VOL. 1 No. 1 December 1980 KDN. 0760/80

ASSOCIATION FOR COMMONWEALTH LITERATURE & LANGUAGE STUDIES IN MALAYSIA

SOUTHEAST ASIAN REVIEW OF ENGLISH

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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.

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Single copy: local M$6.00, abroad US$4.00. Subscription: members M$10.00, others M$12 local, US$7.50 abroad; institution M$14.00 local, US$8.50 abroad.

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EDITORIAL

In our beginning is our end. To start with, then, what are we up to? What but to publish what this, the journal of the Malaysian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, can be expected to publish? Evasive, yes, such a statement, but not altogether; something broadly specifiable *is* indicated that way.

We aren't ready with a manifesto, if we should be at all. Not that we are comfortably warm in total darkness as to what we want to be about. Ideas of the sort of journal both worthwhile and exciting to create, develop and sustain have been firmed, though not, thank goodness, frozen for good. One general conception of it, though, is fixed: the commitment by its editors to seeing it grow and live according to both essential design and 'existential' contingency – to allow each actual issue to reflect teleologically the original basic design as well as in the process to exert heuristically upon the latter a pressure towards modifications subtle or adventurous. In our beginning is our end but we also wish to arrive there as if for the first time.

Southeast Asian Review of English will be a specialist journal but its specialism will take in an already richly diverse and still expanding area of literary, cultural and social interest: Malaysian and Singaporean Literature in English through Commonwealth Literature to Third-World Literature in English.

Southeast Asian Review of English in most other respects won't be a journal of a jealously and zealously delimited specialism. It won't be delimited, for example, to only publishing even something as broad as literary criticism. Its editors believe that criticism and creation should not be found separated, not even for convenience. The journal will carry creative writings as well as articles. The articles in turn won't be delimited in preoccupation or interest: not only, say, analysis and evaluation of Achebe's or Thumboo's use of English but also English in Nigeria or Singapore today, and definition, description and discussion of any of the varieties of non-native English (and even articles addressed to the question of how uses of English that are non-native in one sense can still be natively English in another); not just the sober scholarly article but also the well-written lively sort that thinks aloud freely, speculatively; not only reviews and review-articles but also interviews and the 'review-essay' which, not quite a book-review nor an essay in criticism, seizes upon a work and its preoccupation as points to take off from and to return to as the basis for the critic's own meditation on a theme; not just presenting works in English but also translations into English, and not only translations but also occasionally accompanying explanations regarding the processes involved in arriving at the translations presented; not only serious but also light verse; not just words but also the occasional cartoons or sketches; not only checklists but also 'What to Read in . . .' (Canadian Poetry, etc.) essay-guides, and this of two sorts: objective, summarizing the consensus of critical opinion, and subjective, reflecting the personal taste of the critic . . .

*Southeast Asian Review of English** hopes in time to establish itself as that paradox of a thing bright, light and thoughtful.

*Our hope has been considerably brightened by a Sabah Foundation grant for which we are very grateful.

AN OUTLINE OF AUSTRALIAN POETRY[1]

Professor K.L. Goodwin

In a disgruntled poem called 'Australia', A.D. Hope speaks of the country as 'A Nation of trees . . . Without songs, architecture, history'. It is an unflattering, harsh, and untrue assertion, though it has to be admitted that if the trees are often unique, the songs, architecture, and history are often derivative. The culture of Australia's settlers is largely borrowed – at first from the colonizing country, more recently from America and to some slight extent from the countries of origin of other European and Asian settlers. That is not to say that it is a bland culture without inner tensions. The first white migrants to Australia were not free settlers but either convicts or their military guards – an instant source of a conflict of values. Convicts, soldiers, and later settlers were, furthermore, drawn from many parts of the British Isles, with a large component of poor Irish Catholics automatically at odds with wealthier English Protestants. The rift between free settlers and emancipated convicts took many decades to heal; friction between Irish and English values still occasionally surfaces in disputes about nationalism, post-colonialism, and the possibility of a republic. Such friction is paralleled by suspicion about each new wave of settlers, from the second half of the nineteenth century onward: Chinese, Greeks and Italians, the various European groups that came after the second world war, Turks, and Vietnamese. All such settlers have faced strong pressure to conform, at least outwardly to Australian norms – in language, clothing, food, and social customs. They have had a hard struggle – though less acute than that of the Australian Aborigines – to retain something of their ethnic heritage as a distinctive group.

On the whole, literature falls into patterns dictated either in Britain or the United States. If there is a distinctive literary form it is in the short story, derived from the laconic bush tales encouraged by the *Bulletin* in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.

The origins of Australia's verse tradition lie in a special packaged-for-export-to-the-colonies version of nineteenth-century English poetry and in Irish convict balladry. The colonial tradition of verse owes a good deal to Scott, Southey, the Spasmodics, Tennyson, Swinburne, and Rudyard Kipling. It is a second-hand Romanticism coupled with a strong preference for recitable narrative poetry. The Irish convict balladry is the strongest influence on the Australian bush ballads (also promoted by the *Bulletin*), though sea shanties and convict work-songs also come into account.

Most nineteenth-century Australian versifiers can be related to one or other of these traditions. They are often accomplished and fluent writers, but generally mesmerised by their chosen verse form to the detriment of their observation and intellect. The strong pull of the British homeland – still treated as the social and cultural norm – can be observed in Henry Kendall, even when he is writing about something as distinctively Australian as the bell-bird:

> The silver-voiced bell-birds, the darlings of daytime!
> They sing in September their songs of the May-time . . . .

Kendall could be saying that the song they sing in September (the Australian spring) is identical with what they sing in May (the Australian autumn), but that would be banal. What he is more likely saying is that the September call of the birds is what one would expect from English birds in May (the northern spring). In any case, irrespective of the

meaning intended (which is likely to remain vague), the influence of Swinburne on the versification is unmistakable.

The first two Australian poets that anyone could reasonably think of including in an introductory course are A. B. Paterson (1864–1941) and Henry Lawson (1867–1922). It is only with them that something distinctively Australian manages to hold its own against the imported verse-form. Paterson's literary ballads, such as 'The Man from Snowy River' and 'Clancy of the Overflow', transfer a good deal of the European machinery of the heroic ballad to Australian conditions. 'The Man from Snowy River' presents a quest (the recapture of the valuable colt who has joined a mob of wild horses), a brief roll-call of heroes (old Harrison and Clancy), and an insignificant, despised young quester who turns out to be braver and more skilful than all the others and who accomplishes the quest when the rest have given it up as hopeless.

The Australian element is the elevation of horsemanship into a heroic accomplishment. English writers of poems about riding (William Cowper, Byron, and Browning, for instance) commonly show great understanding of and sympathy for the feelings and mannerisms of the horses; but the art of riding itself, the apotheosis of rider and beast into a centaur-figure is not often attempted. The accomplishment of the skilled rider was highly prized in outback Australia, and even a city-dweller like Paterson (one who 'faced the round eternal of the cash-book and the journal' as he says in 'Clancy of the Overflow') could become a noted horseman.

The unnamed 'Man from Snowy River', 'a stripling on a small and weedy beast', is almost excluded from the questing party by the old man, Harrison, presumably the owner of the homestead from which they start and the owner of the errant colt. Harrison had 'made his pile when Pardon won the cup', a reference to the characteristic Australian love of betting and, no doubt, to the most famous and richest horse race in Australia, the Melbourne Cup.[2] But Clancy (the hero of another of Paterson's ballads) speaks up for the lad and he is admitted to the party.

The landscape through which they ride is distinctively Australian. It is upland country, with wild uncultivated hills on the horizon. The horsemen gallop past a clump of wattle ('mimosa') and into the mountainous country of mountain ash, kurrajong, stringy barks, and hop scrub, where wombat holes make the footing treacherous. The stripling alone is prepared to follow the horses at a racing pace. Wielding his stockwhip, he catches and wheels them back, 'alone and unassisted':

> But his hardy mountain pony he could scarcely raise a trot,
> He was blood from hip to shoulder from the spur;
> But his pluck was still undaunted, and his courage fiery hot,
> For never yet was mountain horse a cur.

Paterson's contemporary, Henry Lawson, is admired more for his short stories than for his poems, but he was nevertheless an accomplished and thoughtful poet. Many of his poems express detestation of the establishment, whether it is the establishment of the empire, the church, the government and its institutions, or big business. This kind of radical scepticism and spleen was characteristic of the *Bulletin*, the weekly journal begun in 1880 that printed much of Lawson's work. In 'The Men Who Made Australia', Lawson writes an occasional poem on the royal visit to Australia to open the first Federal Parliament in 1901. In it he satirises the press, the civil service, high society, graziers, and English visitors. They are the ones who will be involved in the royal visit, not 'the men who made Australia live on damper, junk and tea', that is, 'the Bushmen who were born to save the land'. As with the ballads of Paterson, Lawson's poems enunciate a myth of the bush and its values to a readership that was already one of the most urbanized in the

world. Unlike Paterson, however, Lawson sympathizes with the exploited lower classes rather than with the middle classes. Poems such as 'Shearers', 'Andy's Gone with Cattle' and 'The Teams' celebrate the itinerant country worker – the shearer, the drover, and the bullocky – and his virtues of stamina, fortitude, patience, and independence. In 'The Teams', for instance, the bullock driver is characterized:

> With face half-hid by a broad-brimmed hat,
> That shades from the heat's white waves,
> And shouldered whip, with its green-hide plait,
> The driver plods with a gait like that
> Of his weary, patient slaves.

Lawson is a melancholy and often bitter writer. 'One-Hundred-and-Three' is a condemnation of the prison system that seems to reach back in its hopelessness to Australia's origins as a penal colony. The unnamed convict, 'One-Hundred-and-Three', is a young man subjected to solitary confinement and bare subsistency rations (Ration Number One). His offence is never stated (presumably because that might detract from the sympathy the reader feels for his plight); indeed, any guilt lies with the society that incarcerated him, for 'a waster's son was he: / His sins were written before he was born'. The mindless prison round is presented as degrading and dispiriting:

> Where five men do the work of a boy, with warders *not* to see –
> It is sad and bad and uselessly mad, it is ugly as it can be,
> From the flower-beds shaped to fit the goal, in circle and line absurd,
> To the guilded weathercock on the church, agape like a strangled bird . . . .

Once again establishment figures are pilloried: the church with its irrelevant services, the press with its lies, prison visitors, the unscathed drunken rich (including judges). In short,

> The clever scoundrels are all outside, and the moneyless mugs in gaol –
> Men do twelve months for a mad wife's lies or Life for a strumpet's tale.

For Lawson, true love and brotherhood exist only inside the prison:

> The brute is a brute, and a kind man kind, and the strong heart does not fail –
> A crawler's a crawler everywhere, but a man is a man in gaol;
> For the kindness of man to man is great when penned in a sandstone pen –
> The public call us the 'criminal class', but the warders call us 'the men'.

But such brotherhood is insufficient to save One-Hundred-and-Three, who succumbs in body and will to the 'dead rot dry and slow'. He dies in hospital, a victim of the inhuman prison system.

Lawson's melancholy, pain, hope, and fear are not dissimilar to those of a poet three years younger, Christopher Brennan (1870–1932). Their way of presenting these feelings could not, however, be more different. Lawson is objective and polemical; Brennan symbolic and evanescent. It is the difference between poetry of the outer world of the senses and poetry of the inner consciousness. Lawson and Brennan constitute an even starker example of the contrast than, some forty years' later, do Douglas Stewart and Judith Wright.

Brennan was a writer quite antithetical to those of the *Bulletin*. His sources were European – indeed, much of his work seems like a depressed and even more self-absorbed version of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, or *The Prelude* crossed with Mallarmé and Nietzsche. He writes with alternate dejection and elation about a lost Eden that may, through the poet's quest in life and art, be recovered. In 'The Wanderer', the most admired section of *Poems 1913*, amid rather limp *fin-de-siécle* images and mournful oratory, there are patches of reminiscence firmly set in the landscape of harbourside Sydney and passages of

more resolute, less flaccid outlook, where he temporarily sees beyond the dark night of the soul:

> Come out, come out, ye souls that serve, why will ye die?
> or will ye sit and stifle in your prison-homes
> dreaming of some master that holds the winds in leash
> and the waves of darkness yonder in the gaunt hollow of night?
> nay, there is none that rules: all is a strife of the winds
> and the night shall billow in storm full oft ere all be done.
> For this is the hard doom that is laid on all of you,
> to be that whereof ye dream, dreaming against your will.
>
> (Poem 95)

Brennan's reputation as Australia's one great poet in the European tradition has fallen considerably since the publication in 1960 of the first collected edition of his poems. By contrast, the reputation of John Shaw Neilson (1872–1942) has risen since the first fairly complete edition of his work in 1965. Neilson also works by a symbolist technique, though it was almost certainly acquired intuitively rather than by study or imitation. His poems blend vivid images of nature with significance based in colours and music; they are associatively rather than logically composed; and they have a muted play of sexual and creative suggestiveness. At one time he was regarded as a naive, innocent rustic poet like John Clare or the Ettrick Shepherd, but this was clearly a superficial approach.

Many of his poems have an incantatory, magical quality, a sense of the ability to commune, through silence or murmuring, with a transcendent spirit. In 'The Orange Tree' a young girl stands by the poet telling him of a light 'not of the sky', something that is 'almost sound', 'a step, a call' conveyed by the orange tree. She becomes increasingly impatient with the poet's practical, pubertal explanations of her experience –

> – Is it, I said, of east or west?
> The heartbeat of a luminous boy
> Who with his faltering flute confessed
> Only the edges of his joy?
>
> Was he, I said, borne to the blue
> In a mad escapade of Spring
> Ere he could make a found adieu
> To his love in the blossoming?

The poet ignores her calls to listen, until she reproves him sharply:

> –Silence! the young girl said. Oh, why,
> Why will you talk to weary me?
> Plague me no longer now, for I
> Am listening like the Orange Tree.

Between the first and second world wars, two other important Australian poets made a reputation for themselves. It is with some regret that I pass over one of them, Kenneth Slessor (1901–1971), for many critics would place him in the first half-dozen Australian poets. His output is, however, slender, and I find the diction too luscious and the tone too arch, coy, or jauntily adolescent to warrant close attention.

R. D. FitzGerald (1902–) might, by contrast, be considered over-intellectual. Certainly he is the most consistently dialectical of Australia's poets, struggling with the great questions of time, mortality, reason, purpose, beauty, nature, and organic growth (to mention the main concerns of one poem, 'The Hidden Bole'). His work has an intellectual

curiosity and energy, a courageous but not nervous discontent. Many of his poems are based on historical scenes, but they are always suffused with a sense of the need for thoughtful reappraisal. His historical characters argue with themselves (as Abel Tasman does in 'Heemskerck Shoals') or the poet himself argues about his understanding of the past (as in 'The Wind at Your Door').

FitzGerald's Tasman has a practical man's vision of the Great South Land or Espiritu Santo that he failed to discover.

> It was strange the love he had for it – for a country
> he had not seen; so that its future stood
> above his own time's fortunes in a mood
> that came on him very often.
> . . . . . As one who knew
> the millions propagating in Asia's pen,
> yet knew the jangling, unsatisfied states were filled
> with hate in Europe, where were overtilled
> soils and men too, squeezed penury at best –
> consoled by wars – his thoughts turned more on race
> than national arrogance, that pitiful jest.

Like FitzGerald himself so often, he is puzzled, inquisitive, and open-minded.

In 'The Wind at Your Door' FitzGerald writes about the flogging of an Irish convict bearing the same name as himself, with one of his own ancestors, a Dr Martin Mason, in attendance. He agonizes about the lives of the two men and what similarity he has to either of them. He admires the unflinching courage of the convict who receives three hundred lashes without murmuring. Dr Mason, whose role was more to see that the full punishment was inflicted than to interrupt it for humanitarian reasons, is a less congenial ancestor, but excusable for his attention to private patients and advocacy of the rights of free settlers and because

> they were bad times. None know what in his place
> they might have done. I've my own faults to face.

FitzGerald's voice is quietly reasonable and unhurried. The voice of A.D. Hope (1907–), a slightly younger poet and arguably Australia's best poet, is more dramatic; it operates in shorter cadences and generally expresses a satiric view that is either insidiously critical or puckishly amused.

If Australia's best-known popular song is A.B. Paterson's 'Waltzing Matilda', the poem most frequently quoted from in literary articles about Australia must be Hope's 'Australia', which he wrote early in his career, in 1939. It characterizes the place as peopled by 'monotonous tribes' of 'immense stupidity'. With no culture of their own, Australians constitute a vast parasite robber-state

> Where second-hand Europeans pullulate
> Timidly on the edge of alien shores.

All this is simply a harsher and wittier version of a long tradition of Australian suspicion, hatred, and fear of the land. (A naive poet, Philip Lorimer – 'Phil the Poet' – began a comic poem in 1867 with the lines:

> Queensland! thou art a land of pest:
> From flies and fleas we ne'er can rest . . . .)

But Hope, another dialectical poet who is never satisfied with the ready response, goes on to half-praise Australia for its intellectual dulness:

> Yet there are some like me turn gladly home
> From the lush jungle of modern thought, to find
> The Arabian desert of the human mind,
> Hoping, if still from the deserts the prophets come,
>
> Such savage and scarlet as no green hills dare
> Springs in that waste, some spirit which escapes
> The learned doubt, the chatter of cultured apes
> Which is called civilization over there.

Hope was born in the same year, 1907, as W. H. Auden, a poet to whom he bears some resemblance. Both have well-stocked, inquiring minds; both are satirists who delight in disappointing the expectations of readers; both exude an eighteenth-century common sense of absurdity; and both are highly competent with occasional poems. 'Moschus Moschiferus (A Song for St Cecilia's Day)' is one of Hope's many occasional poems with a difference. It is about the musk-deer, a diminishing species, which is sought with ever 'new means, more exquisite and refined'. The hunters include a flute-player whose task it is, Circe-like, to lure the deer to the archers until 'with its full power the music draws'

> A shadow from a juniper's darker shade;
> Bright-eyed, with quivering muzzle and pricked ear,
> The little musk-deer slips into the glade
> Led by an ecstasy that conquers fear.

The deer is shot, the music 'soars to a delicious peak' and continues on to lure the next victim, and at dusk the prize, 'the little glands' containing the musk, are cut out of the deer and the carcasses left to rot.

The multiple ironies of the poem are characteristic of Hope. It is a song dedicated to the patron saint of music, but it is about music used for cruel, profit-motivated destruction; the moment of death corresponds to the most exultant moment of the music; the music continues after the death, but continual deaths will shortly make the deer extinct. Unlike FitzGerald, who is more explicit and discursive, Hope leaves the story to speak for itself. His wise reticence is rare in Australian poetry.

A little out of chronological sequence I should like at this point to consider the work of a third dialectical poet, Judith Wright (1915–). She has many of the same considerations as FitzGerald. The epigraph to her first volume, *The Moving Image* (1946), was from Plato: 'Time is a moving image of eternity'; time, with death and fear, is one of her most frequently used words; and purpose, beauty, and nature are major concerns. She is, however, highly individual in her treatment of love, motherhood, and their attendant stabbing fears (particularly the fear of death and solitude).

In 'The Company of Lovers', happiness is 'brief', for 'Death marshals up his armies' and 'draws his cordons in'. In 'Woman to Man', a remarkable poem of love and generation she concludes with

> This is the maker and the made;
> this is the question and reply;
> the blind head butting at the dark,
> the blaze of light along the blade.
> Oh hold me, for I am afraid.

Her courage is not, like FitzGerald's, one of resolve in the face of uncertainty; it is one of stating the piercing helplessness of the lonely individual in the face of time and nameless fear.

In less psychologically tense poems, Judith Wright is also a poet of particular places, particularly the New England district of New South Wales, where her family lived, and the rain-forest country of south-east Queensland where she herself lived for many years. 'South of My Days' is perhaps her best-known New England poem. In it she speaks of

> that tableland, high delicate outline
> of bony slopes wincing under the winter
> low trees blue-leaved and olive, outcropping granite –
> clean, lean, hungry country.

It is a country 'full of old stories that still go walking in my sleep', such as those told by 'old Dan' of his droving days, stories that 'slide and . . . vanish'

> as he shuffles the years like a pack of conjuror's cards.

Lawson's bullocky in 'The Teams' fought distance, dust, and rains to arrive from time to time at 'home and rest'. Judith Wright's 'Bullocky' goes mad, believing that he is Moses, lashing his slaving bullocks, and prophesying in the night. The land itself will outlast him, take him to itself, and become the Promised Land that he shouted about – not because he prophesied, but because his bones will provide fertilizer for the grape-vines that now cover the waggon-tracks. The difference between the two poems is instructive and characteristic. Lawson's is a poem of objective events, where man seeks, in this case with some limited success, to tame the land. Wright's is largely an inward poem, where the land possesses first the mind and lastly the body of man, and turns them to its own purposes.

The two remaining major poets who achieved publication in the 1940s are Douglas Stewart (1913–) and James McAuley (1917–1976). Both are thoughtful and well-read poets, and McAuley can be alarmingly recondite, but neither seems to me as relentlessly intellectual as FitzGerald, Hope, or Wright. Both have the sense of wonderment more fully developed than the faculty of ratiocination: their poems end with a pause rather than with finality, or they come to the completion of an aesthetic movement, whereas FitzGerald, Hope, and Wright tend to come to a philosophical conclusion. Their poems give us more of the immediacy of human engagement in the scenes they describe; fewer details are left for the reader to reconstruct.

Stewart's line, 'The boat tugs at the kellick as it feels the ebb' (in 'Rock Carving'), is the kind of immediate detail that one would not expect to find near the end of a poem by FitzGerald, Hope, or Wright. One of Stewart's great strengths, in fact, is that he is able to fuse description and speculation so that neither seems to dominate the other. Like FitzGerald he is constantly inquisitive, but in a rather more eager, rather more sprightly manner. He is rarely sombre, for he is always prepared to be delighted by what is curious or unsuspected.

It is not surprising, then, that many of his longer poems are concerned with voyage and discovery, and are often based on the reports of explorers in and around Australia. His long poem *Rutherford* is concerned with the vision and self-questioning of the atomic physicist. Many of his shorter poems are concerned with observations about nature, particularly those that might be made by an enthusiastic bush-walker. He has the engaging ability to imagine what it feels like to be a tramp ('The Dosser in Springtime'), Charles Darwin ('One Yard of Earth'), an amateur naturalist ('B Flat'), or a silkworm ('The Silkworms'). And his poems almost always contain a thread of puckish humour. In 'One Yard of Earth', for instance, having described one of Darwin's experiments and what

might be derived from it, he records the conclusion (and finishes his poem) with an observation that surprises with its final word, not only because the tone suddenly descends to near-bathos, but also because the sound of the word completes only a half-rhyme instead of the expected full rhyme:

> [Darwin] noted with some reason for men's good
> We should do well to keep our eyes on mud.

James McAuley has also, like FitzGerald and Stewart, often written about discovery and exploration of Australia. Like Judith Wright he is a major love poet. Compared with Stewart, his tone is often one of sorrow, depression, and near despair at his inability to comprehend the mystery of life. He poses metaphysical questions but shows what it is like to meditate on them rather than to argue about them. The Catholic faith that runs through many of his poems more often produces agonizing and awe than easy answers. As he says at the end of 'Because', after recalling his early life with his father and mother:

> It's my own judgement day that I draw near,
> Descending in the past, without a clue,
> Down to that central deadness: the despair
> Older than any hope I ever knew.

After McAuley, as we come to writers still in mid-career, there is inevitably less agreement about who the major Australian poets are. Kath Walker (1920-) has a special place in Australian literary history as the first Aboriginal to have written poetry in English and had it widely published. She writes short phrases in a declamatory style that is particularly effective in recital. Her subjects are almost exclusively Aborigines, the land that was loved by the Aborigines but has been taken from them by uncaring whites, and unfeeling government actions. In her best-known poem, 'We Are Going', she writes of a group of Aborigines coming to a white country town:

> They came in to the little town
> A semi-naked band subdued and silent,
> All that remained of their tribe.
> They came here to the place of their old bora ground
> Where now the many white men hurry about like ants.

Most of the poem is a long lamentation, ending with lines:

> The scrubs are gone, the hunting and the laughter.
> The eagle is gone, the emu and the kangaroo are gone from this place.
> The bora ring is gone.
> The corroboree is gone.
> And we are going.

The poets in mid-career that I shall say something about are Peter Porter (1929-), Bruce Dawe (1930-), Les Murray (1938-), and Robert Adamson (1944-). One other poet, Michael Dransfield (1947-1973), who died young, should also also be considered with them. This is a highly selective list. It leaves out, for instance, Rosemary Dobson and Gwen Harwood (both born in 1920), Bruce Beaver (1928-), Rodney Hall and Thomas

W. Shapcott (both born in 1935), Vincent Buckley and Francis Webb (both born in 1925, but Webb having died in 1973), and Geoffrey Lehmann (1940-), all of whom are thoroughly worth reading.

Porter, an expatriate living in London, and Dawe are both laconically witty poets, but whereas Porter writes in a neutral idiom, Dawe incorporates (and gains some of his most comic effects from) a good deal of distinctively Australian conversation. Porter's wit is launched from a base in highbrow European culture; Dawe's from a partially accepted, partially rejected base in the suburbs of Australian cities. Both are satirists who convey self-mocking uncertainty about their own values. Both constantly revert to the possibility of the destruction of civilization by war or by propaganda in preparation for war. Both are amused by brand-names and heavily promoted ephemeral products of western society.

Where Porter draws much from western music, art, and classical literature, Dawe's references are very frequently drawn from the overcrowded countries of Asia. In 'The Not-So-Good Earth', for instance, he represents an Australian family watching a documentary or feature film on China:

> For a while there we had 25-inch Chinese peasant families
> famishing in comfort on the 25-inch screen . . . .

In a riot scene, myopic Uncle Billy hunches close to the screen and turns up the contrast to see 'all those screaming faces / and bodies going under the horses' hooves'. But they miss the ending. During a commercial break, Dad

> at this stage tripped over the main lead in the dark
> hauling the whole set down smack on its inscrutable face,
> wiping out in a blue flash and curlicue of smoke
> 600 million Chinese without a trace . . . .

This moral concern at the unfeeling nature of modern western society, its ability to lodge vast human problems in a comfortable framework of technology, commerce, or obfuscating language, is typical of Dawe (and, indeed, of Porter).

If Porter represents a metropolitan point of view on the world and Dawe a suburban one, Robert Adamson and Michael Dransfield represent a view of the workings of the individual mind that draws on the bohemian life of the inner city and the re-energizing life of the rambler's countryside or the fishman's beach and river. Where Porter and Dawe are largely public poets, Adamson and Dransfield are largely private ones. They both, like many poets of the late sixties and early seventies, owed something to a combination of the French symbolists, *fin-de-siécle* decadents, and such contemporary American poets as Bob Dylan, John Ashbery, and Gregory Corso.

Something of Dransfield's tense appreciation of his own sensibility, his sense of the importance to the mind of drugs, his ability to convey a sense of the mind conversing with itself, and his projection of the non-mental surroundings of the poet as extensions of his own perceptions can be appreciated in 'I Tell Myself I'm Through With Love'. He is in his shabby one-roomed apartment reviewing recent events in his life:

> on such wet days it is
> possible to talk long hours
> to sleep as cars do

wet tyres on sibilant roads
  a hard chair is best sit
upright take no stimulants

  rooms must be treated as
schizophrenics be gentle
  if you are passive
they teach you all about themselves

Both Dransfield and Adamson have been very influential poets, Dransfield by his inner conviction, dedication to the business of being a poet, personal charm, and need for friends; Adamson largely through his association with the journal *New Poetry*.

Adamson began by writing about the sub-cultures of drug-taking and prisons, but later developed into celebrations of the river-flats of the Hawkesbury River, love, violence, growing up, the uses of friendship, and the exact shades of guilt. In his latest volume, *Where I Come From* (1979) he writes a great deal about his childhood. In one of the 'Stealing Poems' he says:

And then you start stealing things
that are alive like birds

it's hard to know the difference
there is between say
stealing from the zoo

or young birds out of their nests

Dransfield and Adamson are both poets who try to represent the mind's awareness of isolation. Unlike Henry Lawson, who represented this sense through narrative poems of outback Australia, they do so through fragmentary scenes drawn from the inner suburbs of Sydney and the countryside and seascape within weekend reach of the city.

Les Murray, by contrast, is a poet of conviviality and sociability, someone with strong convictions about life and society (he is Catholic, republican, committed to the values of rural life, a believer in the cleansing value of war and the virtues of the warrior, a supporter of the values of the 'people' rather those of intellectuals, a student of Aboriginal culture, and a person obsessed with the concept of honour). He is an anecdotalist, a bush balladist, a humorist, and an imitator (in English) of Aboriginal verse forms. 'The Bulahdelah-Taree Holiday-Song Cycle' is a long poem about a popular string of holiday resorts on the lower North Coast of New South Wales. The lineation and rhythm of the poem are in imitation of those of an Aboriginal praise-song translated into English. In the last section he describes the scene at night:

The stars of the holiday step out all over the sky.
People look up at them, out of their caravan doors and their campsites;
People look up from the farms, before going back; they gaze at
  their year's worth of stars.
The Cross hangs head downward, out there over Markwell;
it turns upon the Still Place, the pivot of the Seasons,
  with one shoulder rising:

'Now I'm beginning to rise, with my Pointers and my Load . . .'
hanging eastwards, it shines on the sawmills and the lakes,
on the glasses of the old people.

In this brief extract one can see a number of his characteristic gestures. The stars 'step out' in the human vitalization that he often applies to nature or buildings; this vivifying quality applies to the whole tone in which he speaks of human beings and their incorporation within the universe; 'The Cross' – the Southern Cross constellation – is used with at least a vague Christian reference; and 'sawmills', 'lakes', and 'the glasses of the old people' represent another of his characteristic concatenations of representatives of humanity and nature all affected by the same mood. In an earlier section, with an enthusiasm that some readers find ideologically disturbing, he had described the timber-gatherers and surfboard riders as 'warriors' because of their rigid code of conduct and their single-mindedness.

Les Murray's poetry cannot be ignored in any survey of contemporary Australian work. His moral and social values are, at least in the literary world, unfashionable (as, indeed, are Bruce Dawe's), but his craftmanship is widely admired. Few serious poets since Paterson and Lawson have attempted overtly to present an image of Australia, nor has anyone, including Paterson and Lawson, attempted to present such a rich and vibrant image. If it turns out to be only the vision of a cheerful eccentric it will nevertheless have resulted in a number of fine poems.

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Notes

1. For the convenience of readers with only limited access to the work of the poets mentioned in this article, most of the references are to poems included in *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse*, edited by Harry Heseltine (Harmondsworth and Ringwood: Penguin, 1972). It has to be recognized, however, that a good deal has happened in Australian poetry since the date of publication of this volume. Two other excellent anthologies are *Australian Verse from 1805: A Continuum*, edited by Geoffrey Dutton (Adelaide: Rigby, 1976) and *Contemporary American & Australian Poetry*, edited by Thomas Shapcott (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1976). A more recent and highly tendentious collection of contemporary poetry by American-influenced collage poets is *The New Australian Poetry*, edited by John Tranter (St Lucia: Makar Press, 1979).

   A useful reference work is Herbert C. Jaffa, *Modern Australian Poetry, 1920–1970: A Guide to Information Soruces* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1979).

   Two useful, if conservative, critical works are James McAuley, *A Map of Australian Verse: The Twentieth Century* (Melbourne: OUP, 1975) and P.K. Elkin (ed.), *Australian Poems in Perspective: A Collection of Poems and Critical Commentaries* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1978).

2. It is unlikely to be the obscure Menindie President's Cup won by 'Old Pardon, the Son of Reprieve' in another of Paterson's poems. The names Paterson chooses for horses, 'Reprieve' and 'Pardon', are, incidentally, interesting associations with Australia's convict days.

RIA

'and We know
what his soul whispers within him,
and We are nearer to him than the
jugular vein.'
– The Quran, L: 15–18 (Arberry)

i

Moments that peeled my awareness
were the times I remember you best:
mornings in autumn, your gaiety dissolving
the secret tension of light and air,
lithely lisping the magic of your name
into the smell of each falling leaf
that clung to your hair.

One such morning remains
the clearest of all,
like a thin slant of light
in a dark musty hall.

That morning the current of air
touched your bone.

You were standing on the slope of the path,
your feet anchored to a mass of leaves,
clinging damply to the earth,
You saw me off with a sticky kiss,
sensing your moment in the slant of light,
your bewildered voice lisping a wish
I couldn't hear.

I jumped over the fence
and left your voice to freeze
in the light.

Two hours later,
a casual voice clinically declared:
'Your child is dead.'

ii

Light was everywhere
when I came out of the dark;
so much light slanting so simply,
flooding my eyes, blinding them
with the yesses of my senses,
the noes of my knowledge;
as on the day I buried you,
an unblessed child in blessed earth,
wind blowing dust
round and round the bare hill,
and the noonday autumn light
steadying in its slant
a sweetness of honey in the air.

iii

Now you are dead, I want to dream
your physicality
back into this house
in which you hardly lived.
Defiantly, I filled the rooms
with your laughing faces, defiling
the ritual of denial
I'd been taught to observe.
Discreetness of absence my Ria
cannot be
in the space that was hair
between darkness and light,
in the trace of your breath
that my tongue must retrace.
I can smell your body still
in the thick mohair rug,
my tactile little darling,
you learnt the rub of things
with the feel of fur
on your cheeks.
Your butterfly kisses
on the side of my neck,
on my scarred ageless face,
taught me the joy you felt
in the fact of the senses.
Tauntingly physical
was your being,
testing mine and the world's
with dark trembling lashes;
that queer left eye
(faulty delivery the doctor said)

fluttering more than the other
the lashes of your joy in my joy
in your realness.

You were nearer to me, my Ria
than my own jugular vein.

At times, your alertness
quickened my sense
of futility –
as when, puzzled
by my burning life away,
you made a wild lunge
and singed the lash
of your troubled eye.
At times, your alertness
quickened my sense
of what you meant –
as when, heady
with knowing curiosity
you somersaulted on to our love-
spent bodies,
your crazy nose triumphantly sniffing
the smell of rancid honeyed cheese
through screwed-up sheets.

iv

Joy means your name Ria
in the tongue of your blood.

You were made for us to reaffirm
the wild impulse of adolescence,
to reconcile a past with a past,
an instant with an instant,
and a tongue with a tongue.
You gave a woman reason
for a moment of hard acceptance
of me and my inscrutable lusts,
and would have taught perhaps
my stubborn ancestral liver
the needs of an unfamiliar heart.

I grew to love you with my body love
as you grew to feel me with your needs,
but our mutual growth
was blighted from the start.

You came raw before the light
burdened with all our hopes;
your mind opened to a strange world,
groping for a sense of self
only to let in
early intimations of estrangement.
I came raw in pursuit of light,
from the place of sun and certainties
into a chaos of new sensations;
my mind opened to an alien world,
the blood's blind urgings locked
in the mind's dumb questionings.

v

The night of your burial
was my sinless night of the soul,
the gaiety that was yours
danced the darkness on every tongue,
all the dreams we had in you
burst to a wake in a sudden song:
an unwilled blasphemy
affirming the will.

But the morning after
was a different matter.
And the morning after.
And the morning after.

Each break of day my love
is a break of day:
my body athwart the slant of light
across the emptiness hollowing my bed,
seeing an endless row of other beds,
dreading all the mornings
when I shall darkly awake
to the harsh fullness of sheer light
that knows no season;
dreading the hangover
of my days
on this island of Circe,
I my own Penelope,
weaving and unweaving
an endless moment,
resisting the light
of the hard sun
that forged my existence,
betraying my blood's vow
to the living now.

vi

The scar, the scar's the thing –
as darkly etched on my native flesh
as the sunburnt line
across your pale sewn-up breast;
as clean as the lightning
across the tropic sky
I had forgotten.

vii

The room seemed suspended
in the haze of the sea,
the light a blend of dusk and dawn.
You were sitting on the edge of my bed,
in which so many needs
were hurriedly buried,
in which so many betrayals
were joyfully consummated,
true to the sterile sensuality
of this time, of this place.
It all seemed part of a floating world,
the still silent sea below;
your child face aged,
your legs casually crossed,
the way you crossed them
when you parodied my pretence
of being a man.
Grace was yours, meaning was yours,
as you shook the clipped vines of your hair
over the floating form of another self;
no bitterness, all sweetness,
as you breathed a breath of spring
along the slant of autumn light,
stirring the presence of warmth
in the chilly dullness of the air.
It was a dream so physical
I woke up to the feel of your breath,
your sister kneeling by my side,
her breezy greeting riding the light,
the moment of your name alive
in those honeyed eyes
staring into the sun.

viii

Marking the days before my return
with a burden of knowledge
that doesn't make any sense,
I sit here among my three thousand books;
behind my back another autumn sun,
shining so simply,
rises over a strange familiar hill,
brown and bare among bluish
eucalyptus green.
I sit here, my pen bleeding words,
gripped by fingers bruised
from cutting your name
into sandstone,
feeling again the firmness
of hallowed letters
sharply etched,
following the contours
of the only mystery
truly mysterious.

ix

Joy means your name Ria
in the tongue of your blood,
a tongue I must learn again
to sing the mystery of our pain.

Be with me my Ria
in the sheer light
of my old sun.

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CONRAD AND COPPOLA : DIFFERENT CENTRES OF DARKNESS

E.N. Dorall

When a great artist in one medium produces a work based on a masterpiece in the same or another medium, we can expect interesting results. Not only will the new work be assessed as to its merits and validity as a separate creation, but the older work will also inevitably be reassessed as to its own durability, or relevance to the new age. I am not here concerned with mere adaptations, however complex and exciting they may be, such as operas like *Otello, Falstaff* and *Béatrice et Bénédict,* or plays like *The Innocents* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* What I am discussing is a thorough reworking of the original material so that a new, independent work emerges; what happens, for example, in the many Elizabethan and Jacobean plays based on Roman, Italian and English stories, or in plays like *Eurydice, Antigone* and *The Family Reunion,* which reinterpret the ancient Greek myths in modern terms. In the cinema, in many ways the least adventurous of the creative arts, we have been inundated by adaptations, some so remote from the original works as to be, indeed, new works in their own right, but so devoid of any merit that one cannot begin to discuss them seriously. But from time to time an intelligent and independent film has been fashioned from the original material. At the moment I can recall only the various film treatments of Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not.* But now, in Francis Coppola's recent Vietnam war film *Apocalypse Now,* based on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* we have a worthy addition to this category which may well set the standard by which all other cinematic re-creations will henceforth be judged.

Conrad's novella, one hardly needs reminding, is the account of a journey from Brussels to the heart of the Congo which partially resembles one made by Conrad himself in 1890. His narrator, Marlow, employed by a colonial company to captain a river steamboat, sails in a steamer down the west coast of Africa to the mouth of the Congo, then continues in a smaller boat to a town thirty miles higher up the river (Matadi), from which he travels overland to the Central Station (the town of Kinchassa at Stanley Pool) and finally into the heart of darkness to the Inner Station (at Stanley Falls). The novella soon becomes a series of impressionistic vignettes exposing the brutalities of colonial, and particularly Belgian colonial rule. In 'the city that always makes me think of a whited sepulchre' (Brussels) Marlow is given his commission, in a house with 'grass sprouting between the stones' guarded by two sinisters women who 'knitted black wool feverishly'. Down the coast of Africa he passes a French man-of-war subduing a native rebellion; 'in the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent.' More vivid impressions await him in the town thirty miles up-river. 'I came upon a boiler wallowing in the grass,' 'an undersized railway-truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air . . . as dead as the carcass of some animal.' A chain-gang of emaciated blacks passes him; he nearly falls into 'a vast artificial hole . . . the purpose of which I found it impossible to divine;' he enters a grove like 'the gloomy circle of some Inferno,' in which 'black shadows of disease and starvation' are slowly dying. On the overland route to the Central Station there are 'paths, paths, everywhere; a stamped-in network of paths spreading over the whole empty land, through long grass, through burnt grass, through thickets, down and up chilly ravines, up and down stony hills ablaze with heat; and a solitude, a solitude, nobody, not a hut.' Marlow passes 'several abandoned villages' and hears the beat of far-off drums at night, 'a sound weird, appealing,

suggestive, and wild.' After fifteen days he arrives at the Central Station, where the exposure of colonialism continues. The Company's agents wander 'here and there with . . . absurd long staves in their hands, like a lot of faithless pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence,' and finally a band called the Eldorado Exploring Expedition passes through; 'to tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe.' The cumulative power of these impressions is intensified when counterpointed by the theme of the mysterious Mr. Kurtz, the agent of the Inner Station, who is first mentioned in the up-river town. As Marlow proceeds on his journey Kurtz grows in mystery and grandeur, his gigantic 'singleness of purpose' condemning the sordid selfishness of the other colonial agents. At the Central Station Marlow is told that he will have to take his boat to the Inner Station and bring back Kurtz, who is very sick. As he proceeds to the heart of the 'mighty big river . . . resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land,' Marlow broods over the 'strange rumours' of Kurtz's unorthodox behaviour, which fascinates him as it embarrasses everyone else. And so the novella moves to its climax, with Kurtz gradually engulfing the atrocities of the other agents in his own immense horror.

Coppola's film is similarly structured. His narrator, Captain Willard, on leave from the battlefront, is given his mission at the very beginning of the film, to locate and eliminate the famous Colonel Kurtz who, after murdering four South Vietnamese officers under his command, has taken his men over the border into Cambodia, where they are indiscriminately killing Vietcong, South Vietnamese and Cambodians. This is 'totally beyond the pale of any acceptable conduct,' Willard is told. And so he journeys up the Nung, 'a river which (like the Congo) snakes across the land like a main circuit cable' to the border and beyond, studying Colonel Kurtz's dossier en route while a vast panorama of the Vietnam war unrolls before him. In the first episode he meets the eccentric Colonel Kilgore who refuses to let the war interfere with his favourite sport, surfing. Kilgore (the syllables taken separately describe the man) is prepared to attack a Vietcong-controlled village at the mouth of the Nung river not really because Willard and his boat need to get through but because the waves at that point have a six-foot peak which is ideal for surfing. In the film's most memorable scene the village is attacked by helicopters flying to the music of 'The Ride of the Valkyries' and demolished by napalm bombs as Kilgore's boys ride the nearby surf. 'I love the smell of napalm in the morning,' Kilgore says wistfully. 'It smells ... like ... victory.' In other episodes Willard encounters a tiger in the jungle while looking for mangoes, attends a striptease show for thousands of GI's which abruptly ends when the soldiers rush onto the stage to manhandle the artistes, meets another boat the occupants of which are searched for weapons and massacred in a moment of panic, arrives at the furthest point in Vietnam, 'the arsehole of the world,' where a demoralished group of GI's rebuild a bridge every morning which the Vietcong demolish every night, and finally penetrates into Cambodia where, in an attack on the boat by Kurtz's followers, two of the crew are killed, one of them, the helmsman, by an arrow through his body. And, as in the novella, between these episodes, Willard continues reading Kurtz's dossier and allows the Colonel's personality to penetrate and absorb his own.

Throughout the journey other, minor parallels to the novella occur. Willard is told that an earlier passenger on the boat blew his brains out; in *Heart of Darkness* Marlow's predecessor Fresleven was killed by natives, and a former passenger on the little steamer to Matadi hanged himself because of the sun 'or the country perhaps.' The attack on the boat by Kurtz's men and the manner of the helmsman's death are common to the novella

and the film. The press photographer whom Willard meets in Colonel Kurtz's camp speaks almost exactly like the Russian Marlow meets in Mr. Kurtz's Station. 'He made me see things – things; now – just to give you an idea – I don't mind telling you, he wanted to shoot me, too, one day;' the words are Conrad's but, in content and rhythm, might just as well have come from Coppola's script. The two Kurtzes, especially, often act and speak alike. Both have asked to be sent to their assignment; both are impressively bald (surely a symbolic touch); both are happy with the agent sent to end their jungle existence. 'I was to have the care of his memory,' says Marlow in words almost identical with those Colonel Kurtz uses when he asks Willard to represent him faithfully to his son in America. When the manager of the Central Station complains that Kurtz's method is 'unsound,' Marlow asks, "Do you . . . call it 'unsound method?' – 'Without doubt,' he [exclaims] hotly. 'Don't you?' '...' No method at all Marlow murmurs. In the film Colonel Kurtz asks pointedly, 'Are my methods unsound?' And Willard replies, 'I don't see any method, sir.' Later, another comment, 'But his soul was mad,' is repeated by the photographer in the film, 'The man's clear in his mind but his soul is mad' Eventually Marlow hazily explains what happened to Mr. Kurtz. 'There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! he had kicked the every earth to pieces.' The laconic Willard puts it more simply, 'He broke from all that [human society], and then he broke away from himself.' in both novella and film, Kurtz is little more than a voice (in the film he is barely visible), which instructs Marlow – Willard for some days and finally expires after muttering the now famous last words.

So much for the similarities between the novella and the film. They are numerous – the same 'story' and structure, and some parallel characters, incidents and expressions. It is strange, therefore, not to find Conrad's name among the film's credit titles. But *Apocalypse Now* is also a work of art in its own right, and from the beginning this too is apparent, despite the resemblances to *Heart of Darkness.* The steamboat which takes Willard up the Nung river is far more important than the boat which Marlow captains from the Central to the Inner Station. Coppola's riverboat is a modern Ship of Fools and its four-man crew, two blacks and two whites, the helmsman, the clown, the coward and the sportsman are innocents caught in a conflict they know nothing about. In *Heart of Darkness,* apart from Marlow, no one develops or elicits our sympathy, as distinct from our liking. In the film, however, there is some development of character. The helmsman Philips becomes increasingly hostile towards Willard till, at the moment of death, he tries to strangle him. The other black, Clean, is friendly and carefree, and his death, while listening to a tape from his mother pleading with him to come back home in one piece, is the film's most poignant moment. The coward, Chef, also develops; shattered by his encounter with a tiger early in the film and still frightened when he has to search another boat for weapons, he has, by the end, gained enough courage to stand by Willard in his encounter with Kurtz. If Lance, the sufer is less alive than the others, it is because he is intended to be the shallowest personality of the four. Thus two perspectives of the Vietnam War are offered in the film – the events seen from the riverboat and the life of the characters on that boat.

But it is only at the climax, when Marlow and Willard confront Kurtz, that *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* part company and develop differently. I think we must be specific, if we are to appreciate Conrad's novella fully, as to the nature of Kurtz's ultimate degradation, which can only be hinted at but never bluntly stated. Identifying it correctly will also enable us to defend Conrad's style against F. R. Leavis' famous accusation, that the "adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery" has a muffling rather than a magnifying effect. We remember, of course, that there is much excessively colourful writing in Conrad's earliest novels, *Almayer's Folly* and *An*

Outcast of the Islands. But in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* he had shown his ability to write more directly and powerfully when his subject required it. Is the gross over-writing of *Heart of Darkness* then a backward step, or did *that* subject demand *that* particular style? The vagueness and 'adjectival insistence' are found mainly in Marlow's descriptions of 'darkness' and of Kurtz's degradation. 'Everything belonged to him – but that was a trifle. The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own.' Kurtz presides 'at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites, which – as far as I reluctantly gathered from what I heard at various times – were offered up to him – do you understand? – to Mr. Kurtz himself.' Kurtz would go on long expeditions; 'mostly his expeditions had been for ivory;' he would 'disappear for weeks; forget himself amongst these people – forget himself – you know.' When Marlow eventually identifies the 'round carved balls' on posts before Kurtz's station as human heads, he makes his most revealing comment, 'They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him – some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence.' That Kurtz massacred the natives, stole ivory and was worshipped as a god are all bluntly stated by Marlow. What then could he do beyond these things that, in 1899 (when Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness*) Marlow could only allude to as 'unspeakable rites' and 'various lusts'? Surely we are meant to conclude that Kurtz, who set out for Africa carrying the light of European civilization at its brightest, came face to face, like other post-Darwinian heroes before him, with the essential animal nature of man, over which civilization is mere clothing, and that then, with his typical ruthless honesty, he cast off his ideals and humanity and dared to live at the other extreme, as the total animal Darwin and the Naturalists said he really was; he tore down the facade behind which the other colonialists sheltered, and converted metaphor into brutal fact, not only devouring Africa, as they did, but, very specifically, devouring Africans. It is this 'horror' that cannot be directly stated but which, disguised behind the most impressive and justified verbiage in Conrad's works, provides a fitting climax to the earlier colonial brutalities and also gives *Heart of Darkness* that mysterious grandeur which has fascinated so many readers. And this is the tragedy of Kurtz. Daring to face the consequences of his nature, he loses his identity; unable to be totally beast and never again able to be fully human, he alternates between trying to return to the jungle and recalling in grotesque terms his former idealism. 'Kurtz discoursed. A voice! a voice! It rang deep to the very last. It survived his strength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart. Oh, he struggled! he struggled! . . . The shade of the original Kurtz frequented the bedside of the hollow sham, whose fate it was to be buried presently in the mould of primeval earth. But both the diabolic love and the unearthly hate of the mysteries it had penetrated fought for the possession of that soul satiated with primitive emotions, avid of lying fame of sham distinction, of all the appearances of success and power.' Inevitably Kurtz collapses, his last words epitomizing his experience, 'The horror! The horror!'.

There are a few human heads in Colone Kurtz's camp in Cambodia – but they do not seem to be particularly important. Certainly they are not as conspicuous as the dozens of complete dead bodies lying around. Colonel Kurtz's problem is basically a military one, for *Apocalypse Now*, we must remember, is a film about war, not colonization. Colonel Kurtz had been an ideal commander, destined to rise in the military hierarchy, till an event occurred which altered his whole life. Sent to supervise the inocculation of children in a village, he was horrified to learn that the Vietcong later broke in and

cut off every inoculated arm. Colonel Kurtz then faced his own darkness, that a war can be fought successfully only *if* one learns to come to terms with 'horror and moral terror' ('Horror and moral terror must be your friends,' he tells Willard); one can win *if* one eliminates all human feeling in favour of total ruthlessness. Colonel Krutz has accepted the challenge of the 'if'. (He had revealed to the news photographer that 'if' is the middle word of 'life'.) Unlike the other commanders who hypocritically claim they are fighting for the preservation of civilization while annihilating whole villages by napalm bombs, Kurtz has bravely cast off the trappings of civilization and turned himself and his men into pure fighting machines. He can therefore rightly boast that he is beyond the timid, lying morality of his colleagues. As the news photographer explains to Willard, there are no 'fractions' (that is, mingled emotions) in Kurtz's make-up; there is only the totality of love or hate. Willard can appreciate this because, earlier in the film, after the accident that killed all the natives in a boat suspected of carrying hidden weapons, he had commented sadly, 'We cut them up with guns and then give them a band aid.' By the time he reaches Kurtz, Willard is convinced that the American army in Vietnam is totally confused in its motives, while Kurtz is admirably if insanely single-minded in his actions. As early as the Kilgore episode Willard had noted, 'If that's how Kilgore fought the war, I wonder what they had against Kurtz.' And so he determines to decide for himself whether to kill Kurtz or join him, which in fact is what his predecessor had done.

Kurtz, however, has other plans for Willard; that is why he has allowed him to reach his camp alive. Like his namesake in *Heart of Darkness* he has discovered that the consequence of rejecting his humanity to live and fight like an animal is that life has become meaningless and empty. He has faced the challenge of darkness only to be engulfed by it. At this point Coppola introduces into his film the anthropomorphic theories of Sir J.G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Jesse Weston's persuasive though irritatingly repetitive *From Ritual to Romance* and, T.S. Eliot's *Poems*, books which we see, like signposts, in Kurtz's library. Indeed Coppola makes him read 'The Hollow Men' to stress the point. Kurtz is now the sick god of his tribe, that notorious bore the Fisher King, and he desperately needs the Quester to execute him and free his paralysed people.[1] So Willard is carefully groomed for this role which he finally enacts. Some facile symbolism prepares us for the dénouement. Early in the film a chaplain conducts a holy communion service on the battlefield while the camera mounts to take in a helicopter overhead with a cow dangling from it. In the very next scene Kilgore and his men dine off the roasted beast. This intrusive symbol of the scapegoat dying for the life of the community is repeated at the end of the film when Willard executes Kurtz at the same moment that Kurtz's soldiers kill another animal in a ritual ceremony. But Willard does not become Kurtz's successor. Instead he sails away, leaving Kurtz's men to be wiped out by an airstrike from Saigon which we know is imminent. This attack probably was to have been the noisy ending Coppola at one time envisaged for his film. Fortunately he preferred a quieter one; now, as Willard's boat moves downstream, we hear Kurtz's final words again, 'The horror! The horror!'

This excursion into anthropomorphism accounts for another significant difference between *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*. In the novella, as I have already mentioned, there is an increase in tension and interest when we move from the atrocities of the colonialists to the mysterious evil world of Kurtz. This is because, whether it is narrating action or reporting speech, the novel comes to us through the medium of words, words which can be equally exciting as vehicles of action or description. In *Heart of Darkness* the vague and massive words which present Kurtz's evil are more impressive and exciting,

because of what they hide, than the precise words which describe the colonial atrocities earlier on. The reader moves willingly from the evil he understands to the evil he can only guess at. On the screen, however, there is a greater gulf between action and speech, for the former comes to us directly, as in real life, without needing words to convey it. We *see*, and we do not need to be *told*. Consequently a first viewing of *Apocalypse Now* can be a bewildering, even exhausting experience. For we suddenly realize that here is a film which begins with considerable action and then declines steadily towards the slow, muted final episode in Kurtz's camp. Has something gone wrong with the planning? Has Kilgore, brilliantly played by Robert Duvall, struck us so forcibly with his lunacy that nothing afterwards is as exciting? Or is this movement from action to discussion, from noise to virtual silence deliberate on Coppola's part? When we consider Coppola's rejection of Conrad's cannibal climax in favour of a rather clumsily contrived ritual sacrifice, the answer becomes clear. *Apocalypse Now* is designed from the first to move towards extinction. *Of course* the lunacy of Kilgore and the other commanders is more terrifying than Kurtz's comparatively rational solution to the problem of warfare. It is far more sickening to see supposedly civilized men burning whole villages without any qualms than to see declared savages killing each other. In a taped message to his colleagues Kurtz taunts them, 'What do they call it when the assassins accuse the assassin?' What he accomplishes in the film is to strip them of their grotesque façade of civilization, to embody in himself the spirit of pure, uncompromising warfare, and then bravely to submit to the inevitable resulting emptiness. If you want war, then fight it thoroughly, and this is what will happen to you. It can only end in a longing for extinction. With Kurtz dies his army and, by implication, all warmongers. In this sense he is fully the scapegoat, dying not that others may live but that they may see that they too must follow him into destruction. Rarely has a work of art appeared in any medium which moves so steadily and daringly from life to death.[2] And of a new world emerging from the old, there is not the slightest hint.

There remains one major difference between *Apocalypse Now* and its source. So far, the *Heart of Darkness* we have been describing could have been written by any pessimistic novelist at the end of the last century, one may even insist, by any novelist except Joseph Conrad. For what makes a novel a Conrad novel is the presence in it of the Conrad hero, that powerful moral force struggling for survival in a disintegrating world. By 1900 perceptive thinkers had long predicted the chaos to come, the breakdown of established religious, political and social systems which our century has experienced. But at that time 'the centre' still held. Darwinism, Marxism and anarchism may have eaten into the framework of society but outwardly the churches and empires stood as strong as ever. The most advanced writers only warned of the coming desolation and each was able to offer a personal solution to the catastrophe. For Conrad the world may be falling to pieces but the individual hero can remain intact, a moral force personified. Whether he survives or dies, he is true to himself, and his integrity is a kind of triumph. *Heart of Darkness* has two typical Conrad heroes, three if we accept the chief accountant at the up-river station. Perhaps we should. He is not a moral character but Marlow 'respected the fellow. Yes; I respected his collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed hair. His appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser's dummy; but in the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearance. That's backbone. His starched collars and got-up shirt-fronts were achievements of character.' The Russian who owns the book *An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship* is clearly a Conrad hero. 'For months – for years – his life hadn't been worth a day's purchase; and he was gallantly, thoughtlessly alive, to all appearance indestructible solely by the virtue of his few years and of his unreflecting audacity. I was

reduced into something like admiration – like envy . . . . If the absolutely pure, uncalculating, unpractical spirit of adventure had ever ruled a human being, it ruled this bespectacled youth.' It is Marlow, however, who provides the answer to Kurtz and the colonialists. The latter are clearly despicable; Kurtz is admirable in his original idealism and his daring to abandon it and live according to what he conceives to be his true nature; but for Marlow there is a better way. 'You wonder I didn't go ashore for a howl and a dance? Well, no – I didn't. Fine sentiments, you say? Fine sentiments, be hanged! I had no time. I had to mess about with white-lead and strips of woollen blanket helping to put bandages on those leaky steampipes – I tell you.' 'The earth for us is a place to live in, where we must put up with sights, with sounds, with smells, too, by Jove! – breathe dead hippo, so to speak, and not be contaminated . . . . Your strength comes in, the faith in your ability for the digging of unostentatious holes to bury the stuff in – your power of devotion, not to yourself, but to an obscure, back-breaking business.' Throughout the novella Marlow insists on the power of efficiency, doing the job one is paid for to the best of one's ability, as a means of conquering darkness. Towser or Towson, the author of the manual on seamanship had demonstrated this. 'Not a very enthralling book; but at the first glance you could see there a singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work, which made these humble pages . . . *luminous with another than a professional light'* (my *underlining*). If *Heart of Darkness* is, as some critics claim, an account of an exploration conducted by Marlow into the heart of man, from his *superego* through the *ego* into the *id*, then its conclusion is that man can surmount the bestiality of the *id* by finding order and integrity within himself (the *ego*) and demonstrating this by worthwhile and responsible action (the *superego*). Indeed, for many critics, *Heart of Darkness* is about Marlow the saved, not Kurtz the damned; it is the story of how to survive the approaching horror.

But *Heart of Darkness* has another positive force than its heroes. Enveloping the horror of Kurtz is the Congo Free State of Leopold II, totally corrupt though to all appearances established to last for a long time. But beyond this travesty of colonial enlightenment, mightier and nobler in every way, is the British Empire, for Conrad the best government the world had ever seen. On the map Marlow sees in the Brussels office 'there was a vast amount of red – good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done there.' In the novella the British Empire still stands firm, testifying to man's ability to conquer darkness with a workable system. Marlow is concerned to remind his British audience on the cruising yawl *Nellie* that their empire came out of darkness and must always struggle to remain free of it. Thus, in 1900, all is not yet lost. 'If England to itself do rest but true' and continues to produce heroes, there is some hope for mankind against the imminent catastrophe.

In the 1970's no such illusions are admissible. No responsible artist would dare to advocate the U.S.A. or any other country as the answer to today's chaotic world. Arguably too, the established religions have also failed. But it comes as a shock to realize that Coppola, an American director, cannot even offer us the traditional American hero, that seemingly imperishable if necessarily 'renewed' Adam, who is always turning up in American books and films, in Vietnam itself only a year ago as the Deer Hunter. In *Apocalypse Now* there are no safe frameworks – no noble nation, no valid faith, no pioneers. The riverboat is a ship of fools, not heroes. The self-reliant Russian of the novella has become the sycophantic news photographer drugged by Kurtz's ideas. And Willard is no Marlow. At the very beginning he says, 'There is no way of telling his [Kurtz's] story without telling my own, and if his story is a confession, so is my own.' What he means is that his personality has been absorbed into Kurtz's till he is fashioned into a tool, the

necessary executioner and guardian of his victim's reputation. Critics who berated the actor Martin Sheen for portraying Willard as a mere puppet missed the point of the role. In a film enacting the extinction of a ruthless colonel and his army, and therefore the extinction of all warmongers and their armies, Willard is Everyman, ourselves, deprived of our individuality till we are mere instruments of higher powers. We are clearly meant to identify with Willard, to see with his eyes and think his thoughts; and the great shock of the film is that this journey on the river of human nature leads us with Willard into the hollow heart of Colonel Kurtz. In Coppola's film, unlike Conrad's novella, there is only the darkness. What the novelist warned against and in some measure provided for has arrived. We are in the great Last Day of the Apocalypse.

Heart of Darkness has withstood the test of time. It endures and will probably always endure. Of its age, it speaks to all ages which, in a nutshell, are surely the essentials of a great work of art. It may be too soon to pronounce definitely on *Apocalypse Now*. In this discussion I have not been concerned to review it purely as a film and will not therefore deal with its many other merits, especially the cinematography -- for once an Oscar was intelligiently awarded. Is it a masterpiece or, as most critics seem to think, *almost* a masterpiece? Certainly it is an impressive film by any standards. But I think we can already confidently assert that, whatever its eventual stature, in two respects at least, its extraordinary structure and its total commitment to today's reality, Coppola's film is worthy to stand as 'a new creation' beside the Conrad novella from which it derives.

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[1] The most relevant section of Frazer's book seems to be 'The Killing of the Divine King'; in Miss Weston's book, see chapters ii and iv particularly.

[2] Structurally, the film resembles Gustav Mahler's extraordinary *Third Symphony* and, to a lesser extent, his *Ninth* and *Tenth*; also, of course, Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*.

WE MAKE IT TO THE CAPITAL

The series of parties held in our honour the week before we left for the island had a mournful desperation. We may well have been written out of Sungai Petani's exclusive existence, its tennis games at the Club, weekend drinking sessions, gatherings at the more fashionable restaurants for lunches and dinners. I had seen a bit of the world, having been to England and some other European countries. Langkawi was in my mind a jungle, huts scattered in its interior and children attending school in a large community hall. The morning we left, as a last obeisance to civilization, we drove round the town, honking, and then shot off towards Kuala Perlis, where we were to take the boat for Langkawi.

We reached the small seaside town just in time. The boat had come in. Its rust-streaked hull banged a few times against the tyres tied to the jetty pillars to cushion the impact, before it was secured. The passengers walked down the narrow gang plank, the women frightened and sheepish, the men proud and aggressive. They came nowhere near the men and women who disembarked from the launch at the Butterworth pier, residents of or visitors to Penang, self-assured and moved by some personal preoccupation. I looked at the last outpost of civilization, Kuala Perlis. The single street of shophouses seemed headed, disastrously, for the sea.

The new teachers, about a dozen, stood or sat close to the deck railings. As the boat, in spite of its decrepit condition, chugged through the blue waters, past craggy, tiny islands and unreachable cliff-heads, we were sucked into a remoteness we did not want to or could not disturb. When we finally reached Langkawi we were not surprised at the picture that opened before us. A green patch of land sloped unhurriedly towards a blue-and-white building, which we later learned was the government Rest House. Opposite it, on lower, level ground, were the Arabian-tale-like minarets of the mosque. We were jolted by a rickety bus past desolate, dark shophouses, squat attap huts, away from the sea, up an isolated road, to the school. The silence that surrounded these two houses was complete and sustained.

We tried escape. We took the only boat that left the island on Friday mornings to the mainland, returning the following day even more depleted. We paid fish-transporting boats lower fares to take us on Thursday evenings. Then we sat in our houses, after the half-hearted teaching, staring at the hills and the newly-levelled school field. Some evenings we walked in a bunch to the Rest House, drank beer and watched TV to the last programme. Or we were at the nurses' quarters. The nurses, 'expatriates' enduring their tenure on the island, tolerated our rhetorical, presumably, brilliant talk. But soon we saw their animated faces set into embarrassed impatience. We were back in our houses staring at whatever scooter or car light that passed down the road beside the school quarters.

Someone, perhaps Donald D' Cruz, 'discovered' poker. Then we crowded the long table after lunch and went to bed when cold night winds rifled the hall. Sallahudin, my Sungai Petani compatriot, sat behind us, watching the scaring rise of the stakes. We lost all sense of proportion, passing the short distance between school and house, sitting night after engulfing night, watching the glossy cards turn tattered and dirty. One afternoon Ignatius Ho called and coaxed but we remained in our rooms. We saw the cards in the evening, scattered and warped like dry leaves during the drought.

A karate punching bag and a chopping post appeared in the compound the two houses shared. Cheng Teik, dressed in blue shorts, singlet and a head-band, stood first at the punching bag, then at the post wadded with straw. The hollow thuds penetrated the hills behind the school; the sharper blows against the straw thwacked and buffeted. Uncle

Tom, really Lim Chuan Kee, a former Senior Assistant and the oldest among us, had bought, against our counsel, an old Fiat. He polished it daily before spluttering off to meet his midwife widow in Padang Matsirat. He had knowledge of engines; he took off the exhaust. Then, in stages, he converted the Fiat into a roaring, harsh tube.

"Make if fly, man!" Donald D'Cruz said.

"We could go to the whores in Padang Besar," Ignatius Ho said.

"Wash your mouth," Sallahudin said. "Allah, Allah".

Donald sat against the verandah rails sucking on his cigarette. Ignatius Ho leafed a *Playboy* he had scanned through innumerable times. Seng Hock, the science teacher, returned from a butterfly hunt. The glossy things fluttered inside finely punctured plastic cases, destroying their wings. He had his kit and got down to his task on the verandah boards. Working with care and precision, he drew out the bodily fluids with a syringe, then pumped in chloroform. He set the wings, before mounting the creature, as if it was about to take off.

A boy came timidly to the house. A horde of students were rushing about the brown ground as if demented.

"Sir, be referee?" he asked Donald, who was the games master.

"Get lost!" Donald D'Cruz shouted.

"The time-table says," the boy said.

"Don't come near the house again," Donald said.

The field was a riot the whole evening.

"Because of these miserable buggers we had to be posted here," Donald said.

Schedules for extramural activities had been pinned up on the general notice board, but the teachers did not go out to supervise.

"Who wants to get roasted under this sun?" Ignatius Ho said.

"We all know you're a nocturnal creature," Donald said, chuckling.

Sometimes we heard strange sounds from Ignatius Ho's room or the bathroom when he thought we were already asleep.

"Don't get personal," Ignatius Ho said.

The fourth formers, especially the girls, came back in the evenings and set up the burgeoning library. They had collected contributions from each class and ordered books from the mainland. I brought back a box-load after the first term holidays.

"You can suggest the titles and buy some of them, Sir?" Salmah, a fourth former, said.

"But why do you take so much trouble?" I said.

"You know, Sir, some of us haven't seen a train, " she said.

The isolation we had accepted and imposed on ourselves from the beginning allowed us to remain well within the pale of our ambitions and desires. In the afternoons, after our communal lunches, we arranged the day the way we wanted it. I lay on my camp cot, reading the batch of novels I had brought over form the mainland. I loved Lawrence's *The Rainbow* – it pinned you flush to the land – and sometimes, to the annoyance of the others, I read the opening paragraphs aloud. It contained a rhythm of life I felt I could never find in my own.

Out there in the hall, a thumping set the wooden house shaking. I let the book slide out of my hands and came out to the verandah. Donald D'Cruz, brown and muscular, striding both European and Asian customs, polished of speech and dark earthy curses, sat out there extracting strange pleasures from nicotine. At lunch he persistently, meticu-

lously, used fork, spoon and *knife*. When he heard Beethoven on the radio, he set the floor planks trembling jumping on them.

"Screw it, man, screw it!" he shouted.

Sallahudin, occupying a room in the house on a lower terrace than ours, counter-weaned with a holy phrase. Cheng Teik, infected, ran out to the punching bag, even if it was night, and banged away.

"Mamma mia," Uncle Tom said.

A strange gleam came into Ignatius Ho's eyes.

"And he pinned her down and ripped at her corsage, " he muttered.

For no reason at all we walked the mile into Kuah, some evenings, sat in the only decent coffeeshop and ate jelly thickly covered with Carnation, unsweetened milk. Behind the shop which was built close to the embankment, the waves splashed. At first, unaccustomed to the sound, we spoke against the steady roar. Then, as the evening fell into cool, dusk shadows, the waves lapping softly, interminably echoing behind the shop, we looked at the farmer, fisherman or trishaw peddler with new eyes. These people, walking or cycling up the main street, had a certain dignity and calm bearing. Our talks turned from unjust exile to student activities.

We returned even more disgruntled from the first term holidays. None of our appeals for a transfer back to the mainland had been entertained. 'You're to do your stint as did the others,' an official at the Education Department had said.

"My goodness! Back to the alien land!" Donald D'Cruz said.

"No more steak at the Paradise Coffee House," Ignatius Ho said.

We stood bunched at the bow, in front of the passenger cabin, trading the many pleasures the holidays had given us. The boat ploughed past the ignored, scree-sloped, tiny islands. When we reached Langkawi the silence claimed us with an even greater vengeance. The impenetrable jungle behind the house, the bare halls and the functional rooms – the kitchen presented unwashed, fungoid plates – sent us early to bed. Morose and speaking with effort, we sifted our feelings and thoughts to adjust to the still afternoons and the emptier nights.

The children's heads rose like unrecognizable balls of fire over their desks. They lobbied us during recess; they came to our houses in the afternoons. In the evenings their voices rang on the now green field. We sat on the verandah, watching, listening.

"How can they be happy in this place?" Donald said.

Ignatius Ho sought sanctuary in the *Playboy* issues he had smuggled past the Butterworth customs. His face was lost in a glistening sensuality.

"Why don't we play netball with the girls?" he said, looking up suddenly.

"You lecher!" Uncle Tom said. "Keep the children children."

"You've a dirty mind," Ignatius Ho said. "Go to your wasting widow."

Uncle Tom plucked away the magazine from Ignatius Ho and took up a fighting stance.

"Face up to a man's world!" he said.

"I don't fight old men. Too tame," Ignatius Ho said, retrieving his *Playboy*.

Uncle Tom roared off in the tube.

Seng Hock returned from a butterfly hunt, talking to himself. Donald, who had taken to swimming in the afternoons, reclined against the verandah railings, looking even browner. Uncle Tom tinkered with his Fiat. Cheng Teik punched and chopped viciously. Ignatius Ho quarrelled, making no bones about his activities in the bathroom. Sallahudin locked himself up in his room.

The Langkawi Boat Co., undeviating from its practice, put a tub at the school's disposal. The school made preparations for its annual picnic. As the boat couldn't take the entire student population, four were selected from each class. The teachers had only to bring themselves. On the Saturday morning we took a bus to the jetty. Almost all of us wore a hat, Ignatius Ho sporting the broadest straw one. Seng Hock carried the pack of Coke we had pooled for and bought.

The boat, gaily festooned, slowly filled with students. Their parents had turned up to see them off. We were given special seats at the stern. Salmah, as head prefect, set the attitude and pace. The students had brought tiffin carriers and these were collected and stored beneath the deck. Salmah went around settling the students as the engine revved up and the boat chugged forward. There was a loud cheer from the pier. We were headed towards the numerous islands we had heard about.

What was it that changed our mood that day? The sun on the bright, blue waters? The students were different: their exuberance was about them like the sea breeze. They wouldn't leave us alone. Our Cokes were opened for us. One of them brought the best transistor they had. They took us into the wind, pointed out the islands and told us the legends about them. We reached *Dayang Bunting*, the island famed for its lake. The boys and girls waded to the shore. A few of them held the *sampan* that carried us, the teachers, to the wide beach. The girls had already unrolled the mats and laid out the plates. The tiffin carriers, from enamel to intricate silver ones, were ranged on another mat.

The boys had changed into shorts, and those who could afford it, swimming trunks. The girls wore loose blouses and floral *sarungs* that fell only to their calves.

"The Lake, Sir," Zulkifli said. "Shall we go?"

While the girls went about laying out the picnic, we took the rough, winding path to the Lake. Along the way, Zulkifli who had an irritating talkativeness, told us about the Lake. Negotiating the slippery bends and listening to him at the same time was a hazardous business. He mentioned something about a pregnant woman living all by herself – accused apparently of adultery – on that island. The Lake had been her bathing place. One day she drowned, carrying her unborn child down with her. From then on the Lake had claimed a life regularly. The frequency of such tragedies stopped only when a Japanese officer, during the Occupation, was drowned while swimming. The body didn't float up, as usually happens, though his compatriots waited to give him a ceremonial burial. The body came to the surface only when a local *bomoh* appealed to the pregnant woman's spirit. And then white crocodiles brought up the body!

"You must be pure if you want to swim in the Lake," Zulkifli said.

When we saw the Lake we wasted no time getting into it. We were sweating from the toil up the winding, uphill trail and the water looked fresh and pellucid. But we didn't go out to the depths. One boy, older then Zulkifli, swam across and returned, triumphant. The girls, their work finished, had come up unobtrusively and they cheered.

"Swim out, Sirs!" they yelled, forgetting themselves.

But we only dawdled in the shallows feeling the faintly moss-covered boulders and shingles treacherous enough.

It was a marvellous picnic, the girls going to the extent of decorating the mats with wild-flower arrangement. Salmah didn't let any one rest from eating. The food from the various tiffin carriers made a strange concoction of flavours. Some of the students peered over us to see if we ate any of their dishes, going away grinning if we did.

The afternoon passed in a daze; the children were riotous. Some played ball, others fished from rocks shouting whenever thay made a catch. The girls sat in groups, talking.

Then with the evening sun showing us a new beach altogether, we packed for the trip back.

We stood in the stern watching the foam whipped up by the boat, nostalgic for the afternoon on the beach. The life-boat, the tow line attaching it to the parent boat, rode the waves like a porpoise. A young Chinese, a temporary teacher in the school, sat in the boat, content to have the rippling sea all to himself. We almost forgot him as the sky darkened and we turned to nurse the indefinable feeling we experienced that afternoon.

Suddenly, out of the dark, came a joyous keening. The young Chinese, seasoned by years of living in Langkawi, ululated a haunting melody. It may have come from the porpoises themselves, as they gambolled - so the Langkawians claimed - through the waves.

I was shy and awkward before the students when classes resumed on Sunday. I saw it in the others too. Ignatius Ho shuffléd to his lessons. Donald's unimpeachable etiquette acquired a few tatters. Cheng Teik lost his kick for the bag and the post.

"They are goods kids," Seng Hock said.

We didn't know quite how to place them: they defied the little psychology we had picked up at our respective Teachers' Training Colleges. They seemed naive and at the same time possessed of a different kind of knowledge. Their curiosity defeated our cynicism. Had insular isolation given them a vulnerable enthusiasm? They were bold to the point of being reckless.

Zulkifli set himself up as our patron. He was full of loud suggestions for our enlightenment and entertaiment.

"That picnic, nothing, Sir," he said. "Go round the island. More adventure."

"You do get a nice view," Salmah said when I asked her. "Zul talks a lot. Sometimes he's right. There's the *gua cherita*."

"Stories actually come from the cave?" I said.

"Your own stories back," she said.

The library she set up had grown. She worked at her table among the shelves during the afternoons. Travel books were popular among the students. I saw the most outdated tourist pamphlets on Penang and Kuala Lumpur.

"Do they really read these things?" I said.

"Look at them and make their own stories," she said, laughing.

I showed a clinical interest in the library's progress. From time to time Salmah placed a large hard-cover book containing all the titles before me. Or she handed me publishers' lists and I suggested some books. I admired her diligence, even sympathized with her ambitions. But there was, as with other students, an irritating distance between us.

"May be Zul and I could arrange a real fishing trip for the teachers?" Salmah said.

"Don't bother," I said, sliding out of the room.

That excursion to *Dayang Bunting* must have awakened some nerve in us. Restless, we found our old interests meaningless. In the afternoons I sat out on the verandah gazing at the empty field. To the right stood the school buildings, deserted for that hot hour between one and two. The sweat sat on me, clammy and unnecessary.

Zul came down the path to the house, smiling.

"Dreaming, Sir?" he said. "Not for long now. Want to go on the fishing trip?"

"In this heat?" I said.

"Not today, Sir. One evening," he said. "Ask other teachers, too."

"Why should we go?"

"For the fun, Sir," he said. "Sitting in the house all time, no good."

"Are you coming?" I said.

"No, Sir. But you all go," he said.

"Thank goodness," I said.

"What, Sir?"

"Nothing."

So it was that we – Ignatius Ho, Sallahudin, Seng Hock, Donald, Cheng Teik, Uncle Tom – found ourselves, one evening, in the fishing village a couple of miles beyond the jetty, waiting, while Zain and Ahmad loaded the boat. Ahmad was a pupil in the school, Zain a fisherman stalwart known for his good catches.

The stakes to which several boats were moored rose like surprising growths out of the sea. Beyond, the hills had darkened under the evening. The man and the boy looked puny, hurrying between the boat – large enough to accommodate about ten – and Zain's hut. A few children from the other huts swam and splashed around the boats, naked and absorbed.

Ahmad signalled shyly and held the boat. We rolled up our trousers and waded through, surprisingly, warm water. Zain nodded at us and pulled at the rope to start the weather-beaten, old motor. It spluttered staunchly into life. Then Zain, business-like, helped us aboard, stored the water container and patrol tin separately and took the rudder. Ahmad waited at the bow to untie the mooring rope.

The boat chugged, the sound echoing among the hills, past the bay head into the open, more treacherous sea. We anchored, in the last splashes of sun, twice, half an hour from Langkawi, and Zain cast the lines. But they brought up nothing.

"We must go to deeper water," Zain said.

Zain spoke only to the boy and through him to us.

We had anticipated plucking the hooks free of fish but were satisfied to watch the water rush by as the boat moved off again.

"Oh, for the open sea and a bottle of wine," Donald sang.

"That reminds me," Uncle Tom said. "Only beer."

He took out a couple of bottles from the bag he had shouldered. He opened one, took a few gulps and passed it to Ignatius Ho. Ignatius Ho sucked at the bottle a long time. Then Donald sipped.

"I want to keep my physique," Cheng Teik said, waving away the bottle.

Seng Hock and Sallahudin shook their heads. Zain and Ahmad looked shyly down.

"This is the life, man," Donald said.

"My bonnie lies over the ocean,
My bonnie lies over the sea," he sang.

The motor spluttered into silence. We seemed to have reached a bay within a bay. Where we were it was dark, but beyond – in landlubber's language – about two miles away shone the traffic of the world. I felt what I imagined Magellan must have, the feeling a glimpse of possibilities always gives. Beyond the mass of darkness around us straddled two islands clean out of the water; beyond a bright disc flushed and dimmed.

Then the light faded; Ignatius Ho and Donald shared a joke. Zain and Ahmad hauled the long nylon rope with its numerous, pendent hooks. They fell emptily on the boards. We had pissed a few times over the sides, and felt cold.

Ahmad dragged in the anchor; Zain started the motor. It spluttered a few times. Zain pulled violently at the rope. The motor whined dryly. Then we sat in silence, the sea roaring beneath the boat. Rain splattered down briefly; the boats washed towards the Gibralter islands and light.

"We're drifting," Ignatius Ho said.

His voice sounded strangely cracked.

Ahmad lit the kerosine lamp. Zain unscrewed the spark plugs, sandpapered, blew on and replaced them. The motor only rasped.

"The engine was working well yesterday," Zain said to Ahmad.

The boy tried his luck with the motor. It shuddered with a quick intake of air, then was still.

The waves jostled the boat even faster towards the sucking island rocks. Zain and Ahmad took out the tiffin carrier and ate whatever they had brought. As the roar in our ears increased, our exasperation deepened. Why were they indifferent to the danger? They giggled, rushing each other to wash their hands in the dark, moving sea. Zain wiped his hands on his trousers and sucked his teeth.

The waves, humped on either side of the boat, took our fear into an awesome silence when they fell. Then they massed again like frisky dark buffaloes? We turned the feeble kerosine lamp, the false gaiety of the beer gone out of our system. Zain and Ahmad huddled in a conference, then dropped into a thigh-and-shoulder-slapping shenanigan. Out there, lighted dimly, was our plight drifting towards the sucking Gibralter rocks. We would either be immediately expunged or, worse still, overwhelmed by the effulgent luminescence beyond.

By the time the boy and the man took up the oars the waves had ceased to be recognizable shapes. Zain and Ahmad crooned some silly song as each handled an oar. Sallahudin, fat and helpless, was a fright at the bow. Cheng Teik sat rigid, on guard, against the roar of the sea. Donald D'Cruz sucked on a cigarette series, while Seng Hock and Uncle Tom mumbled to each other. Ignatius Ho strained to lose himself in a sensual reverie. The boat suddenly turned into a creaking barrel as the waves, vengeful now, sent it shuddering from peak to trough. Zain and Ahmad let it ride the waves as they tentatively dipped the oars. The boat caught suddenly: Zain and Ahmad bent against the waves.

We were a jangle. The boat planks groaned over each other, shifting against compelled direction. Zain and Ahmad pushed the oars and held, rowed and paused. Ahmad fumbled and the boat rolled again. Zain took over; he sighed, wiped his face and stood just behind the older man. When the boat moved up under a wave, Zain plunged the oars, thrust repeatedly and held on. The boat worked forward, Zain wielding the oars with controlled force. Ahmad, stationed behind him, imitated his movements. He gained on the rhythm Zain discovered and took over for a spell. But his young body soon bent under the exertion. Zain quickly stepped into his position.

During that brief moment the boat lunged and lapsed. The waves, grown enormous in the dark, struck at the boat. The machinery of effort and fear fell into an unresisting drift. A steady rain wet us; we remained a loose knot at the bow. Nothing was visible beyond the prow; the sea was a seething white. Phosphorescent gleams leered at us like crab eyes and subsided, only to rise again. We, unwilled, were trapped within perfect riot: rain, dismantling haze, swinging indirection. Zain and Ahmad looked at us, a moment, frightened, then lay down under the loose oars. The boat swung from darkness to darkness like an unmothered cradle.

Sallahudin retched violently.

"I can't take this!" he gasped.

"Let's do something," Donald said.

But he only rocked the boat more – a spill of water froze us – when he groped towards the oars.

"Mamma mia!" Uncle Tom said.

We sat still, wearing out the fear.

Zain and Ahmad talked in Malay under the oars as if safe in the womb of their home.

"Have you been to Kuala Lumpur?" Zain said.

' You know I haven't even gone to Alor Setar," Ahmad said.

"You've to get up a train. It moves, chuk-chuk, chuk-chuk, through many stations. Cuts through day and night. And then the capital!"

"Have you been there?" Ahmad said.

"Seen only fish, boat, sand and sea. But we can go."

"When?" Ahmad said.

"Any time you want," Zain said.

Ahmad laughed, a tiny piping sound against the massed roar of the waves. Ahmad could not control himself; Zain joined him. The boat struck against the waves as the two rolled from side to side, utterly defiant. Our grim, frustration-set faces relaxed. The furious waves may have been bunched, cascading paper, swirling under a freak wind.

Zain and Ahmad tottered to their feet, still laughing.

"We pack our bags, put nice shirts, sarungs . . ." Zain said.

"Prayer mat, flask, some rice," Ahmad said.

"Yes, we could get hungry. Pictures of our family."

"Fruits, books, special kueh," Ahmad said.

"Jokes? Stories? Sadness? Joy?" Zain said.

"Also ALL inside that bag," Ahmad said.

"Ready? The train's waiting," Zain said.

The laughter had left them; the game possessed them.

"Jer . . .rrr . . . ish. Jer . . . ish. Eeeesh . . . Ish. Jerrr," Zain said.

He had taken up the oars. Ahmad stood behind him.

"Ting-ting-ting-ting!" Zain mouthed.

The boat clanged against the waves and locked. The teachers thrown against each other, sat up to watch and wait.

"Goodbye! Goodbye!" Ahmad shouted.

The boat heaved as Zain strained the oars. Ahmad made the clangour of a train leaving a station, then kept up the monotonous thrust of the wheels on the tracks.

"Clack-clack. Clack-clack. Clack-clack," Ahmad said.

Zain struggled with the oars. The waves repelled his efforts.

"Clack-clack. Clack-clack. Clack-clack," Ahmad said.

The boat moved awkwardly forward.

"Click-clack. Click-clack. Click-clack. Ssshh!"

The oars thudded, then hit the water regularly.

"Half hour to Bukit Mertajam. Tickets! Tickets! Click-clack. Click-clack. Click-clack. Click-clack," Ahmad said.

The waves heaved past the boat; the rain slanted against our bodies.

Ahmad geared into rowing motions as Zain panted.

"Tickets, please! Tickets! B.M. Change now!"

Zain slapped Ahmad's hand. The boy, without breaking the rhythm, assumed the rower's position.

"Chuk-chuk. Chuk-chuk. Chuk-chuk," Zain chanted.

The current that had been dragging us towards the Gibralter rocks felt like a loosening tentacle at the boat bottom. Sallahudin retched again, now with relief.

"Taiping, Ipoh, Kuala Kubu Baru, Serendak, Kuala Lumpur!" Zain said.

The boat maintained a steady pace.

"Chuk-chuk. Chuk-chuk. Chuk-chuk," Zain chanted.

Forms assumed and dispersed in the rain-washed darkness before us. Zain quickened the chant. The boat fairly whizzed through the foaming water.

"The hills of Taiping! Change at Taiping. Tickets!" Zain said.

"The track bends," Ahmad said, panting.

"That's Taiping. Change at Taiping!"

Ahmad touched Zain's hand and they changed places. The boy chanted, the man rowed. Water rose to the boards; Ahmad baled with a dipper, still giving the timing for Zain.

"Cleared the hills. Now flat land," Zain said.

"Can you see the tin mines? Must be nearing Ipoh. Change at Ipoh," Ahmad said. He chanted and baled.

Above the waves came a new sound, Zain's panting. The boat slowed.

"Ipoh, Ipoh, Ipoh," chanted Ahmad.

"Ipoh, Ipoh," Zain echoed.

"Change at Ipoh," Ahmad said.

"Kuala Lumpur three more stations," Zain said, drinking from a container.

Another storm hit us. Uncle Tom had, unobtrusively, taken over the baling. The rest of us were bunched at the bow. Ahmad's rowing flagged. Donald, who had composed imaginary music for the piano, now tentatively tried a couple of keys. His guttural voice producing the sounds at first embarrassed us, then had us chanting. We gradually built up a steady chorus; the rowing evened out.

"Change now. Kuala Kubu Baru. Tickets!" Zain said.

Ahmad slapped Zain's hand and sat down. The chorus rose with vigour, drowning the roar of the waves. We soon entered an exalted keening, the boat rose and fell, slicing through.

"Serendak! Serendak!"

Our voices picked up an echo. Solid shapes rose out of the stormy mist.

"Tickets! Tickets!" Ahmad shouted.

Zain was already up at the oars. We chanted faster. The jagged rocks of the Langkawi Bay flashed as the huge waves splashed on them.

Donald broke into a Malay song.

"Rasa sayang. Eh, rasa sayang sayang eh!"

We took up the refrain and rode into the bay with these words on our lips. The village, what could be seen of it, stood against the hills wrapped in calm isolation.

We reached the mooring stakes. And then an odd thing happened. We reached for each others' hands, shyly, surely. The many warm grasps imprinted still deeper in our minds the Gibralter current, the enormous white phosphorescence of disintegration.

Stumbling towards land, we arrived at a familiar shore.

K.S.Maniam
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DIARY JOTTINGS

this restless idling

this restlessness to be
doing resting keeping up holding
on thinking what
next thinking
too brief this leave any leave
to cut loose and live this
week even just this dew
drenched
dawn

this restlessness to
accomplish the future the
present consumed to
fever

this burning burning more
than most and more than most
would guess ever
to see the garden
helps some hosing it cool
on face the spray
breezeblown
back

and burying fish heads
and guts in earth for
richer green and waiting
quizzing clouds for
rain

Ooi Boo Eng

THE REFUGEES

A world gone, and dreams
denied accustomed air, some
stand still, live no life.

To sea's sway in shud-
dering ships others moved with
the monsoons and fate.

Gold-girded, heart in
mouth and hope in heart, they made
ancient history young.

How many died, how
and where, no one knows; enough
survived as problems.

Trengganu's shores they
flooded with inflation and
the world's attention.

Many were chosen
by promising lands but none
strangely by Jalland.

They were chosen for
themselves and humanity,
one hopes, has to hope

for – if nothing else –
the sake of a warm page in
Darwinian history.

Ooi Boo Eng

IRREGULAR LOVE SONNET

You shuffle the good friends around
To find your better ones.
The method is at best unsound
For getting the love you want.

You stack affection's cards
Like a seasoned old gambler,
Ever failing to discard
The game, in spite of domestic grumbles.

There is always one last deal,
Always another hand,
To play the sex appeal
And hope to knot the band.

You will not always count your earnings.
The point will come when all that's left are yearnings.

Lim Chee Seng
University of Malaya

A FIGURE FORGOTTEN IN HOURS NOT-OF-NEED

You are not the purest of women
but you toiled for your children,
throwing morals coyly to the wind.
How else could we have grown up
with cushioned settees to sit on
and hot cuisine to nourish our hungry souls?
I'm reminded of a time
when I refused to talk to you
and miserably moped to the floor
my tale of spite.
You took me by the hand,
said how little I knew of hardship,
and we cried.

Now, in helpless moments,
I think of you,
a figure forgotten
in hours not-of-need,
but a comforter of the past
who caught cockroaches with bare hands.
Sons grew from your breasts
to yearn for the breasts of others
and daughter, when married, belongs to the in-laws,
but your tears of loss
speak also of resilience.
And though it's a sin to grow old
and to lose your dearest treasures,
you stoutly go your humdrum way
while I curse the drudgery of life.
I'm still afraid of cockroaches.
But when I think
how little love I've shown you in return,
I sometimes cry.

KEE THUAN CHYE

SINGAPORE/MALAYSIAN POETRY:

AT LEAST SOMETHING AND LESS AND MORE

(Part 1)

Ooi Boo Eng

Four books of verse have come my way (from Heinemann – 'Writing in Asia Series'): Edwin Thumboo's *Ulysses by the Merlion* (1979) – accomplished, as expected; Arthur Yap's *down the line* – experimental; Shirley Lim's *Crossing the Peninsula & Other Poems* – resistant to the single-word summing-up (but perhaps therein lies its promising future?); and Lee Tzu Pheng's *Prospect of a Drowning* – well, appealing. Four books of verse by Singaporeans/Malaysians (though Shirley Lim now lives in New York she can remember 'The sallow child' who 'Ate rice from its ricebowl/And kicks still in the cupboard/With the china and tea-leaves', p. 50) coming one's way for coming to terms with at any one time isn't a very common event. They are all slim volumes (34, 58, 100 and 52 pages respectively); still, for once, then, something.

The something sometimes comes close to being only or barely just that. In the following, for instance,

> hair today, gone tomorrow:
> age's song sung. each day
> a pate here
> a crown there
> absence makes the scalp flounder.
> a snip here
> a snip there
> removal makes the face rounder.
> . . .

A. Yap (in 'baldilocks & the 3 hairs', p. 23) does no more than having fun with verbal clowning – a clowning zestfully given the rein when in the last two lines of 'medium' (p. 4)

> look at the kampung chicken, it pimps for every ring
> and prinks properly over every prime prize ping

it issues in confident nonsense which seems on the verge of breaking into sense(?); but at least such verbal slap-stick may be 'fun' to some readers whereas a passage such as

> plastics takes many years to decompose.
> paper doesn't, all the time endless successions:
> heroes & villains who've rocked the boat
> wade (only) downwards to find it,
> not mud, is paper-given.
> & freedom is paper. upwards, too,
> every cloud has a papery lining
>
> (p. 2)

is likely to have readers wondering about what purpose or necessity is served by putting in such an archly odd way (including some violation of grammar) the point that nothing is, or is allowed to be, real or lasting any more.

A. Yap's collection is not the only one containing items which amount to only, though at least, something. Shirley Lim's

> My dreams are
> mixed with
> poetry,
> and my nights are
> good nights.
> Who knows when
> gladness
> becomes
> the day, and
> who cares,
> anyway?
> (p. 15)

is that for pretending to be no more than a dashed-off expression of an insousiant nose-thumping at daylight reality. Her 'Dressing Room' (p. 16), which also takes chances with cut-up prose for what may come of the venture, may perhaps be a little more than only something: a present and a past moment are clearly related and through that relation a definite sense of an ending is brought about, a point is made about life's heart of darkness; but the motif of the mirror smeared 'with spilt powder' – bright life clouding over, dirtied – makes the ending and the point a rather stagey affair.

Stagey Lee Tzu Pheng is unlikely to be. The dramatic impulse is faint or non-existent in her work, a weakness and a strength. The life of her poems comes from a meditativeness released by and realizing its particular tone and turn of direction along with the thinking over of something, a situation, an event, a letter from a friend, 'Two rooms long curtained/from the assaulting sun' (p. 10), or a 'pebble-choked stream' (p. 32). But when, as in 'Everything Is Going Away' (p. 2), the thinking over is done in a vacuum and on a theme as general as that to be born is to begin dying a little each day, the result comes to only something (or perhaps even less than that). This is the first of the five stanzas:

> coming into life
> everything is going away,
> going away from the first hope
> to the last futility:
> the opening womb, the closing tomb

There's simplicity, there's clarity, but these virtues lose their force when everything is laid out mechanically as in a diagram or rather a series of inter-crossing equations finally reduced to the formula of the last line. On this sort of thing in verse three lines from another poem (p. 13) provide apt comment:

> my picture was dead
> being drawn too carefully
> and having lived too long in the mind.

'Everything . . .' isn't dead if only because the poem throughout is a struggle to quicken thought into thinking. This struggle comes to something distinctly better in 'Then and Now' (p. 33) which is preoccupied with the same theme but with a positive turn to it – towards life:

> and in you, see the earthblood stir
> to this tremulous smile,
> the being's slow burgeoning!

– and taking off from something remembered ('for Phyllis'):

> So far away it seems now,
> that green time,
> grown over, nearly hidden
> . . .

Also instructive as regards the necessity of a concrete situation for Lee Tzu Pheng to succeed to at least something or perhaps better than that is 'Nightpiece' (p. 4): 'If I listen closely', it begins,

> to these razor sounds that
> saw the night
> . . .

and then – no foot slipping, no word jarring (if none especially felicitous) – it moves from the present into an aspect of the speaker's childhood to arrive without forcing at the point of romantic evocation built up to from the beginning –

> moths in the gardenia tree
> singing in the hedges and the grass

– only to move back to the present of the poem's opening, the recurrence of the evocative moment –

> movement in the hedges and the grass
> moths in the gardenia tree

– firmly merging the present and the past into an identity of feeling. In terms of movement, syntax and feeling the poem *works*, through a single sentence, from beginning to end without faltering. Of the poems so far mentioned it is the best – indeed the others do not deserve mentioning in the same breath with it. If I have rated it no higher than being something plus it is in deference to those who will insist on 'high seriousness', arguing that, yes, the poem works very well, it's very pleasing, but that it works to the end of only the evocation of a mood. I think this argument can be met to a good extent but as it will take a while I will leave the poem as that sort that is definitely something plus.

There is a species of liberal-humanist literary criticism which is susceptible, through its very concern with the decent and the fine in human living, to being seduced to forget to look hard at the actually realized achievement of a poem which happens to offer possibilities for talking about 'relevance', 'complexity', 'human concern', 'social responsibility',

'moral realism' and the like. I can imagine a critic of this temper, faced with Lee Tzu Pheng's 'Cool Lads' (pp. 7–8), having little difficulty working up a persuasive rhetoric and context in which phrases and lines from the poem can be fitted in appropriately, with the result of making the poem look better than it is. 'Cool Lads' is a social-conscience poem, it has 'major-ness' of theme; it begins well –.

> They are often here after the rain,
> Six of them, . . .

– and it has fine things: the picture, for example, of the 'Cool Lads'

> who laugh as they lick
> bright rain from their nose-tips,
> shouting at each other's squints

communicates both a quality of observedness and a sense of delight in the observing, of identification with the observed. But it is a flawed poem. It enforces the need to keep to something reasonable and human, somehow to reconcile the extreme of looking down in anger at boys who 'beat the grass to pulp/in an orgy of sullen joy', and the other extreme of, well, God's in his heaven, boys in the wet, all's right with the world. It fails to keep the balance – indeed it almost bends over backwards to the latter attitude. This shows up most clearly in utterances like 'as tough boys should be', 'cool lads drinking the cool of/moments . . .', 'since boys must be boys' – which all sound like Robert Frost sentimentalized – and in the poem not ending where it could have ended: at the end of the third stanza. Better, it seems to me, to end with abruptness there than to carry on with the three pairs of lines which protest too much for the attitude of live and let live. Potentially a better poem, in some ways actually better than 'Nightpiece', but it isn't a successful whole, and therefore I can't feel it clearly as a whole class or two above the former in achievement.

Thumboo's volume stands out from the other volumes as the one which does not dispose one to separate the bad, the indifferent and the good from one another. The experience one has with the other volumes of being up with one poem and down with another one does not get with his volume. His poems all seem to be more or less of the same standard as regards the handling of language and imagery. But 'Ulysses by the Merlion' has especially attracted me from the first because it is the title poem and because it carries that theme of national identity which all Commonwealth/Third-World poets writing in English are supposed by some critics to have a go at because of the nature of their historical-cultural situation. The poem begins with such a confident simplicity–

> I have sailed many waters,
> Skirted islands of fire,
> Contended with Circe
> Who loved the squeal of pigs;
> . . .

– moves so briskly without being breathless and in general reads so well that it must have been only at the tenth or so reading that a doubt began to nag as to whether it comes out right after all. It still impresses as an original attempt to mythologize Singapore, to set it for the first time on the map, and in the resonance, of the quest myth of Ulysses. We

meet much-travelled and canny Ulysses frankly admitting to not knowing what to make of Singapore:

> But this lion of the sea
> Salt-maned, scaly, wondrous of tail,
> Touched with power, insistent
> On this brief promontory . . .
> Puzzles.

Ulysses' bemusement seems to me an adroit way to make the point that Singapore has been much misunderstood or variously understood, its identity denied any reality, or asserted as there but unidentifiable, or deplored as of dubious value, fragmentary, rootless. But Ulysses' puzzle is itself puzzling. Stumped, he yet goes on to show himself quite knowledgeable and understanding about Singapore and its people:

> They make, they serve,
> They buy, they sell.
>
> Despite unequal ways,
> Together they mutate,
> Explore the edges of harmony,
> Search for a centre;
> . . .

And so on; quite an extraordinary grasp for a puzzled man. There is, then, a contradiction at the heart of the poem. Does it amount to the kind of violation of logical conception which can tear a poem apart? If it does, then the damage done can only be felt surely as depressing the poem to the level of those already discussed. I put the issue tentatively because it is possible to argue that what puzzles Ulysses isn't the country symbolized by the merlion but the symbol itself. I must say, though, that I find it impossible to maintain steadily the necessary hermetic sealing off of the country and its symbol. And even if I could I would still find it difficult to get the poem right because it seems to me that when Ulysses speaks of the dual nature of Singaporean society or culture, of the old co-existing with the new –

> They hold the bright, the beautiful,
> Good ancestral dreams
> Within new visions

– he shows understanding of rather than puzzle at the ambivalent meaning of the symbol, the 'creature of land and sea'.

Another poem which puzzles but in a different way can be taken up at a later point. I want now to turn to poems or passages thereof which don't seem to come up to being even 'only but at least something or something plus'. No, not in the Thumboo volume;

there's none in it of that kind. Like this, the second stanza of 'High Tide' (*Prospect of a drowning*, p. 3):

> Like them, tides will wash
> between us, since
> humanity claims its own:
> when the flood overtakes
> who would then be alone

– which doesn't seem to make good sense even when placed in the context of the first stanza (which speaks of sea-shells as 'sea-washed empty homes'). Or this from the beginning of 'down the line':

> the wind that weaves across buildings
> carries the calculus the city is reckoned on.
> call it what we will, it is liquid graphics,
> neither statistics nor logistics can propel,
> for its basis well under the skin has yet another
> lined in rubrics & this, then, is palpable
> & lends the eye whatever enchantment it wishes.
> . . .

and so on to little or no purpose: what coherent – civilized – sense that can be tortured out of such jargon-like articulation can ever redeem such a wilful attempt to avoid telling it like it is? Than this there can be nothing more exasperating to read? There is, I think – this, 'Adam's Grief' (*Crossing the Peninsula*, p. 3):

> Grieving, no matter at how large a loss,
> Is not enough. It is easy to cry
> Since one first stood, dumb with rage and crossed
> With grief, and wondered at water from his eyes.
> It is where to go from there, with only
> Strange plants and rocks, creatures indifferently
> Shy or ravenous; how to live with his
> Light and dark occurring remorselessly,
> With all voice withdrawn, excepting this:
> Speech which is sufficient enterprise.

Just about everything in this poem exasperates. Take syntax, which is no mere mechanics, paradigmatic elements of language in syntagmatic sequence. It has its own insistent sense – the sense, for example, of the pattern realized in the utterance 'It is easy to cry' says plainly that here, at 'cry', there can occur either full silence or continuation of speech; but the sense of what seems a similar pattern underlying the utterance 'It is where to go from there' plainly points to a continuation with 'that . . .' coming immediately or at some other point. It fails to come and this reinforces the impression given by other things in the poem that its shape of sense has gone awry. Other things? Well, like 'indifferently': it makes no significant difference to 'shy'; and – since it is syntactically possible to extend it to 'ravenous' – what does 'indifferently ravenous' mean? And what precisely can be meant by 'his/Light and dark'? And what sense is one to make of the

first sentence? Is it normal logic at all to expect that grief can be enough if the loss is large enough? If it isn't, there's no point in denying it.

The poems/passages pointed to above as not amounting to anything are those, it is true, which do not make plain and poetic sense to *me*. Other readers may well be able to make good sense out of them. But a reviewer/critic has to say that this and this and this he can't understand, leaving it implicit that what he means is that they are the kind of poems which seem likely to make any favourable 'understanding' account of their meaning and art look far better than they themselves. If I may use J.V. Cunningham (in 'To The Reader', *The Exclusions of a Rhyme*, p. 70) to point up what I mean:

> And all's coherent.
> Search in this gloss
> No text inherent:
> The text was loss.
>
> The gain is gloss.

Happily there's left a fair amount of verse whose text is able in its inherent potential worth to match any 'understanding' gloss it may call forth. Even of the Yap volume this may be said, though it contains much that can be too hastily dismissed by readers – those especially who like their poetry to be Poetry – as idiosyncratic, even perversely quirky. In 'they are days' (p. 1) –

> days are variable,
> each day has what each day has.
> that, which others haven't,
> is best. its best is more
> a constant. less best
> is less everything lenitive.
>
> they are variable,
> each they has what each they hasn't
> this, which others have,
> is better. but best is more
> a concern. less best
> is plus everything fugitive

– Yap is clearly on to the idea of approximating a poem to a mathematical equation, with the two stanzas almost identical in phrasal patterns but in their realization differing where it matters. The objective seems to be the setting out as accurately as possible of a problem of definition – of, specifically, demonstrating the possibility of approaching a concept in two different ways. The language of the verse is therefore kept as objectively clear as possible; repetitive, it is dry, denotative. Not, therefore,'each *day*' – that belongs to lexis, to the world of distracting connotations – but 'each *they*', this being close enough in sound to 'day' to approximate to a rhyming identity with it, but being an item of grammar it looks inwards to a world of ordered relationships. But using 'each' with 'they' – arbitrary? Not altogether; the plural pronoun can be felt as a singular noun in function.

Grammar, it is clear, greatly fascinates Yap. Has anyone ever written a Transformational Grammar poem? Yap has one on 'the grammar of a dinner' (p. 17), and an interesting one it is, too. I quote the beginning:

> let's have chicken for dinner.
>
> somewhere else, someone else utters:
> let's have john for dinner.
> we are alarmed by the latter
> but a dinner, too, has its own grammar
> & we are assured by grammarians
> both utterances are in order.
> . . .

and the end:

> john is a noun holding knife & fork.
> chicken collocates with the verb eat.
> grammarians favour such words
> as delicious & john eats happily,
> but in a gastronomic dinner
> taxonomic john isn't to eat deliciously.

Splendid stuff, this poem, for a TG lesson or textbook. But there's too, a more serious aspect to it. It's no bad thing at all for a poet to be as alert to that very human side of language, the 'fun' possibilities inherent in linguistic sequences, as Yap is; delightedly aware, for example, that in the sentence 'john isn't to eat deliciously' there's more than one sentence, each impudently pressing its claim on us as the most acceptably meaningful one: if this means that John isn't allowed to/mustn't eat deliciously, what a thing it is to deny him that human way with taking food, but if it means that John isn't to be eaten deliciously, what a thing to expect us to do to John, deliciously or grimly! Either way the humanity of the grammar won't 'compute', balking at having to entertain 'deliciously' as part of the syntax which it governs. Or is it our own humanity which rejects what seems on the face of it a possible sentence, an acceptable assertion?

To what extent an utterance can be accepted as a sentence – 'degrees of grammaticalness' – is both a technical and human matter; and to the extent that TG faces up to this squarely, to that extent it can claim to be motivated by a vision of grammar that sees it as a complex of procedures for generating sentences as well as a code of values for affirming basic human decency or normality. I like to think that it is some such aspect of TG which fascinates Yap. At any rate in

> john, + animate, + human,
> couldn't be passed off as repast.
> chicken is + animate, – human,
> & can end up in any oven

he seems to be gratefully acknowledging the value of TG for its attempt to provide, however clumsily, notations for reading off what is and what isn't a 'decent' sentence; though

he seems also to be having a bit of fun with TG for so earnestly making explicit what is after all implicit in the meeting between mind and language.

In another deft poem grammar is foregrounded, its elements becoming major points of emphasis or aspects of meaning. Most poets would regard most items belonging to the grammatical system of a language as so much unnecessary baggage to be jettisoned wherever possible or best left to do their work discreetly behind the scene dominated by items from the world of lexis. But in 'a lesson on the definite article' (p. 16) Yap assigns to what is often one of the most unnoticed items of English grammar the chief role of wittily executing a job of satirical reduction. The poem works through to show up what the girl 'with bank-teller's eyes' really is for trying so hard to be what she would like to appear as to others. The first stanza briskly sets the scene, given the once-over as if with the practised eye of an artist noticing details and highlights for a sketch:

> a crowded restaurant, open eavesdropping
> graded into one another's ears. sharing table:
> a bearded man, a girl with bank-teller's eyes;
> they arrived after me, & an umbrella & 2 coats
> which were there when i was.

The second stanza has the man, obviously a foreigner, and the Chinese girl talking, overheard, commented on by an observer quick to catch the implied or the ambiguous. The final stanza begins with the reductive process fully under way, the girl now referred to only as 'the she . . .', demoted from the status of a noun to that of a pronominal substitute:

> the she was, by the way, the Chinese
> & her the accent, showing she had arrived,
> gone the places, reached the it,
> made the it, confirmed she was the.

The girl isn't just 'she' – she's '*the* she', the definite article gesturing pointedly towards the kind we-all-know-don't-we, which is then specified for unmistakable identification in the rest of the stanza. We see the poetic justice of it all – of the de-nominalization to pronominal substitute used here with satirical effect – because the girl is more imitative than real, a poseur, only 'the accent', the with-it-er, the – with withering simplicity – 'the'. This has to be the ultimate reduction, this moral evaluation mediated through the transformation of a human being to an article.

It would be hard to find the definite article put to such a novel use in poetry and yet with such undeniable success. The point isn't that Yap's poem should win a prize for being, what it must surely be, the only poem in the world whose last word is 'the'; neither is it that, there you are, it takes an Asian, a Singaporean or a Third-Worlder with his new, independent attitude to the English language to be creatively iconoclastic with it. The point rather is that is possible for such a writer to be creative in English without assaulting it. As I hope the above account makes clear, Yap seems able to get beneath the skin of the language, to work with a deft skill with – along – the basic lines of its design. Certainly his play with the definite article, bold as it is, doesn't seem gimmicky; even his ending a sentence with it comes with a sense of inevitability, led up to as it is by the play on the meaning and patterning of the sequences 'the she . . . gone the places . . . reached the it . . . made the it . . .'

As Yap likes to write close to the grammatical points or parts of the language, so in general he likes the language of his verse to be close to prose; even to being like the jotted-down phrases in a note-book, as in (p. 51)

> buildings, shadows,
> locked-in stillness:
> sunday & city centre
> & one's own subordinate presence

– phrases which quickly throw off details to let a mood emerge of itself, as if making the point that this, reality or what you will, must be there before the mind, as in the next stanza, should get to working out some reflections; or like the rather fastidious but still note-taking phrasing of the first stanza of 'event' (p. 18):

> a little combed & frilled girl, smile older,
> at her wedding, the aunt's. combed & frail,
> smile smaller, the bride's teeth stuck to her gums.
> the occasion gave it beauty

– in which details are picked off and so disposed as to make for significant comparison and contrast, and in which, again, the reality (hence 'it', singular?) the details compose is objectively attended to; only then is another perspective on it given, by the reminder in the last line of that objectivity which the sense of occasion and of the particular kind of occasion can bring about in one's response to a given reality.

The given – what's out there, the reality of the naked eye: 'i look at the sudden influx of sails' (p. 45) – is too much – too swift, too elusive – for capturing directly in paint (p. 45):

> & it's almost like painting by numbers.
> but before each square is begun
> the others are already marvellously completed.

Or the given – 'the landscape is too empty' (p. 45) – can prove insufficient to the mind. No matter; turn to language – much is given in words. Experiment with combining them in different patterns – as Yap does in (p. 22):

> another day, she groped for adam's cork
> screw, dropped among the picnicking grass.
> adam bit greedily into her nut
> cake, . . .

– and even, or most of all, the most ordinary words can point to different bits of the reality we know. Attend to such a combination of common words as 'slip-drops of water' (p. 32), and one gets movement, shape and plurality all in one go.

> . . . the topmost leaves
> with slip-drops of water falling, scattering
> lean dogs with humpy shivers.

In that 'scattering' placed where it is different events are enacted: scattering is what water does, falling; it's also what it does to the dogs and what the dogs do; and in the rather uncommon collocation of the common words 'humpy shivers' we get simultaneously shape seen and movement felt.

Play hard, play fair – well, all right, playfully, punningly, as well – with words, and you will be delighted with what they can bring together, or with a new angle on some familiar aspect of reality. Meditate on the word 'shipwreck', for example. The sea of course, and all that romantic stuff – 'an island background' and 'splendid shipwrecks' and 'salted treasure' (p. 3). But there's more than this school fixation with 'shipwreck' – 'the velocity of wind', 'the extent of salvage insurance companies need underwrite' and so on, all very technical and commercial. Then there's shipwreck on land – 'sheepwreck' would be nearer the truth of what one sees in society: people tripping up one another, wolves in sheep's clothing attempting to 'pull wool over each other's eyes/(& other civilities)'. This 'sheepwreck' is more appalling than 'shipwreck'; nothing accidental about it, it is 'crafted by hand', it is done 'neatly' – no need to get wet – and it occurs 'daily'.

I haven't quite made up mind about how much better 'shipwreck' is than being only something but it is an appropriate poem to end this account of the Yap volume with. In some ways it isn't uncharacteristic of the kind of verse in the volume as a whole: in the preference for diction and syntax belonging to everyday speech, casual, 'flattened', demotic –

> shipwreck: i've written about it, & more, before.
> with an island background, it had only been composed
> upon in school . . .

– technical language being dragged in only to be looked at askance; in the tendency to treat with ironic amusement any romantic feature, or way with things; in the play with grammar and with the sound of words as in 'nowadays teems with many themes'; in the flick of sardonism, the afterthought thrown in within brackets – '(& other civilities)' – so that being socially proper is seen as no different from 'pulling the wool over each other's eyes'; in the leap of 'marinated' and 'seasonal' to make contact with each other in a punning nexus ('. . . pirates marinated in seasonal winds').

I would like now to go on to give something of the same attention to the other three volumes (forthcoming as 'Part 2') but first this very general summing-up of the Yap volume: there is verse which at its best seems to come with the play of a distinctive mind, one that is sometimes in evidence as a lively, darting intelligence; and there is verse which seems to be in mortal dread of being caught swelling into the poetical. The poetics to which this kind of verse is written can be both a strength and a limitation.

University of Malaya

THE LITERARY SITUATION IN NEW ZEALAND: SOME IMPRESSIONS (1)

Norman Simms

Before launching into a traditional kind of critique of New Zealand literature, even one which will be unconventional enough to begin with and trace out the oral and then literary productions of Maori poets and storytellers – and perhaps even nod towards some other linguistic and ethnic groups – I feel I must make some introductory remarks about New Zealand society as a place of literary activity and a recipient of other peoples' literary production. In so doing, New Zealand comes off ambiguously, perhaps schizophrenically; and if that is true of other places as well – and I would be hard pressed to think of an exception – it is unique in its form of post-colonial philistinism, to put it both bluntly and mildly. These introductory remarks will be, perforce, impressionistic, controversial, and, yet, I hope, helpful in placing subsequent opinions in context.

Three characteristics strike me at once, after ten years of living in New Zealand, as distinctive, at least distinctive as the contours of a mental space within which activity and reception occur. The first is the dependence of this small English-speaking country on overseas literature, not 'a' but 'the' dependence which is so different from that of, say, Australia or Canada, where the supplementary quality of the national /native tradition provides a running topic (and occasionally 'sore') to the intellectual debate of the country. The second is the paucity of indigenous translations as much from the local literature (Maori) as from the immigrant languages (Dutch, Serbo-Croat, Danish – and of course, Tongan, Samoan, Nieuean, etc.) which signals a special smugness articulated in any ideological equivalent to 'the cultural mosaic,' 'the melting pot,' or the 'new' and 'hyphenated' national types. Finally, there is the lack of literary criticism: little more than the weekly book-review, and even then the prestigious place goes to non-(serious) literature as its subject. Each of these need to be expanded and implications drawn, shown to intersect, if not interconnect, and then yield new implications again.

Newspaper statistics tell us on ritual occasions that New Zealand is one of the most literate societies in the world and that there are more books read here than in most other countries, more booksellers per capita, and so forth. Statistics tell us little beyond themselves, of course; and it is a continuing joke to note that these statistical 'books' include racing forms and free advertising weeklies, a 'bookshop' constitutes any gift & toy merchant who puts a few glossy volumes amongst his greeting cards, and 'literate' hardly ever equates with literary. Nevertheless, libraries tend to be 'good' and one can usually find a fair range of current Penguin paperbacks at the local shop. What is significant is how much the well-read Kiwi is well-read in British and American literature but not in New Zealand literature: *how much* here includes a willingness to read and/or purchase certain established New Zealand authors – from Maurice Shadbolt through Janet Frame to Witi Ihimaera. What it does not include is a sense of New Zealand authors forming a literature, even a literary strand autonomous within the larger Commonwealth or Anglo-American tradition. A rather random, unscientific questionnaire distributed to some of my students at a university and a teachers' training college recently confirmed these prejudices. Asked what books they recall having been read to them or read themselves as children, not one respondent listed a New Zealand title. Even in asking about current

non-assigned reading preferences, no one referred to a local book or author; and only a few, asked directly for their favourite New Zealand authors, could come up with a name – and then almost always Witi Ihimaera. What this means is that on its first level literature to New Zealanders means English literature, and English means British and American.

When later on in their reading careers New Zealanders do come upon the local authors – and even when pressed to think back to particular New Zealand books read in childhood – the fact remains: New Zealand writing is a fragmentary supplement. New Zealand literature does not provide a primary, defining experience to consequent reading – to, may I say it? – the essentially literate and cultured way New Zealanders come to view themselves and the world.

Not that New Zealanders, any more than any other people as a whole, the French included, see themselves and the world primarily in a literate manner: but that there is no shared narrative, imagistic, and mythic quality to the linguistic habits of the country, at least none that is indigenous. For the truth told, there is a literate basis, and that comes from overseas, built into the schooling system current up to a decade ago, in the mythic presence of the British Empire/Commonwealth and the unchallenged superiority of British literature, 'the greats,' even when on occasion some American or translated European authors enter the syllabus of literary sophistication.

Once – and then almost immediately threatened with a metaphoric lynching – I ventured to say that, looked at in these very broad cultural terms, New Zealand writing comes off as a kind of folklore, an exotic, perhaps eccentric sidelight on the culture, not central to its urban(e) literary consciousness; while Maori writing, sparse as it is, because it tends to grow out of and still engages in problems raised by the functioning (albeit modified) oral tradition, is a literature – a literature because it engages the central moral and aesthetic questions of the Maori experience of New Zealand/Aotearoa. Let me say otherwise then in self-protection, that there is no New Zealand literature: there are good, not so good, and bad writers who participate from a distance in the English literature of the British Commonwealth.

The extension of this argument must wait until we come to the third element of characterizing New Zealand as a literate/literary society, since the implications of this dependence have to be assessed within the phenomenon of a culture without criticism. Now we must turn to the problem of translations.

I suggested that this problem turns on the paucity of indigenous translations. By this I mean that, with the exception of children's retellings and anthropological texts (and even then there must be great qualification of quality determination) Maori literature remains a virtually unknown thing. Maori literature, of course, but not Maori songs and dances, especially those composed to nineteenth century hymn tunes and contemporary popular rhythms; and then not known or appreciated as literature either. The vast treasure of Maori song and story remains virtually unedited and untranslated; the little that is translated is poor, almost deliberately so. Usually relegated to fairy tale and quaint legend, the literature is not seen, certainly not seen for what it is – art song, romantic epyllion, erotic tale, lament, or satiric jibe. This matters in a discussion of New Zealand literature in a way distinct from consideration of Indian ritual in Canada or Aboriginal song in Australia because in New Zealand Maori culture is much nearer to the surface, the centre, the daily experience of its aesthetic and moral life. Maori literature, untranslated for most people, is an invisible presence: always there – heard, seen, even participated in with varying degrees of pleasure – but not recognized or understood as a literature, as an intellectual experience commensurate with 'literature' itself.

But the problem of translation is broader. And not just in the matter of the other language-groups who do not have their literatures translated; and here I mean as much the European as the Pacific Island immigrants. Translation neither occurs in New Zealand, or are translations brought in. One would have to search far to find a real collection of Dutch literature, or even a body of Samoan songs and tales. One might even go so far as to query the lack of translation from English or Maori into Serbo-Croat or Tongan or, more simply, the translation of English into Maori, other than the Bible and some hymns.

The problem, then, is this: English, meaning British English, is so overwhelmingly the dominant language and literature, the natural medium in which literature appears, can ever appear, that other languages and other literatures are devalued, dismissed. But since British English literature does not meet the immediate mental perceptions of New Zealand, is not the supplement to an indigenous tradition, no matter how small, literature itself cannot play a vital role in the people's self-perceptions and self-evaluations, except in a negative way. To read British literature in New Zealand with no other literature as a context to which it may prove a supplement is to make literature a secondary phenomenon, something not essential to the culture's cultured way of understanding itself. And thus perhaps for the mentality not to have a cultured understanding of itself at all.

In other words I am contending that a literature which cannot sustain within itself translations on a mature level and which has nothing to offer in translation of itself is – again – no real literature. Although this is not to say there are no good authors or no good books, the 'good' will be measured by another literature, not the indigenous one.

Measuring books is one of the things criticism is all about to be sure, as Raymond Williams adduces in his cultural etymology of the word. But that is not all, of course. There are standards to establish as well. Criticism also includes within itself a process of enquiry, of questioning, of analysis, and of reflection. Ever since the West European Renaissance, when thanks to the development of printed texts and the emergence of techniques for the easy retrieval and codification/tabulation of information, modern literature (as a creative or imaginative writing) could begin to separate out from technical and philosophical writing, literature has included, along with poetry and narrative fictions, the essay – and very much part of what the essay essays to do is criticism, literary and otherwise. So that a literature recognizable as such within a modern European-type culture, first by its ability to address itself to the fundamental questions of perception and value within its society, second by its capacity to translate and receive translations from other languages, is also, third, known by its own critical assessment of its processes and products. This third defining element too is lacking in the contours of what we began by calling New Zealand literature.

Reviews there are, to be sure, in newspapers and magazines for the most part, but occasionally collected into volumes. There is virtually nothing at all, however, which could be called a sustained critical examination of New Zealand writing as such. The most we find are some recent attempts at critical biography, but even they are more biography than criticism, at best fragmented aperçus on a single author. Once in a while some living author will be interviewed in the press: the questions tend towards the non-literary. More rarely a writer attempts some statement on her or his own beliefs: he or she tends to deny the intellectualism or craftsmanship of the endeavour. Academics, when they publish at all outside of restricted and safe precincts of other peoples' literary traditions, equally fail to engage in a critique of the literature, of the mentality as discourse, and stick to the fragmented and fragmentary close-reading of selected texts. In short, though it may somewhere exist, I cannot think of a single work of criticism on New Zealand literature that it would be a pleasure – aesthetic, moral, and cultural – to sit down

and read. There is no running debate on the essence of New Zealand culture, the dimensions and directions of its writing, the place of its authors within a historical or geographical continuum, the analogues, parallels, and influences of its genres. The closest I can think of to all this are the brief essays and reviews in the cyclostyled and all-too-short-lived bi-monthly *Outrigger* edited by Tim Pickford.

All this should not be taken as a sweeping condemnation of New Zealand as an anti-intellectual unliterary place. On the contrary, there is a great deal of intellectual activity and vast quantities of writing produced, perhaps more per capita than most other former British colonies. Yet the implications of my remarks are more than just a quibble on the definition of literature. Rather, I trust, they help to define the grounds on which many writers in New Zealand have emerged to do themselves and their nation credit and the mental space in which the outsider may perceive and evaluate these significant and many other less (not to mention in-) significant poets and novelists.

Let me conclude by going off on a slightly different tack. Partly I have hinted at this in referring to New Zealand writing as such really as a folklore, while Maori writing is a literature. Again, there is more to this than a mere quip. Add to the two key terms now a third, Third World Writing. By looking at these three dimensions we can come up with the following remarks. A literature is a body of creative or imaginative writing (including translations and the critical essay) that arises dynamically out of and helps maintain the continuing debate which is a culture or a society addressing itself in its most intimate and vital concerns; each work central insofar as it participates in the terms and the terms of reference specially valid and validated by the society and the culture themselves. The literature is urban and urbane, metropolitan because it merges local interests and references to a larger pool of inter-communications. Or at least, literature can include within itself lesser works, of varying quality and concern, insofar as a whole it offers a constant reflective re-assessment of the constituent parts of that whole. A folklore, on the other hand, while it may contain on occasions works of merit such as to transcend its own specificity and so come to be included in literature, is as a defining phenomenon composed of works which address themselves only to local concerns in terms and in terms of reference which are not relevant outside itself. Folklore is dependent because it does not deal with the vital concerns which determine the basic moral, aesthetic, political and social realities which are assumed by it, as well as by the dominant literature. Thus folklore need not be defined only by orality or by some variability of textual transmission but by its limited and local frame of reference. Hence, for instance, so long as Maori culture was self-contained and its singers and story-tellers were valued for their noetic as well as poetic powers, its oral tradition was a literature. As soon as that which is of vital importance to the well-being of the community is transferred to some other dominant tradition, what remains is folklore. The emergence of a body of Maori writing which once again addresses dominant issues signals the commencemnt of a new literature. In this sense only, when talking about the dependence of European New Zealanders for their vital literary, and consequently cultural perceptions and values on British writing, does the local conglomerate of writing move from being considered a literature to a folklore.

Now a Third World Literature is different from both because it involves a nation that, in disassociating itself from cultural and literary dependence, is neither fully a literature nor still a folklore. While its colonial literature remains dominant, that is, when the intellectuals as well as the rising audience of the general public still turn to someone else's literature for their primary perceptions and values of what is aesthetic and moral, then the local tradition is a folklore: dependent, trivialized. Then when the Third World

country turns to its local traditions, begins to re-evaluate and recreate it so as to be the source for the terms and the terms of reference by which it articulates its primary values and perceptions, it begins to create a literature. The phrase "third world" here is an adjective of transition, of direction; and of course, already many so-called Third World countries have, at least in terms of their literature, passed over completely from the realm of folkloric dependence. This writing is to its constituents dominant, and the older (written or oral) literatures may be accepted as viable supplements.

Having said that, when we look at the New Zealand situation we find that the dominant New Zealand literature, the English language writing, is folkloric; certainly not Third World – not even, as I hope to show in a subsequent essay, in regard to Maori writing, whether in English or in Maori. There is no indication yet that this country, like Canada or Australia, for instance (citing the older "white" dominions only) has anything like a debate on national identity going on, has any viable alternative, no matter how quirky, to assert as a literary substitute for the British tradition, or has undertaken any sustained effort to integrate the Maori and European traditions. This leaves two ways to approach New Zealand writing. One is to single out particular authors, usually those well-known and often living overseas, for brief critiques, with a passing regard for exotic characteristics that may define them as coming form New Zealand. The other is to conti-continue this broad categorizing survey and turn to the questions of Maori writing, of publishing and access to print in New Zealand, and, finally, of who and what is being published today – and perhaps why. I shall follow the second course.

University of Waikato
New Zealand

light
verse
in
comment

PENANG PERSPECTIVE : THE GIRLS THERE TODAY AREN'T

> A degeneration . . . is affecting a
> section of the fairer sex.
> Perhaps it is a sense of equality
> . . . that makes our girls more
> manly in their verbal outburst.
> . . . let us hope that those who
> want to give vent to their anger
> by being vulgar would think
> twice before opening up.
>
> *New Straits Times* 21 Jan 1980

Hey, hear
this, Editor
of the New Straits Times –

> All ear, all ear
> for you, curious curator
> Victorian venerator
> of old Straits Settlement of Penang times.
> Give it me straight.

When I think of my island girls –

> you are lost for words.

But *they* are not:
that's what I'm trying
to tell you about –

> No need to shout.

Penang girls and their bad words –
I tell you, the situation's tragic –

> In that case they are birds
> of the kind to which you're allergic.

When I hear them open up –

> You can hear *that*?

I mean when shrilly
they open their mouth –

They do that
too in the south
quite freely.

When they speak
my heart sinks –

Mine's in my mouth
and sings

because you know they don't giggle
these days they are no more girlish –

A very ticklish
distinction.

I mean, just hear them
cursing and swearing
and not blushing
I can see their forefathers turning
in their graves and blushing
redder than laterite –

I think you're dead right.
Men of their light
would be grave and tight-
lipped to the last.

I don't understand
what you say, but it's a shame
the fairer sex
behaving like man –

I see you swear by
the chivalric context
but you're somewhat lax
in your logic:
sex is sex
fair, fairer or not fair
Apropos, though, of the income tax –

But I'm talking morality;
the use of a four-letter word
rarely heard in yesterday's society
spells degeneration –

True, not in conversation.
Maybe in generation?

No, no, not even in that connection.
Good girls don't speak bad words, ever.
So Penang girls, please remember,
you can vent your cute anger
but no rude signs, no obscene thunder.
Flash your almond eyes demurely –

Penangiteishly, purely
and old timers in their graves
will rest
peacefully
and bless
gravely
the air we take in
primly
uprightly

Bottoms up to that

Ooi Boo Eng

Dicetak oleh Penerbit Universiti Malaya, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur 22–11.