least his marriage to his wife's 14 year-old niece. When taken together, these details function also as ironic portrait of a man culturally adrift.

What Wong is doing in Asian poetry in English is not dissimilar to what Robert Lowell is doing in America. There is the same rejection of the temptation (to which too many present day poets have succumbed) to make poetic hay of bourgeois grievances, the same meticulous interest in oblique statement. Like Lowell, Wong holds unyieldingly to personal experience seen in a wide context as the principal factor of a poet's salvation; he is preoccupied with the obscure kinds of violence done to the individual by modern societies everywhere. After he had completed *How the Hills are Distant* in 1962, Wong felt, rightly, that he had exhausted a particular vein. 'Remembering Grandma' turns up what looks like ore from a fresh mine. It is one of the first efforts to get to grips with—rather than moan about—the detribalization anxiety that has dogged the Malaysian writer for years.

While Wong continues to justify strongly a meticulous interest in oblique statement, most of his younger contemporaries have joyfully embraced a kind of Larkinesque directness, and a trendy colloquialism. On the whole this has been a liberating influence. The language of Omar Mohamed Nor's poems is a neutral kind of medium which allows the poet's own speaking voice to come through without difficulty. Stripped clean of early twentieth-century habits of allusiveness, it is the mark of a kind of 'international style'—perhaps 'Commonwealth style' is more accurate—in minor poetry appearing nearly everywhere it seems. One imagines much of this being read to jazz accompaniment, as this extract from Omar's 'e.e. cummings talked to me from his grave' shows:

paul tillich came recently
and was ragged because of
his theological beliefs
i met a muslim who is still
repenting for not having
performed his pilgrimage to mekah
he paid attention to his quran
i, to my bible

i asked him whether there's
going to be a muslim-christian
holocaust and he says that
the true muslim is a true christian
even bob dylan would sing to
that, he had a peep at me
as he fell off from his motor-cycle
i hope there will be a
congress of dead poets
where i can meet a malay poet
from malaysia

i must stop here
it's bed time and i have to
cook myself for the worms
they object to badly cooked food
they dislike my poems because
i did not use
capital letters[9]

There is a deliberate surrender of any effort to cope with traditional or evolving ideas of imagery and with metrical or syllabic scansion; and a readier, less derivative fluency is the result. But the dangers of swinging over to this extreme are also clear. The poem is verbose rather than conversational; it lacks tensile strength. On the other hand, Omar's other poems in *Tenggara*, notably 'three layers' and 'the mosque' show the greater discipline and the neat economy which this style is capable of. Other young poets like Pretam Kaur, Wong May, and Mohamed Haji Salleh have written with equal success. Local poetry in English, whether written in Wong's or Omar's style, is not likely any more to appear derived. Its tone may falter here and there, but it is now really on its own.

Still one has to ask where this poetry is going. An 'international style' may free a writer from a specifically British tradition, but at the risk of some deflection of purpose or loss of potential enrichment. The signal lesson that local poets in English have learnt—the hard way—over the past twenty years is that enrichment cannot come from overseas. Can one suggest—ducking flying epithets of 'chauvinist', 'petty nationalist' and the like—that it can come from our own Asian heritage? In conversation Wong Phui Nam has often deplored the lack of received tradition which greatly handicaps a writer here. Perhaps his is the most solid achievement to date because he has always been exercised by this lack. There appear to be no myths to fertilize the imagination such as modern British and American poets can play at rich and poor with, no body of received assumptions upon which a writer can rely. Of course this is an illusion. South-East Asian civilization, from Thailand and Cambodia in the north to the Indonesian archipelago in the south, is uniquely steeped in classical traditions linking it to India and the Middle East, in much the same way as the British heritage is related to the traditions of Greece and Rome. The classical culture of this region has remained dormant through not being drawn upon during more than two centuries of colonial occupation. As far as writers in English are concerned, that heritage, regrettably, is almost forgotten. The fault is partly but not entirely their own. Our histories are still mainly 'diplomatic' histories relating to the establishment and the eventual withdrawal of colonial power. There are no sufficiently detailed or extensive social and cultural histories as yet to which we may go to understand the native past from which we have grown. Research is now turning up, also, a rich tradition of Malay folklore. Why shouldn't local writers in English re-examine this deep and varied past and put it to fresh purposes? *Lela Mayang*, a Malay play recently produced in English translation, which won both critical and

popular success, gained much of its stiffening from doing just this. If mythic power is lacking in local literature in English as yet, it is not for want of traditions or history apart from the colonial. These are already there in abundance, but only writers can revivify them, not by straight forward historical representation, but by investing them with the slightly mordant cast of our attitudes today. It has been done before elsewhere and is still being done.

A renaissance of abiding Asian traditions may well be self-conscious to begin with, but the promise of the more rounded authentic response which this widened scope of reference will afford a writer cannot be lightly dismisesd. It is important that he should not labour to create what is already there. This hoped-for richness will not, of course, suit all temperaments, but our heterogeneous tradition, often older than the European, will not have been fully exploited, and our writers in English will continue to appear competent at best, unless some of them initiate this scrutiny and reinterpretation of the past.

How they do it is of course the problem. If they aim to deny the present which has been profoundly complicated by Western norms, and if they seek the restoration of a bygone, relatively homogeneous, Asian cultural order, they are likely to be caught, in V. S. Naipaul's phrase, in a middle passage. They should rather aim to retrieve and recast items of a great and neglected heritage in the light of the complexities of the second half of the twentieth century. Something of this motive in R. K. Narayan's work keeps him, unlike V. S. Naipaul, significantly outside the development of the modern British novel. What is quite certain is that if Malaysian (and possibly Asian) literature in English is ever to go beyond a certain praiseworthy competence and become something to be reckoned with, to be read not only by interested readers in other countries but in Asian countries as well, writers must now examine whether the language will adapt to their bones as it has so far adapted to their thought.

NOTES

[1] For a nearly complete list see together *The Commonwealth Pen*, edited by A. L. McLeod, London, 1961; *Bunga Emas*, ed. T. Wignesan, London and Kuala Lumpur, 1964; and the annual bibliography by L. Fernando and D. E. K. Wijasuriya and later by Ooi Boo Eng (Malaysia and Singapore section) of the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 1965—.

[2] Malay is the sole national language of Malaysia (and Indonesia). Singapore's national language is also Malay, but it recognizes four official languages, among them Malay and English. As this is an area study, writers in English in Malaysia and Singapore are considered together.

[3] Hugh Clifford, 'The Genius of Mr Joseph Conrad', *North American Review*, June 1940, pp. 842-52.

[4] Jessie Conrad, *Joseph Conrad and his Circle*, London, 1935, pp. 76-77.

[5] Among them are *Since the Beginning*, *A Price of Malaya*, and *A Freelance of Today*. There are also numerous tales and sketches of Malay life.

[6] Anthony Burgess, 'The Corruption of the Exotic', *The Listener*, 26 September 1963, p. 465.

[7] *Twenty-two Malaysian Stories*, edited by L. Fernando, London, 1968.

[8] *Tenggara*, II, I, April 1968, p. 56.

[9] Ibid., p. 77.