The Poetry of Personal Revelation: Reviewing Cyril Wong's *Unmarked Treasure*

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by Leonard Jeyam

If both Koh Beng Liang's and Alvin Pang's last volumes of verse point outwards to a civilised, urbane Singapore, most of Cyril Wong's poetry prefers to dwell inwards, seeking inner truths about external realities. His is rarely a public poetry that yearns to be consumed by wit, artifice, and social integrity; instead the perceptions of his inner self often take centre stage.

Instead of arriving at the artifice of social, universal truths, Wong prefers to concentrate on self-extenuation and, not unlike his earlier verse, probe the fissurings of the self few are brave enough to speak about. In "Flight Dreams", for example, the persona of the poem realises that the dreams of his future cannot be realised anymore as a result of his mind's young mind discovering the undercurrents of sensuality, sexual desire, which actually help him find release from the dreams of "entrapment" his parents had for him when he was younger:

> Then I discovered a part of me that rose up
> in a hundred bedrooms that eventually
> looked like each other, when a stranger's
> hand or mouth would push me back into myself,
> only to suck me back out again by the shock
> of the body's capacity for desire
> like a black wave rolling back and forth,
> back and forth right through me.

But such sexual release, the persona discovers later, is only akin to an astronaut cast adrift in space, "into a starry nothingness". The perceptual space his words evoke often concord with just the right tone and image. His personal, inner world also discovers just the right public sphere to cohere in, although Wong can be accused of not always wearing his emotions subtly. In "Notes to a Suicide", the persona explores the alienable perspectives of such an act but wallows in gladness thinking about the victory which his newspaper obituary would eventually engender over his parents:

> Imagine it: my face on the last page
> of the Straits Times. Passport-size,
> no less. A grin on my face, for sure,
> mother having chosen it herself.
> But do not mistake that grin for irony.
> Among veterans, I will be the exception,
> the prodigious newcomer for arriving
> before my time. And so imagine it:
> that finishing tape at the end of the race
> tightening to an arc across my chest.

Reading *Unmarked Treasure* is to invite into our minds the clash of intimate and chaotic pieces of the fragmentary nature of human experience. Wong's verse works on different levels of metaphoric revelation and relevance, although it is all too easy to pigeon-hole such verse as being merely confessional. His fondness for the tropes of the postmodern snapshot and visual stimulae is certainly evident in all of his writing. This often translates sensitively into a penchant for enacting meaning simply by way of imagery:

> Uncertainty expanded and pushed
> out against the walls around my voice, but
> my love only saw my easy confidence, my self-
> deprecating humour, while my mind was opening
> a window from the back of my head to gaze
> out into some horizon, where a vague silhouette
> of myself was walking further and further away.

This plane of revelation, amalgamating personal grief and lyrical suggestiveness, is something uncommon to anything being written in Singapore at the moment. Perhaps only Alfian Saat's outstanding second book of verse, *A History of Amnesia* (2001), could compare in terms of autobiographical insight although his private and public juxtapositions have a different strategy in mind. That is to say that Alfian's later poetry prefers to dwell on the social context of being a Singaporean, wherein identities of nation, state and the individual are explored. Wong's poetry, on the other hand, is a totally private universe full of delicate perception written in a deceptively simple, revealing style. Vision arrives out of solitude, out of the very dreariness of living. He finds emotional centres, which often arrive with an achingly beautiful choice of metaphor. He remembers an old home in a litany of images in "First Home":

> I am a child again standing at this balcony,
> succumbing to a solitude I knew then how to love,
> a row of potted plants humming to a day's luminosity,
> while those clouds are the vast sails of ships
> billowing with the future's
> unstoppable gale.

Then when the "unstoppable gale" of the future actually arrives, the wonderment of fondly remembered things begins to be suffused with the ideas and feelings of adult family conflict and sexual insecurity. These images often evoke a sense of loneliness and grief, two things not always easy to replicate in verse especially when faced with the subtleties of image and language. In his tribute piece to the Thai artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, Wong discovers again that in images of defeat/loss he is able to learn a new language of acceptance and transcendence, which subsumes the possibility of genuine selflessness. The nothingness he felt as a young child as a result of the emotional estrangement between he and his father is dealt with first:

> This was before my father stopped talking
> to me, Araya, before I realised that love
> meant I would always be the one
> giving more. And I learnt how disappointment
> too could swell to something as deafening
> as a plane outside my window, that blizzard
> of sound rocking the insides of my ears
> and chest so hard and often that how
> could I not help but begin to love that too.

Ironically, the poet learns from the Thai artist's fondness for reading and singing to corpses on film so as to, we are told, facilitate the "communication between her and her memories of loss". In his long sequence, Wong too wishes his living father dead, which he says is similar to the years "spent / mourning his absence". His father, we can garner from numerous poems in the volume, despised his son's less than manly physicalities and kept an emotional distance from the rest of the family too. Wishing him dead would help the poet-self to compose his own meaning or "own stories" on and around the metaphorical dead body. The poet could then begin to understand the language of forgiveness:

sing bittersweet love songs
from a throat already raw from rage
and crying to his sealed eyes
and mouth, not fearing if he would
awaken to scorn my womanly voice.
But for this, I would require him
to be really dead, Araya, as only then
could I truly begin to forgive him.

Cyril Wong is the custodian of a strand of Singaporean poetry that is rare indeed. One would have thought that being confessional in a hugely autobiographical age is commonplace enough. Yet, we forget that to be Asian still means keeping one's sentimentality in check, which in turn renders sensitive and sentimental outpourings unnecessary. It has been suggested by one Singaporean critic that such biographical musings could also be viewed as a form of social protest from within the authoritarian island-state. While this could be wholly possible, I feel that we should not miss the essence of what Wong's poetry is all about. His is an art that works simply from a personal plane, and from within such a plane we have some of the most sensitive, articulate probings into the nature of one's self that have never been seen before in all of contemporary Singaporean verse.