"[A] country where one cannot wish to be": Place and the Mythic Imagination in Wong Phui Nam's *How the Hills Are Distant*

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In this article I shall delve into the heart of Wong's early notions of a homeland, which according to him is a "country where one cannot wish to be", and I shall also probe what he means by a local writer bringing "a naked and orphaned psyche" into his work (*Exile* 28, 133).[1] His use of modernist myth (or a mythic mentality) in all his early verse, especially in the sequence *How the Hills Are Distant*, will demonstrate how an early Malayan writer such as Wong could easily lead to his work having a moral and political non-viability in the postcolonial context. What I mean to say is that, after being left with no discernible socio-historical traditions after his country's independence, Wong's idea of man as a solitary being diminishes somewhat the notion of his participating in society as a social being. Without real cultural or spiritual sustenance, the personae in his poetry are left to wander in the so-called wilderness of a mythic landscape, sometimes even as real human beings. Sometimes they take the form of a naked psyche (I call it a "persona-self") who senses the inevitability of the feeling of exile from the land. Often it is when such consciousnesses and landscape become indistinguishable that we are left at the end of the poetic sequence with just the theme of resignation, isolation, and the failed attempts at recreating some sort of idealised postcolonial land. At other times these consciousnesses are left within the landscape hoping to rediscover a wholeness of self in the form of, as I will argue, disordered Jungian mythic models. It is when such a disordered consciousness is unable to achieve any kind of psychic reintegration within the landscape, or reintegrate itself with it, that the mythical aspect of his or her landscape becomes frightening, where monsters are seen to emanate from the jungle, rock-pools and sea. Wong himself has said that the bleakest aspect of his landscape is often symbolised by a god who fails in his resurrection, which in turn symbolises the lack of any historical and cultural sustenance of the local condition (Quayum 45-46).

What Wong decided to do was to concentrate on the "otherness" of the local landscape, readjusting his colonial focus to include ideas of subverting the supposed idea of belonging to the land to one that remains unredeemed, ephemeral. Although his first volume *How the Hills Are Distant* published as late as 1968 was probably the most important book of Malaysian literature of that decade, the impenetrability of his metaphorical landscape and use of modernist myths could already be discerned from his poetic output as an undergraduate. Beginning with the uncollected pieces in *30 Poems: University of Malaya Poems 1957-1958*

(1957) and *Litmus One: Selected University Verse* 1949-1957 (1958), it was with the publication of his long poetry sequence *Toccata on Ochre Sheaves* (1958) that I feel the mature phase of Wong's writing began to emerge, in spite of displaying a tendency to rely wholly on Eliot's modernist strain of writing. Therefore, for the purposes of the discussion here, I shall confine myself to his poetry written after the 1950s. His imaginative resources had by the 1960s begun to display a keen interest in conceptualising a new Malaya as an abstracted entity in which his vision of its landscape is often caught between the outer world of trope and the inner world of dislocation and loss. The mediation between these two worlds by a "persona-self" of the poet, as we shall see, will in the end determine either the outcome as vision from or knowledge of the landscape, or the severe lack of both notions of transformation and release.

Wong Phui Nam's poetry sought a vision of his homeland that was something entirely new in Malaya in the late 1950s and early1960s. His early poetry often depicted a landscape of his homeland which hovered between the idea of belonging and non-belonging. He did not believe in any one vision of the land or in one unified voice and, in so doing, rejected the possibility of envisioning a new nation-state from the fixed perspective of one ideal. By and large his poetic enterprise right up till the 1990s rejected the "oppression" of a single interpretation of the local landscape but was willing to delve into the possibility of presenting a vision of the land and nation by way of imaginative flexibility, especially in his use of myth and metaphor. However, it was the very difficulty of this new landscape that he put forward which made it seem as if little meaning could emerge from such a terrain of an intellectual's despairing vision of his local landscape and nation as a whole. Redemption from the landscape often became muddled up with the dour strength of his imagination, so much so that the idea of belonging itself was seen as inhabiting an impenetrable personal space of the poet which seems, on the level of surface meaning at least, to be kept separate from the forces of external reality. My analysis of his poetry in this article then seeks to redress some of this "impenetrability" in Wong's verse. I will look at the disjunction that arises from the juxtaposing of the subjective reality and the surface meaning of his landscape, and between his use of personal and literal metaphors. I will do this by establishing the nature of the poet's topographical meaning and seek the possibility of delving into the occasional moments of meaningful alliance to and transformation from within that landscape.

To confront the poetry of Wong Phui Nam is to confront a poetic self seeking validation or regeneration in an alien landscape which yields little by way of meaning in language or an imaginative description of the land. His is a landscape that revels mostly in the power and meaning of the primal nature of things, where it would seem that the encroachment of human civilisation on the untamed order of nature has had little success or that it has yet to take place. This sense of displacement is something Wong himself asserts that gives rise to "a naked and orphaned psyche" in his work as a result of a Malaysian writer in English being

unable to connect with any discernible socio-cultural tradition of his land. In his important essay, "Out of the Stony Rubbish: A Personal Perspective on the Writing of Verse in English in Malaysia" (1993), he speaks about his problems of the lack of identity and even those with the English language itself:

> If he gives any thought at all to writing as a vocation, the writer in English in Malaysia very soon becomes painfully conscious of a special kind of poverty that comes from being almost entirely bereft of an identity that finds its confirmation in a community of belief and tradition — and in the use of a received language whose origins may be traced back to common ancestral beginnings. This is particularly the case if he derives from any of the immigrant communities that make up a large part of the population of the country. The deprivation is not just in the nature of breakdown and loss (a phenomenon characteristic of twentieth century societies) of a pre-existing stable order but of an absence, even at their very beginnings, of cultural and spiritual resources carried over from a "mother" culture relevant to the sustaining of a vital communal life in the new land. Without access to a meaningful tradition or claim to even a disintegrating one, the Malaysian writer in English brings, as it were, to his work a naked and orphaned psyche. (*Exile* 133)

What a Malaysian writer in English brings to his work then is a confrontation with his own lack of understanding of and insight into the new land, "the wilderness" so to speak, something which Wong readily admits that his unlettered Chinese ancestors must have been faced with from day to day after their arrival in colonial Malaya:

> The origins of the individuals and families which make up the immigrant communities ensured that even before their removal to the country of their eventual domicile they would come to the new settlements in a culturally (and spiritually) denuded state. By and large they belonged to the poorest of the poor classes in their homelands. [...] The accretions of more than three millennia of history had left them unburdened of the ancient classics, of religious insight, of the Confucian prescripts for correct social relationships, of poetry and letters, the fine arts and so on. The inner guides to behaviour were a debased form of Taoism mixed with the veneration of ancestors and worship of household and other familiar spirits and a sense of kinship loyalty. These were the scant inheritance they brought with them to contend with the wilderness. (*Exile* 134)

However, this wilderness which failed to provide any kind of spiritual or cultural inspiration to them ironically sustained them in terms of material benefit, which Wong contends eventually became part of their new "values" and by extension those of the nation today (*Exile* 135).

Place and the mythic imagination

As a result of his despairing vision of his young nation as being little more than a socio-cultural wasteland, Wong tried to frame the tropes of the imagined landscape in his poetry to highlight his own sense of alienation and displacement which he felt stemmed from his understanding of the poetics of space and place. The ensuing vision of the land was not only terrifying — with visionary monsters and gods abounding — but also brought a perceived landscape which often could not be mediated by language so as to seek any kind of transformative potential within. No other writer in the short literary history of modern Southeast Asia has presented a more disconcerting vision of a native landscape. The constructed identity of his landscape and locale often suggests a disturbing sense of dis-location and the metaphysical allure of his poems takes on an impenetrative ambivalence into which few local critics dare venture.[2]

The Singaporean poet Edwin Thumboo also had to contend with suck a lack of cultural sustenance in his nation's recent past. However, Thumboo, unlike Wong, preferred to face the future of his land with a spirit of multicultural awareness wherein society's lack of cultural nourishment could be redressed by the artistic attempts at melding the consciousnesses of the different ethnic groups and finding in their shared heritage common myths and symbols to help in discovering the identity of a young nation-state. Wong's attempt at representing the spiritual and cultural privation of his land, on the other hand, preferred to dwell on a more static understanding of the history of his new country and, as a result, chose to depict himself symbolically as a voice, or a "persona-self", merely hovering in and around his metaphorically dense landscape, often sensing an inevitable exile from it. Wong was different from all the writers and poets before him in that his probing into the spiritual consciousness of the land went a step further: it became for him not unlike a probing vision in which the poet's consciousness and the land became inextricably indistinguishable. All his writing except for his transliterations of the Chinese classics[3] displays a propensity to pare down the fine particulars of the physical landscape and be remade as being part of the temporal awareness of a speaking voice of the poems, a primitive and sometimes self-bewildering, analogical persona-self. This persona-self then, being unable to discern a reintegrating vision of the hybridity of the land, chooses to condemn itself to a life lived along the margins of the self and is confined to what Wong calls the "phenomenon of reporting":

> a reporting of the pain, desolation and even horror of an inner state that has little possibility of mediation towards meaning, of the psyche being lost into itself to struggle in a morass created of itself of undirected feelings, fantasies, dreams and deeply buried unnameable primordial urges. (*Exile* 137)

What rules this imaginative, psychic landscape would then have to revert to what Anne Brewster says is the "de-evolutionary process" of Wong's imagery,

"a dragging of human beings back into the insensible, undifferentiated world of primal nature" (144). Intimidating mythic beasts are seen to occupy a large space in the poet's imagination, which live in the rough and seemingly hostile terrain of swamps, impenetrable jungles, tropical rainstorms, gods, ghosts, superstition and rumour. So much of this inhospitable terrain is also covered in varying shades of darkness which in Wong's case could either result from his oft-used binaries of light/dark imagery or, as we shall see, his dense employment of mythic tropes. Even within his more urban topographies, Wong leaves his readers with a sense of menacing bewilderment, especially when the streets of his towns conjure up scenes of struggle and apocalyptic denouement. In the much-anthologised piece, "For a Birthday" (or Part XVIII)[4], the persona-self ponders the impossibility of ever finding meaning in a land torn apart seemingly by a spiritual crisis which is engendered in the violent and destructive descriptions of the townscape. His only hope, he says, is in the tending of his "sores to an emptiness", which in the final stanza is sensitively transposed into the "terrain" of his pain, which even language is unable to transform or alleviate:

> This then is a country where one cannot wish
> to be. The spirit not given its features
> festers in the flesh, incites the year
> to come upon it like the tiger. The city's parks,
> odd streets corners and the public buildings
> bear the stench, the torn fur
> of trivial remembrances. Thus in the flesh
> am I hunted out, creature of my days,
> vocal perhaps to seem some kind of Job
>
> tending my sores to an emptiness,
> the hoarse throat my psaltery to make such sounds
> as may breed some hint for the soul's endurance.
> Who would be comforters, do not begin to dress
> or even touch these scabs —
> their peeling leaves
> a spreading terrain
> where all conclusions, all arguments are broken down
> to miles of striations, the soft-mud flats.
>
> (*Exile* 28-29)

As in most of the poems in the sequence, the persona's search for self-renewal amidst a hostile environment speaks of a dual sense of displacement. Firstly, the persona's psyche is bereft of the landscape which he ironically inhabits at the close of the poem; it is the pain of his wounds from being hunted down by a beast which actually comes in between him and his immediate topography. Secondly, the persona points to the inability of language, his language, even to lessen the pain of

his physical or spiritual self. Again, in the last four lines, his wounds numinously form a barrier to his understanding of the language and logic of his true spiritual misery of being abandoned amidst such a hostile world. It is this dualistic sense of displacement which informs much of Wong's poetry sequence, resulting in a realisation of the futility of the search for meaning in the land or for a sense of wholeness in the natural landscape through language. In the first poem of the sequence (Part I), the persona begins with such an abundance of hope that he will succeed in merging his psyche with natural landscape through the "eloquence of words" and the "vowels on the wind" of "the old man, the river":

> When I am dead
> should the old man rage
> and relieve himself upon the fields,
> my heart shall no more
> be taut with kneading
> that works from silt, green tumescent heads.
>
> The old man grows,
> lives from subconscious hills,
> sentient in fishes and reeds that slant
> towards eloquence of words.
> The waterfowl cry
> his flowering of vowels on the wind.
>
> (*Exile* 5-6)

But the resulting hope cannot find resolution in any poem of the sequence after this, and, sadly enough, finds fruition only in the rich tensions of loss and despair. The resulting feeling of a pervasive rootlessness, both of the mind and body, comes about as the result of the processes of this all-pervasive tension.

There are also other mythopoeic strategies at work in the sequence. "How the Hills Are Distant" as a whole employs numerous mythopoeic strategies that act as a kind of exploration of belief (or disbelief) in a land that seems spiritually devoid of, according to Wong, "an identity that finds its confirmation in a community of belief and tradition — and in the use of a received language whose origins may be traced to common ancestral beginnings" (*Exile* 133). He asserts that the landscape depicted in his early poetry was an "outer manifestation of the inner condition of suffering cultural deprivation" (Quayum 52), which I think is another way of putting what he had expressed earlier: "The real disease is oneself; and the problem really boils down to how one must come to terms with the sickness in one's own spirit." (in a letter to Eric Mottram, quoted in Wignesan: 4).

Wong's poetic landscape is one that yields little by way of meaning; there is an abundance of images of silence/s, darkness, and a festering loneliness. Although there are moments when the flora and fauna of the landscape point towards the

"eloquence of words" as I have pointed out earlier (Part I, *Exile* 5), language usually yields painfully little. Often it is just "the pain of looking for answers" (Part X, *Exile* 18). In Part V of the sequence, Wong says that in spite of the feeling of a "harsh longing" and when "the heart is upon false scent",

> There is no commerce with the ghosts who have died.
> Out of the coming and passing of the words
> my tongue finds for longing, from tangle of this dying,
> there is but a little falling of damp earth
> and a slight cold wind against the trees,
> savagely intent upon their separate interior lives

and in the final stanza:

> Keeping its days and seasons,
> the land yields no speech to us
> even through intercessions of imagined ghosts
> who would make it easier for the tongue.
>
> (*Exile* 10)

In Part VIII the poet records a "conversation petering out… silences" (16). The rumour and superstition from within such a landscape point towards initial attempts at evoking meaningful paradigms but they too in the end just harden into incomplete myth. Wong warns us in his famous lines from Part IX:

> 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.
>
> (*Exile* 17)

If at all there was to be an enterprise of realising a new land in words, Wong's sequence was doomed to failure from the outset as the landscape holds too much by way of "the contours of a personal anguish" (*Exile* 11) and the cultural sterility of arriving "into the past / of some non-arriving future" (*Exile* 31). Indeed, such an unimaginable past or future would surely prepare the way or ground, metaphorically speaking, for "the promised emanation of a god" from among "the twists and tangles of vegetation" and "the streets uneasy at the coming of a strange birth" (Part IX). It is obvious here that Wong's Modernist strategy of dislocation and use of myth are inspired by his reading of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and his employment of Christian myth from "Journey of the Magi" in particular. Also, the

agony of Wong's personae that experience a kind of judgement-day scenario is not unlike that of W.B. Yeats's "The Second Coming". I will examine the nature of such mythical gods and monsters in the next two sections but one must not forget that Wong's language of transcendence and use of Modernist Christian myth was later transformed in the 1990s when a new Christ-like figure emerges from out of the local plantations and wilderness of the local landscape.[6]

Jungian mythic models

Prominent Wong Phui Nam critics like Anne Brewster and Lloyd Fernando have all noted that strange beasts scurry about the landscape in much of the volume *How the Hills Are Distant*, although none of these critics seem to want to read Wong's poetry sequences as a whole. Thus far, they have suggested that these beasts are symbolic in part and suggest the mindscape of an immigrant poet to a large extent, whose themes of loss and displacement are closely linked to his evocation of place. I would like to suggest that, while the symbolic import of these beasts is indeed linked to such themes, these "symbols" need to be grounded further in the language and meaning of myth. In my mind two important mythical archetypes in Wong's early poetry need to be explored. One is Wong's employment of Jungian mythographic language and the other is his acknowledged rewriting of the Egyptian Osiris myth. For the purposes of this discussion, I would like to read both the sequence "How the Hills Are Distant" and all the poems contained in the later sequence "For a Local Osiris" (collected in *Ways of Exile*) as a whole, although they were not written as a continuous piece of work.

As we have already seen, Wong's poetic landscape is a highly private one which is akin to language for the exploration of the soul rather than one which is anchored in the public spaces of reality. I concur with Lloyd Fernando when he points out that Wong "deals with preparations for a kind of self-renewal. They take place in a luminous world just behind the senses, and are more related to a cryptic mood rather than to the common processes of thought" (146). This insight will be important in helping me find a visionary opening, as Seamus Heaney would call it, into the Jungian archetypal world of Wong's early poetry. In a central poem such as Part IX in *How the Hills Are Distant*, a curious blend of classical mythography is at work. The suggestions of the Minotaur walking the backstreets and the "promised emanation of a god" seem to invite an exploration of the psyche of the persona-self.

> Broken off from their daily pre-occupations
> the streets on Sunday settle into their presences of stone.
> Houses under a manic sun put up their distressed faces,
> and trees along the edges of a public lot,
> die quietly, and to themselves. The walls remain

to keep the minotaur to the backstreets
when the heart, too much in the sun of its inconsequence,
is withered of its images: from its dark recesses
of jungle pool, the promised emanation of a god,
and rumour wild among the people, who would be saved
in the ruin of merchants and a lean year upon the fields.
But that images should wither and die,
weathered from the places where we would walk,
the buildings carry symptoms of our particular hell.
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.

(*Exile* 17)

As we have already noted, the harmony of the persona's "self" is continually in conflict with the evoked landscape, which in turn effects the heartfelt ideas of loss and displacement in the poem. I will now suggest that this is due, in part, to the incongruity of Wong's use of Jungian "archetypal images", especially in poems like Parts IX, XVI and XVIII ("For a Birthday"). In the above poem, the exploration of the persona's psyche can be discerned first by looking at the existence of the Minotaur roaming the "dark backstreets" in the poem.

In the Greek hero myth of Theseus and his slaying of the Minotaur, Laurence Coupe argues that the concepts of the "ego" (the hero Theseus himself), "shadow" (the minotaur which must be overcome), "anima" (the feminine unconscious, Ariadne) are all positive images for the "self" to undertake a journey into the darkness and then rise towards the light of "self". The goal is to achieve "psychological integration" or a wholeness of self (141). If we were to study the poetic metaphors found in Wong's poem Part IX closely, we would be able to discern that certain Jungian principles of the "self" are also at work, although not in exact conformity with the hero myth account of Theseus and the slaying of the Minotaur. The "ego", or the persona's "heart" in the poem (line 7), is seen as being too enfeebled and therefore precludes the possibility of reading a hero myth in the poem. It is "too much in the sun of its inconsequence, / is withered of its images" so much so that it can only dream of wild rumours and "the promised emanation of a god" — the latter, according to Coupe, would indicate the ultimate "model of the attainment of self" (as in, for example, the myth of Jesus Christ). Therefore there is little possibility of reading a hero myth in the "narrative" of this poem via the archetypal

concepts of the Jungian mythic model. What we are left with is the unsubdued archetype of the "shadow" of Wong's Minotaur which bedevils the town and the persona-self of the poem. Even the possibility of the journey towards the light of the reintegration of the "self" ends up as withered "images" on the streets and the surroundings buildings which, the persona tells us, "carry symptoms of our particular hell". Interestingly enough, the self is still stuck in darkness, incapable of any psychic growth or has not the ability to transform itself. It is no wonder then that meaning or the answer to the persona's predicament is made all the more powerful when he tells us at the end of the poem, "see how the hills are distant, locked in their silences". When such archetypal myth is incapable of being transformed within such a negative evocation of landscape, it simply petrifies as the streets do at the outset and the close of the poem. They simply "settle into their presences of stone" (line 2).

Such a disordered consciousness which arises out of the landscape is, as I have said, due to the inability of the persona to achieve any kind of wholeness, or the reintegration of self. In Part IX, the persona-self speaks about "the promised emanation of a god" but which ironically originates from the "dark recesses" of some "jungle pool". The sense of loss which the persona-self feels is made all the more poignant because of the seeming impossibility of a god to arise out of such a contradictory wasteland, which therefore means that the Jungian ultimate goal of the true attainment of self remains incomplete, dissociated from the psyche. In Part XVI, the "lonely self" is brave enough to actually confront his psyche. However, instead of assuming the persona of Christ himself, who according to Coupe is the ultimate attainment of the mythic self, the persona-self can only bear witness to the crucifixion scene:

> To most only the despair is real,
> winding from the face by rough steps
> upward to the overwhelming hill
> of Calvary, and the long deep strikes of pain
> into the shoulder, as the dragged heavy end
> of the cross, knocks in the teeth
> of the lower steps following the ascent.
> The mean fact of houses bars the way
> crowding upon the lonely self,
> and bare walls that hide our weeping in the garden.
> There is only the self in the midst of fire —
> when the planted crown strikes root
> upon the skull
> the agony beats back the overhanging Roman sun
> and the multitude, pressing in upon the hour
> told in the sky's final desolation.
> To most who after, turn away,
> there cannot be wine-rows upon the slopes,

but the wind sawing at ruined walls
and a hint of bones in its tracks across the sands.

(*Exile* 25)

But this is not to say that the self is not trying to find some sort of "resurrection". The Jungian metaphors of the ego's descent into despair, and then the ascent, which I interpret as a continuation of the metaphor of "our particular hell" of Part IX earlier, as well as the journey the attainment of "the self in the midst of fire", point towards the fact that the processes of salvation or finding the revelation of "self" are indeed present. But, having said that, the wilderness of the hill of Calvary which confronts us at the end of the poem is still too bleak, too disillusioning for us to say that the metaphorical journey of the ego has at last yielded vision from such a desolate landscape. The final line of the "hint of bones" strewn across the land is then not unlike the petrification of the self in stone of Part IX or the scattered body that is the "small stones beneath the porch" in the poem XVIII ("For a Birthday"). Indeed, we have been warned, not to look for such "signs, or starve / among a wilderness of stone". Such a task would prove futile.

This self then is some sort of fleeting creature, though human, who spends his days wandering the tormented topography of much sorrowfulness. He hopes, in spite of the futility of such thoughts, that he could somehow be delivered from, or find redemption in, and amongst Wong's "wilderness of stone", rock-pools and swamps. He is some kind of wraith-like creature whose "spirit" Wong tells us is "not given its features" (*Exile* 28) who waits or at other times is said to be in us as in the poem "Batu Lane, K.L." (Part XIX) or *within* us — "the stunted unfinished creature / that resides in your flesh" (*Exile* 32). Anne Brewster's account of the beasts that roam the poetry sequence is also plausible. She contends that the many creatures such as dragons, half-beasts, Minotaur, demons, ghosts and monsters which roam about in Wong's bedevilled topography are

> mythic agents of retribution who are to enact their role not only in a personal but a wider, collective context; their significance is cultural in the same way that Yeats' mythic beast in "the Second Coming" suggested to him the spectre of war that was to descend upon Europe. What Wong's beast of retribution symbolizes is the vulnerability of the alienated, estranged psyche of the rootless and the exile… of a minority ethnic group, the Chinese, in the Malaysian landscape (1987: 145).

Brewster later suggests that the scenario of the sequence has an eschatological incline, asserting that the "agents of retributions" above are potentially "destructive forces at work in the natural and social world" although Wong's poetry "fails to fulfil this promise" (146-147). While I am not averse to perceiving such doomsday strains in *How the Hills Are Distant*, I nevertheless fail to see their true relevance

because these so-called agents have nothing to do with a socio-Christian revelation in an allegorical landscape but, rather, are simply tropes of the imagination of the persona-self in the sequence. At times they appear simply as metaphors for the nature of a "beastly" landscape and at other times they are employed in true myth-like fashion as in the mythopoeic Jungian models I have already ascertained. If indeed the end-times scenario could be realised, it would be in and as part of Wong's other real mythopoeic strategy in the rewriting and employment of the Osiris and Horus myths in both the "How the Hills Are Distant" and *Candles for a Local Osiris* sequences as we shall soon see.

We must not forget that the landscape found in *How the Hills Are Distant* often works at two levels. The first of course would be Wong's rendering of Eliot's mythological strategies of his wasteland and the second would be the re-siting of his "impotent" landscape to include a Southeast Asian one but without the use the of the Fisher King and Quester Hero myths for example. Wong's new wasteland is densely tropical, although it could also very well at times be tropes of a particular vision of a Buddhist or Taoist hell. In Parts V, for example, the persona-self attempts to elicit a few words by communicating with the dead to explain the tangled, dying landscape before his eyes, but to no avail:

> There is no commerce with the ghosts of those who died.
> Out of the coming and passing of the words
> my tongue finds for longing, from tangle of this dying,
> there is but a little falling of damp earth
> and a slight cold wind against the trees,
> savagely intent upon their separate interior lives.
>
> Keeping its days and seasons,
> the land yields no speech to us
> even through intercessions of imagined ghosts
> who would make it easier for the tongue.
> Against the rain, nothing of the memory of the dead
> is caught and held among the roots. (*Exile* 10)

What the persona-self here tries to do suits Wong's conviction that his migrant Chinese ancestors who came to Malaya must have undergone such an experience. Sensing the strangeness of the dying landscape before his migrant eyes, the persona-self pleads with the ghosts of his ancestors to help him find the rights words (or language) with which to understand his painfully bleak and seemingly dislocated landscape. Where in Part I of the sequence a strain of hopefulness could be seen in the land which is said to slant towards an "eloquence of words" and a "flowering of vowels on the wind" (*Exile* 5), the persona-self in here continues to be bewildered by the savageness of his new land which remains "mute" and thus is unable to inspire the country of his mind with meaning. Later, in Part VI, he realises that

the land's desolation results in a kind of spiritual and imaginative dislocation in its inhabitants. The legends of the land which his ancestors brought with them causes them to recede into their private selves, engendering in them little understanding with which to enter imaginatively into their new world.

> The legend of the dead bear in the shifting rain
> extends the habitations of a private landscape
> which in the light of morning
> upon a fallen hill-side and mud about
> the hedges in a suburb that few think upon
> will bring no change of heart
> or hint for our new roof-lines.
> Word of the terrible dragon's descent
> upon a neighbouring hill will pass
> in the breaking prism of the rain,
> leaving houses and suburban roads in the cold and wet
> and nothing to plague the dreams of children.
>
> (*Exile* 11-12)

The persona-self here is lacking the clues from within his mind in spite of attempts at some kind of reconciliation with his landscape with the hope that language would inspire him to understanding his abstruse and impenetrably bleak country. He recedes further into his despairing consciousness.

The ambivalent fertility of the "local" Osiris[7]

The only real mythopoeic strategy to my mind that Wong actually realises to conclusion is his rewriting or recreating of the Egyptian Osiris fertility myth, which is an original attempt to effect a mystical, rather than a secular, salvation from his persona's "torment of the flesh's complexities" (*Exile* 18). His use of this fertility myth is not unlike T. S. Eliot's employment of it, but with far less regenerative potential and without the use of the Fisher King and Quester Hero legends. While Eliot's use of the myth is employed throughout *The Waste Land* and with the regenerative potential of the myth linked to the resurrected Christ figure in the final part of the sequence, Wong uses the myth in a more disturbing fashion. Instead of the body parts of Osiris helping to make fertile the land by transforming themselves into river reeds, as in the original Egyptian myth, the poet's recreated god has to painfully come to terms with the nullity of transformation, wherein the persona's scattered consciousness in the sequence is unable to find meaning in a culturally sterile and hostile landscape and, thus, is unable to germinate, or sprout roots.

Eddie Tay points out that the employment of the Osiris myth here is about "the issue of articulation" which points towards the "articulation of words" in Part

I of the sequence, of trying to word-sketch the "virgin" terrain of the Malayan/ Malaysian landscape into meaning. While it is true that the persona's body does transform into the "river reeds" in that part of the sequence and thus invigorate the landscape with hopeful meaning and distinct identity, Wong himself has stated that

> Osiris suited my purposes as I found I could make him into a god who failed in his resurrection to symbolise our local condition. If such a god comes back at all, he is slightly demented as represented in the violent growth of our tropical vegetation. He is a transplanted temperate flowering shrub that grows thick, fat leaves but fails to flower. (Quayum 45-46)

His "local" Osiris is not the Egyptian Osiris who later fathers a child whom all the living pharaohs symbolise but a mythic, dismembered half-beast, as in Part III of the shorter sequence "Candles for a Local Osiris". In this poem the persona-self senses inwardly that one of the reasons for the failed emanation is that the tropical jungle subverts the idea of a lush temperate forest giving birth to such "a carnivorous waking". So bleak is the poet's conception of his natural tropical landscape of Malaya that even foreign mythic gods are not able to germinate the land so as to find rebirth in it. The poet-persona is only able to ponder such a god's death amidst the local landscape:

> Whenever the night is troubled with wraiths
> of rain that haunts our roofs, stirring the senses
> and, in the blood, a carnivorous waking
> only to the reek of the city's promises,
> I think of your death. A god, that day you stalked
> your quarry till a sudden clearing in the woods
> happened on you and its changes of climate
> coursed through your veins. The flowers
> you found here were furry and green
> and could not bloom. In the undergrowth, the thing
> you surprised had the look you did not understand.
> And when remembrance of what you had done,
> or left undone, could no longer hurt you
> like a wound, under the leafy shadows
> you were made ready for death.
>
> (*Exile* 53)

Ironically, the local landscape is said to breed the absence of such a god, rather than such a god haunting the absent spaces of the jungle and urban landscape. This absence is of course not unlike the alterity of the landscape which so many postcolonial writers invoke in their writing to suggest, among other things, the

themes of cultural and spiritual dislocation or deracination. For Wong, the inability to understand and hence connect with the natural world of his homeland is made all the more frightening. The absence which he senses about the land often makes him just suggest the presence of half-monsters, which function as metonymical, rather than metaphorical, connections between the poet and his natural world. While metaphor would suggest the completion or designation of another half of meaning or image, his half-monsters to my mind act as poetic metonymy, wherein they make abstruse connections or associations with the poet's perceptual spaces of absence. In most of his sequence the poet-persona is only able to suggest, or sense within him, the incarnation of such mythic creatures and, as a result, is only able metonymically to realise a beast half-formed. In Part IV of the sequence it is again perceived, with the stimuli of the filthy, physical urban landscape and elemental earth, as terrifying with "savage beak and claw", but with none of its other physical features described:

> Out by the back way past closing time
> I make for the road. Through worn soles the loose stones
> hurt. My toes feel moist from pressing into slush.
> raw trash on a chill wind… Out there my disquiet
> spreads, infests the mounds piled high, fermenting
> in the wide-mouthed municipal bins. Whatever moves,
> moves among greased cans, bruised tomatoes and things
> spilt from plastic bags…
>
> Only once have I sensed it,
> high above the roadway, above the sodium lamps that light
> the nearby intersection, hard against the sky, adrift ---
> drawn from the sea by rankness of these breeding grounds.
> *With savage beak and claw, you would have wrought*
> *much havoc, cast terror wide before you*
> *as you slipped into the plunging bright arc of your descent.*
>
> (emphasis not mine; *Exile* 54)

From his disgust with the filth of the increasingly materialistic culture of the towns as well as the poet-persona's deepening feeling of dislocation with the landscape, the persona is unable to perfect his description in words of a real monster or pagan god. The metonymical connections which I have pointed out with regards to its description suggest for me the manifestation of some kind of psychological repression which comes from within the poet-persona. Perhaps his consciousness is not prepared to deal with the impulses of loss and defeat which arise from his incomplete identification with space and place and therefore is unable to form vividly or confront the reality of fully-realised images of such a despairing consciousness.

We can easily see this in the shorter sequence "Osiris Transmogrified" which suggests that such beasts are indeed images of the psyche of oneself, disconcerting images which appear to terrify and nothing else. As usual the poet-persona senses its presence from the elemental stimuli, here of "a habitation of the moist twilight" by the sea:

> You were a shadow
> assuming form – a beast, elemental god
> incarnating, sprawled upon damp sacks, old newspapers,
> trousers opened at the fly. The limbs and torso
> in their bulk were not fully resolved from mud.
> Thinking to look closer, I drew you out and saw —
> the face, an earth wall, cutting that had slipped
> under the weight of rain and, in that featureless wound,
> myself, sheared of all familiarity grown from long
> having been human. In the morning, I was smooth
> hard stone rolled over the sea-bed in a rising
> stream. The children going up and down the stairway
> were carried luminescent in half-light — yellows
> greens and blues and pinks — roundels turning
> in the stream — afloat, migratory, bright sea-anemones.
>
> (Part IV, *Exile* 64)

The "trousers opened at the fly" is a judiciously chosen image as it recalls ironically the original myth in which Isis recovers all the body parts of Osiris except for his penis. However, for Wong's phantasmagorical creature, it is born, upon resurrection, emasculated. This creature, finally revealed to us, is the poet-persona himself and, by extension possibly, all denizens of the depicted landscape. That is to say that the poet's psychological search for identity in an alien landscape reveals little if nothing at all by way of his imagery. His developing consciousness of a migrant soul in a new land and the attempt of wanting to discover a suitable voice or language to help him plant new roots in the cultural psyche of his adopted country come to little fruition in the end. In the poem above, not unlike other poems in the sequences already discussed, the consciousness of the poet-persona is shorn of his humanness and the following morning petrifies and becomes part of the landscape once more, becoming a "smooth / hard stone" by the beach. Even the potentially rich imagery of the variously coloured "luminescent" children by the sea's edge lacks any kind of transformative potential — they are only described as "afloat, migratory" like "bright sea-anemones". Strangely enough, the sea-monster of Part IV of the sequence above is described in more vivacious, though frightening, terms of slipping seawards and headlong "*into the plunging bright arc of your descent*" (*Exile* 54).

Conclusion

Beginning with his early poetic sketches which tended to invoke only T. S. Eliot's strain of modernity, the major verse of Wong Phui Nam eventually settled on the now important theme of migrant dislocation. Not unlike Eliot's European wasteland, his early poetry can be read as an indictment of a newly independent Malaya (and even Singapore) of the late 1950s and 1960s, which according to the poet was a land without a real spiritual and cultural inheritance to help sustain any kind of significant explorations into meaning and national identity through the very act of writing. While it could be said that Eliot's wasteland was a work about the yearning for order through its use of "the paradigm fertility as the framework for a transcendent vision" (Coupe 35), Wong's use of modernist myth as a means of explaining and demystifying the wilderness of his age was even more of a descent into the cultural chaos and sterility of a land. He has said that his metaphorical landscape had "little possibility of mediation towards meaning" ("Out of the Stony Rubbish", *Exile*: 137).[8]

It is then very easy to read Wong's *How the Hills Are Distant* and much of his early poetry as a poetic sequence which has at its heart the themes of exile and loss (of course the exile in this case would be deemed an exile of the mind rather than a physical one), with the poet despairing of the cultural wasteland that was his Malaya of the late 1950s and early 1960s. What I have also put forward in this article is that while at the heart of his sequence there exists a notion of a fractured society struggling to gain a cultural identity (cultural insight even) as well as how the survival of humanity is articulated, it is also about the surrendering of the will of the poet to his art, which in turn leads to his depicting of the local landscape as some kind of ahistorical wilderness and spiritual desolation. Such an ahistoricity comes as a result of his acute poetry of alienation that he so ably demonstrates throughout his early poetic oeuvre. He searches for a wholeness or a reintegration of the self that is not in the past, present or future and, in so doing, creates a mythic space which is unlike much of the poetry written in English in his part of the world. I believe that Wong was not interested in exploring the many historical dimensions of a newly-independent Malaya but perhaps preferred to dwell on the impossibility of the cultural regeneration of that land, which he then transposed to a now almost universal condition of the exile of the mind. His use of mythical archetypes, especially his rewriting of Eliot's modernist strategies and the savage Osiris myth, are all re-rooted in the world of a "new" Malaya which often yields little by way of meaning or unity.

Notes

[1] All poems quoted in this article are taken from Wong's first volume of collected poetry, *Ways of Exile: Poems from the First Decade*, which I simply refer to as

"*Exile*". The quotation "a naked and orphaned psyche" is from his essay in that volume, "Out of the Stony Rubbish: A Personal Perspective on the Writing of Verse in English in Malaysia".

[2] Only Anne Brewster has dared venture into Wong's metaphorical terrain with some success. Lloyd Fernando has probed some of Wong's poems with some acuity, although he has avoided reading the poems as a whole.

[3] I have refrained from analysing Wong's translations of Chinese classical poetry for two reasons. Firstly, these renderings of mostly Tang Dynasty poetry, especially of Li Po and Tu Fu (or Li Bai and Du Fu), cannot in my opinion be deemed new poems; in terms of their literary conception and execution, they remain very much the work of the original Chinese masters. Secondly, and more importantly, the "world view" or the ordering of the Chinese poetic imagination with regards to the conceptualising of the physical world is quite unlike Western poetry and therefore beyond the scope of this article. Cecile Chu-Chin Sun has put it very succinctly in her article "Mimesis and Xing, Two Modes of Viewing Reality: Comparing English and Chinese Poetry" in *Comparative Literature Studies*:

If I were asked to single out the most significant and radical distinction between English and Chinese poetry, I would say that it is the dominance of *mimesis* in one tradition and that of *xing* in the other. By *mimesis*, I do not mean any particular strain of *mimesis* as developed in the West, nor any narrow definitions of aesthetic representation associated with the term. Instead, I am referring to a mode of conceptualizing reality in terms of a hierarchical way of thinking with its distinct anthropocentric privileging of human beings over external nature, a concept which is deeply rooted in Western metaphysical thinking. In English poetry, one way of tracing this mimetic mode of thinking is through the metaphorical relationship between "tenor" and "vehicle".

Xing (lit., evocation), is not merely a poetic device to evoke feeling in the poem through reference to external reality in Chinese poetry. Rather, in its extended dimension, *xing* represents a lyrical energy that informs Chinese poetry predicated on a cultural orientation in which everything in reality, including human beings, is perceived holistically and as organically integrated. This view of reality constitutes the very premise of the lyrical relationship between "feeling" (*qing*) and "scene" (*jing*) in Chinese poetry, the counterpart to the "tenor" and "vehicle" relationship in Western metaphor. Briefly, "feeling" is a collective term referring to the whole range of abstract and elusive human sentiments expressed in a poem. "Scene," equally a collective term, refers to the physical context of a poem, including all the sounds and sights of external reality. These are primarily of nature, but "scene" can be broader than that. This relationship between "feeling" and "scene" is at the very core of Chinese poetry. Any thorough and comprehensive understanding of the significant distinctions between English and Chinese poetry at the level of their

lyrical expression must be approached from these two distinct modes of viewing reality as implied in the notions of *mimesis* and *xing*, respectively. (326-327)

[4] "For a Birthday" was not included in the earliest version of the sequence *How the Hills Are Distant*, first published in 1968. Later editions of the sequence have included the poem, including Wong's collected volume of verse, *Ways of Exile: Poems form the First Decade* (1993).

[5] My reading of the original Egyptian Osiris myth comes from Laurence Coupe's account of it in *Myth* (London: Routledge, 1997): 1-2. I am grateful to Eddie Tay for pointing out that Wong was already conscious of the employment of the Osiris myth right from his university days as an undergraduate, which was employed in a group of student poems which remains unpublished.

[6] Although Wong himself asserts that the Christ figure "appears now and then though not overtly" in his work, he nevertheless admits that his use of the local Osiris myth in his early work was a kind of parallel "between the seasonal cycles of the temperate regions and the Resurrection" (Quayum 45). He also adds that the Osiris figure was one god who gave "no hope of resurrection", returning later "in a monstrous and unexpected way" (Quayum 51). There is simply no space here to analyse the poet's Christ-like figures in his later poetry in any meaningful detail; such an enterprise would obviously be the basis of another full-length article. Suffice it to say that such a figure appears to transform the local landscape momentarily in later poems such as "A Night Easter", "Lazarus Recumbent" and "A Fire Easter".

[7] My reading of the original Egyptian Osiris myth comes from Laurence Coupe's account of it in *Myth* (London: Routledge, 1997): 1-2. I am grateful to Eddie Tay for pointing out that Wong was already conscious of the employment of the Osiris myth right from his university days as an undergraduate, which was employed in a group of student poems which remains unpublished.

[8] The title of Wong's essay is obviously echoing T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land*; Wong indirectly pays tribute to his only major influence. Modernism in art and literature was seen as something ironical, rarely iconic, and it is for this reason that as a literary movement it made an appearance only in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Malaysia's and Singapore's response to modernism, and all other *–isms* which implied modernity, was at best unenthused, marginal, not unlike the Australian response to modernism (Carter 265-266). Malaysian society had always remained conservative and resistant to any idea of excess or any thing that challenged the "organic unity" (Carter 265) of form and feeling, something which the original Malay *pantun* (or Malay proverbs) and Romantic Literature excelled in achieving and demonstrating.

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