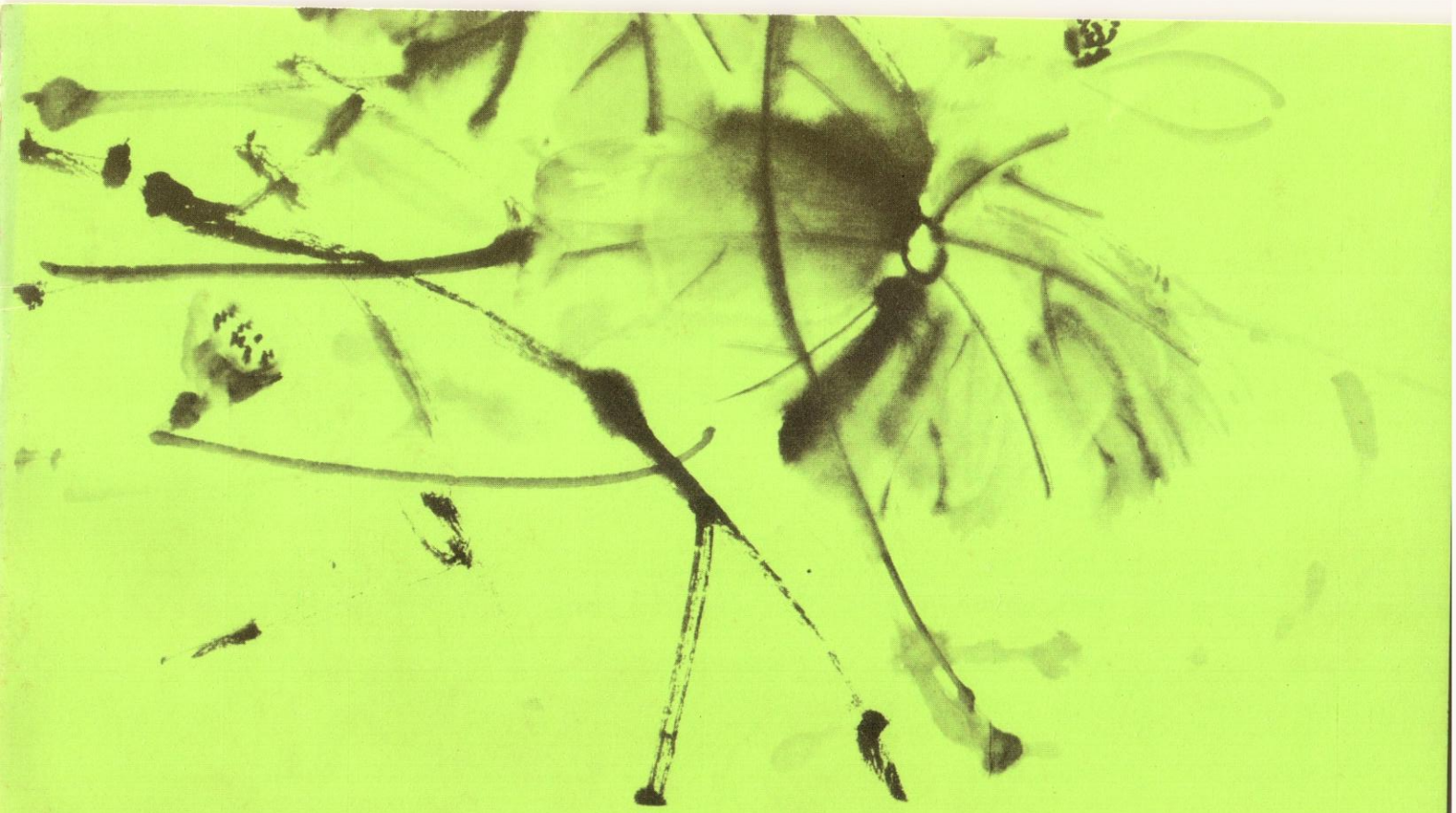

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NIGHTJAR

by

Arthur Yap

here, in the night, trees sink deeply downward.
the sound of moonlight walking on black grass
magnifies the clear hard calls of a nightjar,
its soliloquy of ordered savagery, little intervals.
time, clinging on the wrist, ticks it by
but eyes, glued to the dark pages of night,
could not scan the source on the branch.

its insistent calls jab & jab so many times
to a silent ictus, so many times, ringing off the
branch
in tiny sharp tuks, each lifting from the last

through the night. while the shadows of the trees
go past the edge of sleep & i sit awake,
if it's footfalls across the road, they should be
far away, sounding on the trees, an euphony
lodged on high, the starlit side of heaven.

AT NAGOYA

by

Arthur Yap

there is a zoo & botanic gardens combined.
the vernal equinox comes on grey & subdued,
a curiously fluid morning, spring not fully arrived
& things go on their own ways. in the hothouses,
unforced, the theme is verdant crisis.

suave wind, tepid sun outside. bottled,
the heavy-lidded fuschias could explode,
extemporize the greeness of the year & bring with it
a pain, out in the open, need not be endured.

a high pile of glass with its own weather.
a thick pile of clothes with its own arms.
huge cactuses, boys' prickly heads potted.
the steely air lades moisture to the eyes.

where, at nagoya, a zoo & botanic gardens combine,
a portion of time lies waiting.

ACHIEVEMENT: THE POET WITH AN ARTIST'S TOUCH...

ARTHUR YAP
talks with
KEVIN SULLIVAN

Arthur Yap's poetry is celebrated for its innovative use of words, finely controlled style and unwavering individuality. Robert Yeo has described him as "the most exciting poet writing in Singapore today". He received public recognition as the recipient of a National Book Development Council Award for Poetry but eschews the idea of the poet as a public figure.

In addition to writing, he has held exhibitions of his paintings in Thailand, Singapore and Australia.

He is reticent about himself, modest about his poetry and tantalisingly non-committal about current trends in Singaporean Letters.

We met in his university office where he very hospitably provided coffee and proceeded to offer gentle and illuminating observations on the practice of poetry.

Kevin: What sort of influences have been active in your poetry?

Arthur: I would say the influences are very eclectic. In school I started reading. Even before I'd finished Secondary School I think I'd read all of D.H. Lawrence. And I was very intrigue by his prose — not by his poetry, I found his poetry to be somewhat sloppy ... and, then ... poets I've been very much interested in — the writings of Philip Larkin in particular. And then I suppose, again, it's difficult to say who I'm influenced by because there have been poems I've been impressed by, not by the poet himself, or there have been lines I could not even

attribute to a specific writer. So I would say that my influences have been very eclectic in that way.

Kevin: Ee Tiang Hong in his foreward to "Commonplace" says that the poem: "Letter from a youth to his prospective employer" — says that he thinks it's not too tenuous to suggest that that's in the tradition of the Chinese scholar writing to the Imperial Court or the Emperor.

Arthur: Ah, when I wrote it, it was not really an intention of mine. I think in his preface Tiang Hong tried to attribute too many Chinese characteristics to my poetry. And in fact, when he wrote to me, he thought that the paintings which were included were variations of a kind of Chinese painting and I told him that it was not and it was far from my intention to depict Chinese paintings in a novel kind of way. I suppose basically what I write is something which will reflect my environment. I think some poets set out with a very noble idea, that, you know, they want to change the world. I don't, because I don't think I like the world that much. Nor, on the other hand, do I hate it so much that Iwant to say — just let things go. I'm rooted in a particular area and I try to reflect the life styles and the folk ways and the mores of a particular area and I think that is what I try to do in my poetry more than anything else.

Kevin: Is there a tension between the fact that you write in English and the fact that those influences, those folk ways are very often not in English?

Arthur: I think, you see, the folkways and so on are what I may call language free in a sense. I mean, they are not specific to one particular community. If so, how you see them, you could see them as personal. You could write about them in Chinese or Malay etc. etc. I choose to write about them in English.

Kevin: Do you see any developments in the English which you use — from the point of view of Singaporean English?

Arthur: Well, there's been a lot of talk about the kind of Singapore English. I don't think right now it's characteristic of the kind of English that is spoken in this way, say in Papua New Guinea and so on, which seems to be language of its own. And often I think it's a kind of linguistic issue. People try to say — O.K. there is a kind of Singapore English. Now, at the same time, while I don't believe it is fully developed, I can see certain trends about it and in some of my poems I try to incorporate that as well. For example, the one about two mothers talking — they are having a conversation in an H.D.B. estate, and things like that. All the same I think it depends, because ... your writing may not be called Standard English in that way but I think when you want to capture a particular incident — well, you need to sometimes bring in, incorporate certain idioms, certain lexical items, certain rhythms even, and I try to do that by writing in Singapore English.

Kevin: I think rhythms are probably the most effective and the most evident characteristics of Singaporean English to be visible in poetry. Are you consciously trying to develop something along those lines, or is it something which happens naturally?

Arthur: Well, it's something which happens. I may sort of overhear somebody saying something and think, you know, that's just too good to pass up. And then, there is another thing. I think sometimes if you just write a poem you become very wilful about it. It ends up by becoming a kind of cheap parody. I think that's always the danger as well.

Kevin: Robert Yeo said to me — you don't want to make the thing a joke but on the other hand in order to be faithful to the language it's necessary sometimes to...

Arthur: Yes. So I think one has to really be rather selective.

Kevin: Is there any relation between your painting and your poetry?

Arthur: No. If I can express everything through one medium then I won't have to choose two. My paintings are usually non representational. I explore different things: the relation of space and shapes and forms and so on. In poetry I think — I've been told I'm a little bit more human in my poetry than in my painting.

Kevin: Your paintings are to a certain extent impenetrable.

Arthur: A certain non representation.

Kevin: And that's an alternative in what you want to express?

Arthur: Yeah, I suppose you can do that in poetry as well, sort of very abstract descriptions of statements, of feelings, of things like that which are particular to me. But I think in poetry I try to explore something else, something a little bit different.

Kevin: In "A brief critical survey of prose writings in Singapore and Malaysia" you say that the "lack of any literary tradition is, in this case, one of the main factors. But this is something established through time." You're talking about the problem of people describing monsoons and Chinese New Years ad nauseam. Has a literary tradition been established since you wrote that?

Arthur: Yes, it's certainly much more advanced now. If you take the very early writers. I would call them pioneers of a sort. I think they had more difficulties than young writers now. To begin with I think a lot of it was due to the fact that many of the writers were university educated and they were exposed largely to, say, if you like, an English tradition of Literature and they were not exposed to much American Literature or any other literature in translation. And, as a result, I think there

was always a very tentative, very imitative feel. And then I think people wanted to break away from this very obvious imposition. They couldn't have anything to turn to so they obviously had to improvise. And they came up with — one early attempt was a kind of amalgamation of English, Malay, Chinese and they called it ENGMALCHIN. Now, I thought the whole thing was very ... if you look at it objectively — it was really such a laugh. I mean, it was just merely throwing in a Chinese word here, a Malay word there, and making the whole thing like a kind of pastiche that didn't work. I think after a while people became less tentative and they were surer I think, basically in greater exposure to the language, using the language — but they're not using the cultural norms and so on. I mean, you're not writing about, say, Autumn unless in your country there is an Autumn. So you use the language and you write about your own situation. I thought that took away some of the very tentative feel of writing and from then onwards I think there has been development. I think that is very evident if I look at, say, very young writers today. When they show me their poems I'm impressed by the kind of certainty they have, and it's not just merely linguistic alone. Of course what they lack would be experience and skill and so on but you know, the initial attempts I think are much more successful than, say, the initial attempts of writers in the past. And I would attribute this to the fact that these young writers have something to go on, which the older writers did not have. I don't think we can call it exactly a tradition because it is not really that established, but certainly some breakthrough has been established.

Kevin: Has that breakthrough come from a collective effort? The movement after the war, then Edwin Thumboo, Ee Tiang Hong, people like that.

Arthur: Yes. And I think also the Anthology edited by Edwin Thumboo, *The Second Tongue*. I thought that was in many ways important because it brought to attention the people ... they are local writers ... and I think, the

younger ones, in looking through the anthology will say — oh, yes, these are the themes, and these are the ways, the techniques and so on, and these are some of the things I would like to do. And so there was something for them to look to rather than to try and effect that kind of breakthrough on their own, which would be very difficult.

Kevin: Accepting that there is now some kind of tradition within which young people can write, do you think that the tradition is now sufficiently established to see trends going in different directions? For example, it's been said that your poetry is almost anti — tradition, it's defiantly individualistic, whereas, for example, Robert Yeo and certainly Edwin Thumboo have articulated the idea that poetry is a necessary attribute of the community; it comments on the community.

Arthur: For me, I don't think it's a poet's business to be a spokesman of any kind. I think Robert feels, for example ... I think basically we are on to the same thing, except our concerns are very different. He thinks I am far too private, for example. And my own stand is that I'm not a person who wants to write poems with a political basis or a social basis, commenting upon society as such simply because that is the way I feel ... if that is really what I want to do then I would rather be a politician or a social worker, or whatever it is. Now, having said that, it doesn't mean I want to be excessively private and esoteric, in which case I don't even have to publish. My own stand is that as a poet, I'm also basically a writer ... a Singaporean. My commitment is to my society. But as a writer my commitment is to writing, you know. Sometimes there may be a kind of overlap, but it doesn't mean I have to wear my Singaporean citizenship like a badge all the time, that every poem has to reflect some Singaporean concern, or knock some Singapore concern. So I think our concerns are perhaps different in that way.

Kevin: Would you accept that this is at the moment a cause celebre among Singaporean writers — which of

these trends you sympathise with ... or is that overstating it?

Arthur: Well, I think the trend of reflecting the community would be the more obvious trend. I mean, most people talk about it and pay lip service to it. But for me, I don't think that is terribly important. I mean, when I reflect why I write I think the initial reasons would be rather laughable. I started writing and painting because I was bored to death more than anything else. In school, well, I did all these things but I wasn't terribly serious. When I graduated and I started working, that was, I think, the time when I felt really bored. Plus, for some unaccountable reason I was really poor. As a student I was well off but when I started working, for at least two years I could hardly make ends meet. So it simply meant that I couldn't go out, or do the things that I wanted. So I was, if you like stuck with myself. So I started writing and painting and I thought — My God ... these things that I'd been doing for a long time ... but they never gave me that kind of pleasure, you know, as they did then.

Keven: When was that?

Arthur: That was when I graduated. In 1965, I think I was more serious in my approach. It was not just something that I wanted to do because I could show it to someone and say — look, I also write, or I also paint, and so on. And these were things that I also did for myself more than anything else. And I suppose this kind of start gave me, not so much the idea, but the feel that, you know, basically since these are things that I do on my own I have every right to do them as I please. I don't feel committed in any way that I have to write a poem which will reflect this or that, if I don't feel that it's a genuine feeling of my own.

Kevin: You said that you don't feel sufficiently fond of life to celebrate it, nor do you feel sufficiently disenchanted with it to criticise it in a fundamental way.

Presumably in that case your poetry has changed with your attitude to your surroundings and your situation. What sort of changes would you say are there?

Arthur: I think it's always very difficult for one to talk about one's self in that way. I've been asked this before and I said that I can't really see very much change in what I write. Perhaps in the technique of writing I have become tighter. But I think my subject matter is basically the same. It is, if you like, something about the human condition, and more specifically about the community that I live in. Again, I don't think that is a contradiction. As I said, I don't go out of my way to say — look, I must write a poem to champion this cause or that one, but the fact is that since I live in a particular community I cannot help but reflect aspects of the community. And I don't go about knocking it or praising it but sometimes I see tomething that seems to me comical, ironical, sad, and I try to depict them as they are.

Kevin: Edwin Thumboo in "Singapore Writing" says that ".... in a given situation the writer must explain his society, bring into focus the forces, whether healthy or pernicious, which move society." I suspect that you are not totally in sympathy with that.

Arthur: No.

Kevin: But perhaps the last part — "bringing things into focus" — in a sense, in giving a subjective, an individual consideration of a public subject — perhaps that's what you are doing at the other end of the spectrum. Would you agree with that?

Arthur: Yes, I think I'm more inclined to sympathise with the latter part of his statement.

Kevin: Do you see developments among other poets along these lines?

Arthur: Well, of the themes that are being pursued by poets now — many of the themes are what I may call home themes, sort of exemplifying conditions here. But also I get the feeling that some people may want to write for a bigger audience, and they wilfully cultivate certain things that seem to be more topical, more interesting. And I think there is more evidence in, say, prose writing. You'll get certain writers who'll say — look, I'm not going to write about a little community, or this or that. I'm going to write a pot-boiler. And what are the basic ingredients, if it's sex, violence or whatever it is, I want to do it ... or espionage. And I can see poetry also moving along this way. In other words something that is not necessarily more eclectic but something that is more international.

Kevin: Do you think that's a dangerous course?

Arthur: I won't say it's dangerous or not dangerous. It depends on how well it can be done. If it's just going to be the result of something very cheap then I don't see any point in it.

Kevin: Are there developments towards an international audience which seem to you to be exciting, among writers and poets in Singapore today?

Arthur: Yes, I think that it will certainly move along that line.

Kevin: Are there any examples?

Arthur: Well, I think it's sort of difficult to talk about examples without being specific. But I would say that, what Goh Poh Seng is attempting, for example, is something along that line. And perhaps what Robert Yeo is attempting too. Certainly moving to a larger framework.

Kevin: Would you like to find a wider audience, or is the audience of less importance to you when you write?

Arthur: Yes, I would say the audience always is of less importance to me. Because I really don't know how to begin to write for anybody in particular, I mean, if I can say that I write for somebody then it will be mainly for myself, and I hope that ... if others are interested in what I write, then I'm happy.

Kevin: What is your audience in Singapore?

Arthur: It's difficult to say. I get people writing to me, or calling me up; but very few. But when they do they usually express interest in what I do. And it could be a student, it could be somebody I don't even know. Very often, and this is, I think, the good part, I may get someone who comes to me and says — look, can I show you my poems. And on one occasion I had someone who wrote to me sending about ten poems for comment. And I replied and asked the person, you know — will you tell me who you are. And the person never sort of gave me any details. But after about ten letters I thought — that's enough. I'm not just going to sit down and comment on these poems all the time. And one day he just came to see me, and he turned out to be a student, not someone I had taught. And then he showed me I think a collection of some two hundred poems that he had written. And that was marvellous. But I think, unfortunately, he has stopped writing, and he has gone into the diamond industry! They have sent him somewhere for training and so on, so I have not seen him since. But that kind of thing is nice. You feel that here is someone who is interested, and he looks you up .. you tell him the poems are good or not good in the best way you can.

Kevin: What was your reaction from the writing point of view when you went to Britain, spending time in a different linguistic background?

Arthur: I didn't meet very many people who wrote, simply because if they did, then I didn't know about them. You know, later I found certain people who were interested in writing and we used to sit down and exchange ideas and

read each other's poems and I found that was quite nice.

Kevin: And the more general reaction — to living in a Northern, cold country?

Arthur: Initially I took very badly to the cold. But apart from that I found life styles are basically not different. I mean, the specifics can be different but once you get down to meeting people, you know that generally people have the same kind of concerns, the same aspirations and so on. And I found that, as with any place, you know, some people you take to more, and with those people I was quite happy and I don't know whether that has a bearing on what I write but certainly it gave me new situations, new people, a new environment and something else to explore.

Kevin: It's an interesting point, that peoples are basically the same. But on the other hand, don't you think that climate and geography are important factors in forming people's attitudes towards life?

Arthur: A friend of mine ... she's Japanese ... she had a theory, it's not original: she said that, for example, people who live in a Northern region are in some ways very different from those who live, say, around the Tropics, and she said that that is the kind of theme which has been explored in Thomas Mann's writings. And that basically there is a difference insofar as it also affects your mental attitude. Now, I don't know whether this would be generally true. I suppose you could say that it typifies people. I mean, if you take the Scandinavians you could say that generally they are rather detached, rather cool and so on, less excitable than people who live in the Tropics. But once these characteristics are observed I think the basics are not very different.

Kevin: Are the basics the same in Singapore today as they were, say, fifteen years ago, before the sky-scrapers?

Arthur: No. Again I think that ... no, that is not correct, the basics are still the same ... but perhaps the ways of perceiving the same basic things are perhaps a little bit different. L 's say if I lived on a kampung fifteen years ago and suddenly I live in a skyscraper. My sense of orientation will be different, but I will still be the same person. My values would have changed but the very basic aspects would not have changed.

Kevin: Is the assurance you have recognised in younger writers the product of a developing literary tradition, but also of the new assurance of the society in which they live – if you live in a booming economy, you will write a different kind of poetry?

Arthur: Yes, I would say that is definitely the case. I also feel that although the younger writers have a greater ease, I think today ... I feel they are also less motivated. If you take, say, people who were writing ten or fifteen years ago, I mean, they would write just for the fun of it. They would not even show the poems to other people. But very few people will write today without aiming it for some particular purpose such as a competition and so on. Now, that is rather interesting. I think ... sometime, about two years ago I asked for contributions to a journal ... and the articles would not be paid. I had a total of two or three poems. Now, when we ran a competition and our first prize was five hundred /dollars/, I think we had several hundred. So, again, when I say that there is greater ease in writing, I think fewer people tend to write for the fun of it, or the sheer enjoyment. It's for a purpose, I mean, I write because there is a competition. I write because a friend of mine has asked me to submit it to a magazine or something like that. And I don't see this as being a good thing, because if one doesn't go through a period of just writing all the time then in the end you only write occasional poems, and I don't think any kind of improvement or real development can be seen in such.

Kevin: Would it be true to say that your poetry is more about ideas than about emotions?

Arthur: Yes, but also in some places I try to explore the emotional aspect rather than the conceptual aspect.

Kevin: When I read your poetry – maybe I missed the point, because I was in the dark – my impression was that your control was such that you don't often allow yourself to become "warm" about the subject.

Arthur: Yes, again I think that this goes back to one's own approach. I always felt that in writing – I mean purely from the technical point of view — under-statement is preferable to exaggeration, simply because I think it has more lasting power. I mean, if you read a person like Larkin you do not find him over-stating things, unless it's for effect. And then you get writers like James Joyce, then you get writers like James Dickey for example. After reading him you find that some of the emotions may not be really very true, and that if they had toned down they would have been more forceful. And then if you go back to the poem a second time, you'll find that it is utterly boring. Whereas if you go back to the same thing written by Larkin you find that there is womething more to discover. So, apart from this technical aspect I also wonder how much one is to improve one's self in one's writing. I mean, you know, anyone reading a poem will know this is by Writer A, or B, or C, and the person is not judging the writer but judging his writing. And of course you can say that sometimes a person can write in a highly detached manner and so on, but essentially I want to be in the background. But I want to make whatever points I want to make. And for this reason sometimes I have been told that I am very cold, very clinical in my writing. Well, for myself, I don't see it as such. It's just that I want a situation to develop rather than for me to comment on it and to shape the reader's response as such.

Kevin: With Larkin, restrained and controlled though he is, there is a quality of wistfulness, of loss, of overwhelming sadness or nostalgia which is evoked in, as you say, a sort of understated manner, but it's there nevertheless. At the end of many of your poems you feel – this has been constructed with assurance and it's been controlled and manipulated ... and I don't appear to be expected at the end of it to feel a sensation of loss, or joy, or whatever.

Arthur: Yes, I see what you mean. Yes, perhaps it's something I have to look into, to take stock.

Kevin: But it's something you're happy with. You're not attempting to write poetry which evokes emotions rather than a considered response.

Arthur: No. As I said, I don't sort of sit down and say this is what I want to do exactly. If, as a critic, you evaluate my poems as such, then I'm sure there must be a basis for it. As I said, it's something I need to look into myself. I don't think I have done self evaluation of my work and I certainly will have to.

Kevin: Looking to the future, do you see your work going in any particular direction? Does it happen by itself or do you look for ways to develop this technique, that technique?

Arthur: I suppose I just move along in whatever direction that I feel I'm involved in. I don't think I go out of my way to say I want to incorporate this particular approach or that particular approach.

Kevin: The other thing which struck me about your poetry is that there is almost a diffidence. Juxtaposed with sad, sometimes desolate poems you have humourous ones like 'Family Movies'. Do the comic and the serious come from the same motivation?

Arthur: I think they come from the same motivation. Actually it's interesting you brought up that particular poem — *Family Movies*, because, when I showed it to someone at first, he said — oh, I didn't know you had taken to writing obscene poems. And I said — far from it. I said, you can either see it as being humourous or it can be serious. And very often if you look at, say, a best seller you can almost predict what is to come. So I actually wanted to be ironical about the whole situation and juxtapose words and so on, to make the whole thing appear as if it's really jocular and vulgar but it's really not the case.

Kevin: *In what sense is it not vulgar or jocular?*

Arthur: In the sense that if you look at it from the way the words are supposed to have certain connotations and then you find that it's actually leading to something else, and it's a different denotation. So, I think, from that point of view, it's not jocular.

Kevin: *But surely that's what makes it jocular.*

Arthur: When I say it's not jocular I mean that if you read through it you could say there are no jokes, or you could pick out the individual jokes and see it as being a jocular poem.

Kevin: *What linguistic possibilities exist in Singapore and Malaysia which don't exist elsewhere?*

Arthur: Well, what would be very different from other places would be, I suppose, specific lexical items. I mean if you look at, say, trying to inculcate one medium, one standard language and standard forms and so on. This kind of attempt has been made by lots of people. Naipaul, for example, in his novel, *In a Free State* has done that tremendously well. So it's not a novel technique. But ... every last word that would be specific to this place and would be not found elsewhere. For

example, incorporation of dialect terms, of Malay terms and so on, and perhaps also certain structures — the way that certain things are phrased might be very different from the ways in which things are phrased elsewhere. For example, you can ask a question and I think, say, an English who has never been exposed to this kind of form — it will not be a question for him. For him it might be something else. But when he knows about it, it might be perceived as such.

Kevin: Can you use that in poetry?

Arthur: I think you can but I don't know whether one could write an entire poem that way unless you are very ... unless the subject matter lends itself to being portrayed as such. But I'm sure it could be incorporated along with other prose writing. That might be a possibility.

Kevin: Your own particular forte is the use of words, the development of words per se rather than their communicative value, not only in terms of meaning but in terms of rhythm and stress and so on. Are the developments there in your own poetry, or in other poetry?

Arthur: I really don't know. As far as my own poetry is concerned I suppose I've been doing more or less the same thing. With other people, for example, I could see ... I can see people becoming surer in whatever they do. At the same time I think also there could be the possibility that people will move into a very institutional stance. I mean, that becomes almost like a poet laureate kind of poetry which, to me, would be a bit meaningless. And I think that ... I'm quite sure that good poetry will continue to develop, but there will also be this very public aspect that will be developed — and I don't think that that development is particularly good.

Kevin: The comments on society and so on?

Arthur: Not necessarily. It's just like ... you have arried and you are more or less now a spokesman. So you are writing poems that are overtly public. It is as if you are ... it's just like a poet laureate on the occasion of someone's coronation and he write a kind of public poem about it. And I think it might be possible that there might be writers who move along in that direction, and I don't think that will be very good.

Kevin: And the younger poets whom you see emerging — are they more likely to develop in that direction?

Arthur: Not necessarily. I don't think that they would have the kind of public stance as yet to be able to do that.

Kevin: Are you interested in belonging to a movement, in meeting other poets, exchanging ideas, having readings and seminars?

Arthur: Yes and no. I'm not interested in being in a movement as such if it's like a coterie. I'm also not interested in sharing ideas if it is just sitting down and merely making conversation. The same with painters. At one time I used to join many societies, hoping that we could get a discussion about painting. But I found that many people were not interested in talking about techniques or things like that. They were more interested in knowing who had sold how many paintings, and, if it's just that, then I'm not interested at all. But I think I would definitely be interested in meeting people who are interested in sharing ideas and so on, and I don't think this needs to be something that has to be ... you don't have to say — look, we have to meet every month. It doesn't have to be someone who is a local writer, it could be someone passing by and you meet him, and you find after talking to him, you can say: well, this really has been

very interesting. And if it's that kind of thing I'm more interested in it.

Kevin: Does that happen? Are you familiar with many of the poets in Singapore – or outside Singapore?

Arthur: I don't see very many writers but sometimes when I do – there are people that I meet or I write to and we exchange ideas and I find that to be very interesting. Some of them may not be writers but they are interested in, say, what people are doing here. One example I can think of is a friend of mind who has translated *The Second Tongue* into Japanese. She doesn't do creative writing but I think she is very good in the sense that her judgement is always very precise and very accurate. And we exchange a lot of ideas about what we feel about other people's writing and so on. And I think that has been very, very helpful.

CASTRO AND HEMINGWAY: LIFE AND LITERATURE

by

Ooi Boo Eng

So at last we know — Fidel went to school
With *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, more than a book
To pass time with: 'Castro the rebel took
A tip from Hemingway',* clearly no fool
On living dangerously: hit and run,
Sneak back harder-hitting behind the gun
Sights of the enemy — this, the first rule
And last of guerilla warfare, Castro
Of course knew. Nor was it only the macho
In Hem's hero that had him truly hooked.
And surely not the style pared spare, hard, clear?
When he first read the novel at twenty
What hit him hard was the nitty-gritty
Of tactics: how to live - love - in the rear
Of the enemy, how to remain alert
And retain freedom to strike and avert
Capture, worse than death; how to move, retreat,
Re-group, or scatter to disperse the heat
Of massed fire-power --- Also how to eat
On the run?! But I submit, with all due
Respect, Castro took in — more than he knew —
More than what he could get from a manual:
That moving force, the individual
Stamp of style and seeing seamlessly sealed,
Which gives the life imagined through and true,
A created whole, its unique appeal —
Inimitable, for life to imitate.

Melbourne

*News item, *The Weekend Australian*, 31 March 1984, p.7.

COURTESY (à la *The F.Q.*, VI?)

by

Ooi Boo Eng

The line's fine, but when
the politician's polite
he's being politic.

Courtesy's neither
a means nor accessory
but a whole world: you,

You can't acquire it
before a mirror, nor in
a finishing school.

Where blood, heart and mind,
And the stars, don't conspire
forget crash courses.

Nothing's as fine as
old wine except the bouquet
of true courtesy.

It's rubbed off on some -
courtesy: time's timeless bloom,
human history's grace.

Melbourne

THE TWO MESSIAHS OF NGUGI'S *A GRAIN OF WHEAT*

by

Edward Dorall

Since its appearance in 1967 Ngugi Wa Thiong' O's third novel, *A Grain of Wheat* has received much critical acclaim and is now considered to be one of the finest, if not *the* finest, African novels written in English. It has been admired for its taut, sinewy, simple, almost poetic prose and for its penetrating, objective presentation of the European as well as the African characters. Its structure, particularly the many purposeful yet effortlessly managed flashbacks to illuminate four important days in the present, has been compared to Conrad's, particularly in *Lord Jim* and *Nostromo*. And African critics especially have been concerned with its historical accuracy, commending it for its faithful picture of Kenya attaining Uhuru (Independence) in 1963.

Though nearly everyone writing about the novel has, expectedly, mentioned the importance of sacrifice to appease guilt, very few have gone further and related this theme to *all* the Bible texts prefacing each of the novel's four sections. Not only these five texts but many others, as well as Bible ideas featuring prominently in the thoughts of some of the characters, indicate the importance Ngugi attaches to the Bible in this novel - indeed, in the first two and the later *Petals of Blood* as well. His is obviously not the Hemingway manner, writing his novel first and then leafing through anthologies for memorable quotes from the Bible and English literature to use as a title, nor even Gide's whose *Si le grain ne meurt* (*If It Die*) leans on a single text for its Bible parallel (incidentally, one of the verses from which Ngugi gets the title for his own novel). Ngugi's

way is also different from Steinbeck's and O'Neill's in *East of Eden* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, which are modern retellings of Bible and Greek stories. *A Grain of Wheat* resembles rather Faulkner's *Light in August*, in which the alien hero and Earth-Mother heroine are given greater significance by being drawn into a Christ pattern of sacrifice and redemption. Ngugi has explained his intention clearly. Though he is no longer a Christian he was educated in a missionary school, and there "I was concerned with trying to remove the central Christian doctrine from the dress of western culture, and seeing how this might be grafted on to the central beliefs of our people."[1] The boy hero of his first published novel, *Weep Not, Child* (1964) dreams of being a saviour like David and thinks he can achieve this through education. The second published novel, *The River Between* (1965), actually the first written, was originally entitled *The Black Messiah;* it dramatizes the conflict between tribal and Biblical values, drawing importantly on Messianic patterns. In *A Grain of Wheat* Ngugi goes even further. The Bible now provides the title and at every point in the novel Bible ideas integrate with the African story.

This 'story', in its essentials, is first about Kihika, who has always dreamt of freeing his people from the English yoke. When the Mau Mau war breaks out and a State of Emergency is declared over Kenya, he flees to the forest and the bravest follow him. Feeling that he has failed to attract the majority to the cause, Kihika searches for someone to help him organize an underground movement in his village. He picks on the strange and solitary Mugo, visits him one night and arranges for a meeting with him in the forest. Mugo immediately betrays Kihika, who is captured and hanged on a tree. A few days later Mugo is arrested while trying to prevent Kihika's former girlfriend Wambuku from being beaten by the soldiers, and sent to a detention camp. There he unflinchingly endures the beatings of the English District Officer and inspires his fellow prisoners to go on a hunger strike. Eventually eleven men die, questions are raised in the House of Commons and this ends the Emergency.

When the book opens, four days before Kenya gains Uhuru, Mugo is hailed as a hero, a successor to Kihika, equal to him if not even greater. The villagers plead with him to lead them in the celebrations. Mugo refuses but finally appears, confesses his guilt before all, and is executed privately.

The texts introducing the second, third and fourth parts of the novel are from Kihika's copy of the Bible. The first two, underlined in red, signifying, presumably, blood or physical action, apply to Moses. They are *Exodus 8:1*

> And the Lord spoke unto Moses, Go unto Pharaoh, and say unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Let my people go;

and *Exodus 3:7*

> And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows.

The third text, underlined in black, equally obviously signifying death, is *John 12:24*:

> Verily, verily I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit;

and this I will conveniently call a Jesus text. At this point it may be appropriate to remind the reader that the term *Christ* is a title and comes from the Greek word *Khristos*, which means 'Anointed.' In the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures the word translates the Hebrew *Mashiahh*, which is applied not only to kings like Saul and Solomon who were literally anointed with

oil but also to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who were more correctly 'appointed' by God to certain positions. When the word is used in prophecies it almost exclusively applies to the great deliverer whom the Jews were told to expect, who would in turn complete the work prefigured by the earlier anointed ones. The greatest of these was, of course, Moses, who in *Hebrew 11:26*, is actually called a 'Christ': 'He esteemed the reproach of the Christ as riches greater than the treasures of Egypt'; in other words, 'He considered the stigma that rests on God's Anointed greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt'. The Bible pattern is of two great Messiahs - Moses, who mediated the Jewish or Old Law Covenant and Jesus, the mediator of the Christian or New Covenant.

Kihika clearly sees himself as Moses.

> The boy was moved by the story of Moses and the children of Israel, which he had learnt during Sunday school ... Kihika bought a Bible and read the story of Moses over and over again.[2]
>
> (p.75)

At this time an incident occurs which vaguely parallels the account in *Exodus 2:11-15* of Moses' initial stand for his enslaved people, their suspicion of him and his flight from Egypt into the wilderness. Kihika, feeling some of the strength of Moses (*Exodus 2:11*) challenges the Sunday school teacher on a Bible point and proves him wrong. For this he is to be beaten in front of the whole school (pp.75-76). At this moment his schoolmates behave like the Israelite whom Moses defended. The latter had asked Moses, '"Who appointed you as a prince and judge over us?"' (*Exodus 2:14*) and in Kihika's school,

> many boys, including those who had proudly identified themselves with Kihika in his moment of triumph on Sunday, looked at him

> with hostile eyes that disassociated themselves from his guilt.
>
> (p.76)

Kihika runs away from the English school (Egypt) and, like Moses, prepares for his role as deliverer in the wilderness of his home.

Also like Moses, he is a national leader.[3] '"Do you know why Gandhi succeeded?"' he exhorts his friends. '"Because he made his people give up their fathers and mothers and serve their one Mother - India. With us, Kenya is our mother"' (p.78). '"Kenya belongs to black people"' (p.85). To Mugo, in their climactic encounter, he explains his aim most fully:

> Not words, not even miracles could make Pharaoh let the children of Israel go. But at midnight, the Lord smote all the first-born in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of Pharaoh that sat on the throne unto the first-born of the captive that was in dungeon. And all the first-born of the cattle. And on the following day, he let them go. That is our aim. Strike terror in their midst. Get at them in their homes night and day.
>
> (p.166)

In the forest he is joined by the bravest, and together they parallel the exploits of the Israelites under Moses and Joshua. 'People came to know Kihika as the terror of the Whiteman. They said that he could move mountains and compel thunder from heaven' (p.16). His capture of the seemingly impregnable police garrison of Mahee is similar to Joshua's capture of Jericho. Details from Ngugi's description of the Mahee incident:

> Suddenly the night was broken by the simultaneous sound of bugles, trumpets,

> horns and tins. From inside the prison came a responding cry of Uhuru.... Caught unawares, the police made a weak resistance as Kihika and his men stormed in.... The garrison was set on fire.
>
> (p.16)

echo the Bible's account of the fall of Jericho:

> Then the people shouted, when they proceeded to blow the horns. And it came about that as soon as the people heard the sound of the horn and the people began to shout a great war cry, then the wall began to fall down flat. After that the people went up into the city, each one straight before him, and captured the city.... And they burned the city with fire and everything that was in it.
>
> (*Joshua 6:20, 24*)

with a detail or two from Gideon's victory over the Midianites thrown in for good measure:

> Gideon came with the hundred men who were with him to the edge of the camp at the start of the middle night watch ... the three bands blew the horns and shattered the large jars ... and the whole camp got on the run and broke out into shouting and went fleeing.
>
> (*Judges 7:19-21*)

But since Kihika's struggle is primarily a physical one, the red way of blood, he has to demand the utmost in physical endurance from his followers:

> 'If we are weak, we cannot win. I despise the weak. Let them be trampled to death. The weak and those with feeble hearts

> shall be wiped from the earth. The strong shall rule.'
>
> (p.166)

And this is his great limitation. His standards are too high for most men. Only an exceptional few can meet up to them, and this makes their women bitter rather than proud (p.124). Even among Kihika's friends, Gikonyo and Karanja remain behind. In an interview with Dennis Duerden in 1964, Ngugi said:

> I think the terrible thing about the Mau Mau war was the destruction of family life, the destruction of personal relationships. You found a friend betraying a friend, father suspicious of the son, a brother doubting the sincerity or the good intentions of a brother, and above all these things the terrible fear under which all these people lived.[4]

He was speaking about *Weep Not, Child* but, in his next novel, he made Kihika demand this 'great sacrifice' of his men: '"A day comes when brother shall give up brother, a mother her son, when you and I have heard the call of a nation in turmoil"' (p.15). This unnatural sacrifice dehumanizes those who make it. Kihika's faithful aide, General R., ashamed of his supposed weakness when he failed to kill the father whom he detested (pp. 184-185), toughens up in Kihika's army till he is strong enough to be chosen to kill the Reverend Jackson, a preacher of non-violence and, therefore, a danger to the Mau Mau. But the deed haunts him and he can hardly get through his speech at the Uhuru celebrations.

> Why did the man's face now suddenly appear before him? You had to die, he addressed the face, but the words did not leave his throat.... Words came out, and it seemed he was pleading innocence, giving evidence

> in a crowded court. Jackson, his accuser, stood in front, with a bloody face.
>
> (p.191)

Kihika himself, when he visits Mugo soon after killing the D.O. Robson, is far from being the confident leader everyone thinks he is.

> He spoke quickly, nervously, and paced about the fireplace. Could this be the man who had burnt down Mahee? ... His bitterness and frustration was revealed in the nervous flow of the words. Each word confirmed Mugo's suspicion that the man was mad.
>
> 'You think we don't fear death? We do. My legs almost refused to move when Robson called out to me. Each minute, I waited for a bullet to enter my heart. I've seen men piss on themselves and others laugh with madness at the prospect of a fight. And the animal groan of dying men is a terrible sound to hear.'
>
> (pp.166-167)

It is clear by this time that Kihika's red way will not bring Uhuru but only a guilt and frustration shared alike by his followers and those who remain behind. The result of the Mahee capture is only further repressive measures from the British government, which is quite happy to meet force with force (p.123).

Moses' Law Covenant too, the apostle Paul explains, did not bring true freedom and salvation. It was too rigid, too perfect, and proved to the Jews that they were sinners:

> Therefore by works of law no flesh will be declared righteous before him /God/; for by law is the accurate knowledge of sin.
>
> (Romans 3:20)

A perfect sacrifice, which can bring total release from sin and death, is needed beyond the Law.

> But now apart from law God's righteousness has been made manifest, as it is borne witness to by the Law and the Prophets; yes, God's righteousness through the faith in Jesus Christ, for all those having faith.... For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and it is as a free gift that they are being declared righteous by his undeserved kindness through the release by the ransom paid by Christ Jesus.[5]
>
> (*Romans* 3:21-24)

Kihika himself partially recognizes this. In his speech to the villagers at Rung'ei station he asks for '"a death which will change things, that is to say ... a true sacrifice,"' and correctly sees its fulfilment in Jesus:

> 'But first we have to be ready to carry the cross. I die for you, you die for me, we become a sacrifice for one another. So I can say that you, Karanja, are Christ. I am Christ. Everybody who takes the Oath of Unity to change things in Kenya is a Christ.'
>
> (p.83)

But he himself, we have seen, is a fighting Messiah like Moses, not a suffering one like Jesus. He underlines *Psalm 72:4, 12* in red in his Bible:

> He shall judge the poor of the people, he shall save the children of the needy, and shall break in pieces the oppressor. For he shall deliver the needy when he cometh /sic. 'crieth'/; the poor also and he that hath no helper.
>
> (pp.21, 22)

but this song describing conditions in Solomon's reign will receive its complete fulfilment only when the greater Messiah establishes his 'new heaven and a new earth'. These are, therefore, Jesus texts, plainly beyond Kihika's power to realize. Nor can he fulfil another Jesus text, *Matthew 16:24, 25*, which he also applies to himself:

> Take up my cross, is what Christ told his people.... If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.
>
> (pp.77-78)

By the end of his life he is even twisting a Bible text to suit himself. Justifying his violent actions to Mugo, he says:

> But a few shall die that the many shall live. That's what crucifixion means today. Else we deserve to be slaves, cursed to carry water and hew wood for the Whiteman for ever and ever. Choose between freedom and slavery and it is fitting that a man should grab at freedom, and die for it.
>
> (p.167)

The text he misquotes is *John 11:50*: 'It is to your benefit for one man to die in behalf of the people and not for the whole nation to be destroyed', which, of course, applies only to Jesus. By this time Kihika is fully reprehensible, for he has long realized that his way has failed, that another work is needed, to win over the hearts of ordinary people, and that this is beyond his capabilities. For some time he has been thinking of another leader to accomplish this second, and more important task.

Moses too had spoken of another Messiah:

> A prophet from your own midst, from your brothers, like me, is what Jehovah your God will raise up for you - to him you people should listen.
>
> (*Deuteronomy 18:15*)

For centuries the Jews looked forward to this final deliverer, and they had the prophet Jeremiah's words to assure them that he would mediate another, better covenant for them:

> 'There are days coming,' is the utterance of Jehovah, 'and I will conclude with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah a new covenant; not one like the covenant that I concluded with their forefathers in the day of my taking hold of their hand to bring them forth out of the land of Egypt, which covenant they themselves broke.... For this is the covenant I shall conclude with the house of Israel after those days ... I will put my law within them, and in their heart I shall write it. And I will become their God, and they themselves will become my people ... they will all of them know me, from the least one of them even to the greatest one of them.... For I shall forgive their error, and their sin I shall remember no more.'
>
> (*Jeremiah 31:31-34*)

In the Bible pattern, Moses' covenant is fulfilled and superceded by Jesus'. Similarly, in *A Grain of Wheat*, Kihika's red way of physical struggle bringing guilt upon all is succeeded and superceded by Mugo's black way of suffering and death making redemption possible for all.

That Mugo is Kihika's successor no one will dispute; it is part of the novel's story. What is not always appreciated, however, are his qualifications for this honour. From the very beginning Kihika has marked Mugo as someone special. When Kihika speaks at a Party rally in Rung'ei Market he sees Mugo in the audience and looks at him significantly (p.15). Later Mumbi, his sister tells Mugo:

> Do you know my brother once, no, he said it often when angry with his friends ... he said that if he had something really secret and important, he would only confide in somebody like you.
>
> (p.121)

And when eventually Kihika comes to Mugo, he tells him frankly:

> I often watched you in old Thubai. You are a self-made man. You are a man, you have suffered. We need such a man to organize an underground movement in the new village.
>
> (p.167)

His next words can even be considered as a gloss on *Jeremiah 31:32, 33*. When Mugo protests that he can never take the Mau Mau oath, Kihika replies:

> 'But what is an oath? For some people you need an oath to bind them to the movement.
>
> ... No, you take an oath to confirm a choice already made. The decision to lay or not to lay your life for the people lies in the heart.'
>
> (p.167)

And it is the way of the heart that Mugo eventually offers not only his fellow villagers but all Kenya after Kihika's

death. Himself a man from the humblest background, like Jesus, but unlike Kihika and Moses, he inspires the ordinary people by what he does in the trench which the soldiers make the villagers build round their new village. His attempt to prevent the soldiers from beating the pregnant Wambuku, thus drawing their blows on himself and immediate imprisonment, soon becomes the subject of songs by the villagers to sustain their courage and faith. In the concentration camp at Rira he is questioned and whipped by John Thompson, the commander - scourged by his Pontius Pilate, if we insist on getting the most out of the Bible parallel (p.117). And his silent, passive endurance inspires the other detainees to organize a hunger-strike. When eleven men die and the attention of the world is attracted to Rira, as to Gandhi's similar hunger-strikes in India, the House of Commons takes up the issue and the Emergency is soon ended. What Kihika fails to achieve through physical struggle, Mugo achieves through suffering. In his speech to the villagers after his return from Rira, he offers, as his reason for enduring, a greater ideal than Kihika's:

> 'In those days we did not stay alive because we thought our cause strong. It was not even because we loved the country. If that had been all, who would not have perished?
>
> We only thought of home.
>
> ... When we thought that one day we would return home to see the faces and hear the voices of our mothers and our wives and our children we became strong.'
>
> (p.58)

The Moses-Jesus parallel here could not be clearer. Mugo's appeal to universal family ties, which Ngugi had criticized the Mau Mau for destroying, surpasses Kihika's and the Mau Mau's narrower appeal to nationalism. And it is this greater love he calls for that attracts the

villagers. As he walks through the village, they call on him to be their saviour (pp.110-111). Gikonyo and Mumbi confide their intimate problems to him, confident he can solve them. More songs are sung about him, his exploits are exaggerated till he becomes 'Kihika born again' (p.156), 'a legendary hero' (p.153) and finally, recognizing his role as mediator, 'the man who talks with God' (pp.139, 188). More important is the opinion of Warui, the old man who has lived through most of the historical movements for liberty from the British and who is best qualified to recognize a true liberator. He had taken part in the 1923 procession to Nairobi to demand the release of the young patriot Harry Thuku and had supported Jomo Kenyatta from the moment he appeared. Now

> he had a similar faith in Mugo, he wished his sons had grown to be a man like him, and used the same formula which over the years had made him predict, with a prophetic accuracy that surprised him, the national heroes.
>
> (p.148)

But as Uhuru day approaches, which is to set the seal on Mugo's Messiahship, one problem remains unsolved, Mugo's own guilt. For it is he wh has betrayed Kihika, and Kihika who is crucified. Does this upset the Moses-Jesus pattern we have been discussing? Is Kihika both a Moses and Jesus figure and Mugo a mere Judas? He himself makes the parallel, twice privately (pp.152, 174) before announcing it publicly to the whole community (p.193). And it is the guilt of this betrayal, which has numbed his emotions, rather than any ideal, which made him endure so much. His speech to the villagers about home and family is, in his opinion, a lie (p.58), and when he can no longer live with it he offers his life to the people, not for their sins but to expiate his own. The Judas pattern seems clear.

It is, however, far from clear. The Bible Judas committed suicide and saved no one. We are still faced with the great event of the novel, the Mugo's death does save, potentially the whole of Kenya. I suggest, therefore, that we interpret his betrayal more accurately. That he intentionally betrays Kihika and feels guilty are the facts. That he is therefore Judas, even in his own opinion, is only true if Kihika is Jesus. But if what I have claimed is true, that everything Kihika stands for fulfils a Moses, not at all a Jesus, pattern, then Mugo is mistaken. He is the betrayer of Moses, not Jesus. Understanding this should clarify the whole pattern for us.

In the village everyone feels guilty. Those who remain behind are ashamed they did not join Kihika in the forest. Some have even sinned further. Gikonyo was the first in his detention camp to confess the oath he took to the Party. Karanja served the English by identifying Mau Mau fighters and bullying his fellow Africans. Mumbi too has betrayed her husband Gikonyo, with Karanja. Even among Kihika's men there is guilt. Lieutenant Koinandu cannot forget the defenceless white woman he raped. General R. is tormented by his murder of the Reverend Jackson. In fact, on Uhuru day there is a general gloom. Everyone feels uneasy, expecting something momentous to occur.

We are again in the context of Paul's comments on the Mosaic Law, that it was too perfect for humans to follow, that it therefore condemned the Jews, including Moses himself, as sinners, needing a new covenant to ransom them from sin and death. Exactly parallelling this, on Uhuru day the Kenyans all stand condemned by Kihika's law, needing a new and kinder law to redeem them for a fruitful future. Before Jesus could establish the New Covenant he had to abolish the Mosaic one. And similarly, before his better way can operate, Mugo has to abolish Kihika's unsuccessful way. Mugo betraying Kihika is therefore Jesus abolishing or, in the eyes of the

Jewish leaders, betraying Moses. Fittingly, to explain Kihika's 'crucifixion', Paul tells us that God

> kindly forgave all our trespasses and blotted out the handwritten document against us, which consisted of decrees and which was in opposition to us; and He has taken it out of the way by nailing it to the ... stake /cross/.
> (Colossians 2:13, 14)

It is Kihika's law of oaths that is crucified as Moses' law of decrees was, when Jesus fulfilled it by his death. Thus Mugo can even consider his betrayal as 'a great act of moral courage ... there was a kind of purity in the act' (p.173).

A point in the foregoing needs to be developed, that it was Jewish religious leaders like the Pharisees and Sadducees who wanted Jesus killed, not really, as they told Pilate, for making himself an earthly king in opposition to Caesar (which is precisely what they did want him to do) but because he exposed their human traditions beyond the Mosaic Law and, announcing its fulfilment in himself, went on to preach a new law to replace it, thus putting them, bluntly, out of business. The ordinary Jews, on the other hand, welcomed Jesus for his miracles and gracious teachings and were not upset by his attitude to the Mosaic Law. In *A Grain of Wheat* we have the same situation. The villagers acclaim Mugo for his way of hope, secretly happy that this cancels out Kihika's sterner way. It is Kihika's closest followers, General R. and Lieutenant Koinandu who want the betrayer of Kihika executed; as General R. says, the betrayer of Kihika had really 'betrayed the black people everywhere on this earth' (p.134). When Mugo identifies himself as this betrayer, the crowd abandons him in shock, just as the ordinary Jews who welcomed Jesus with the palms of kingship when he entered Jerusalem abandoned him five days later when he stood

condemned for preaching against their Mosaic Law.

If Mugo betrays Kihika out of fear and, consequently, but mistakenly, sees himself as Judas, he also betrays him out of irritation, because Kihika stands in the way of his happiness and the great mission he feels called upon to perform.

> Why should Kihika drag me into a struggle and problems I have not created?
>
> (p.168)

> To keep myself alive, healthy, strong - to wait for my mission in life - is a duty to myself, to men and women of tomorrow. If Moses had died in the reeds, who would ever have known that he was destined to be a great man?
>
> (p.171)

For Mugo is no mere betrayer developing accidentally into a saviour. His Messianic calling is as authentic as Kihika's. He sees his loneliness as a fulfilment of *Exodus 3:1-4:*

> Moses too was alone keeping the flock of Jethro his father in law. And he led the flock to the far side of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb. And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. And God called out to him in a thin voice, Moses, Moses. And Mugo cried out, Here am I, Lord.
>
> (p.108. See also p.164)

But the work he envisages is very different from Kihika's. From the beginning he is antagonistic to the latter's ideas:

> What right had such a boy, probably younger than Mugo, to talk like that? What arrogance? Kihika had spoken of blood as easily as if he was talking of drawing water in a river, Mugo reflected, a revulsion starting in his stomach at the sight and smell of blood. I hate him, he heard himself say.
>
> (p.15)

Unlike Kihika, who is violently committed to the abstract concept of the nation, Mugo is devoted to the real land and the cultivation of it. And his peaceful actions do eventually succeed in returning divided families to cultivate a free land. We are not surprised, therefore, that Mugo applies to himself *Psalm 72:4*, which Kihika had underlined in red in his Bible but was not able to fulfil.

> He remembered the words: he shall save the children of the needy. It must be him. It was he, Mugo, spared to save people like Githua, the old woman, and any who had suffered.
>
> (p.110)

Mugo can make this come true as he can also realize another prophecy: 'Thereafter, as a chief, he would lead his people across the desert to the New Jerusalem' (p.118) But he has made one mistake. It is not as Moses that he will fulfil these prophecies but as Jesus. Kihika had been the national, unsuccessful Messiah; Mugo must therefore be the greater, final Messiah, needed and foreseen by Kihika to complete his work. As Paul puts it succinctly in the Bible parallel:

> The Law has become our tutor leading to Christ, that we may be declared righteous due to faith. But now that the faith has arrived, we are no longer under a tutor.
>
> (*Galatians 3:24, 25*)

So Kihika must die that Mugo may appear. Mugo, however, must also die, so that the people may be saved. Like Jesus he is not only the mediator of the New Covenant but also its sacrificial victim, for the Bible Law is that 'unless blood is poured out no forgiveness takes place' (*Hebrews 9:22*). By Uhuru day he has performed the preliminary work, in the trench and in Rira camp. Slowly he has been growing towards the final act, even as Jesus himself was 'perfected' in his own Messiahship (*Hebrews 5:9*). Through emotional apartness from all men, great agony of spirit and even a pleading to be left alone, parallelling Jesus' agony in the garden of Gethsemane, he comes through his last meeting with Mumbi to accept the necessity of public confession and death (p.203). He is even the right age. Twenty-five years old in 1955 when Robson was murdered (pp.162, 163), he is thirty in 1960 when the Emergency ends and he comes out of detention to be hailed as the new Messiah. Jesus too 'when he commenced his work /as Messiah/ was about thirty years old' (*Luke 3:23*). By Uhuru day, 12 December 1963, Mugo, like Jesus on the day of his death, is therefore thirty-three years and some months.

It is tempting at this point to fit Mumbi somehow into the Messiah pattern but it seems quite clear that she belongs to another tradition. Her name is also the name of the first woman of the Gikuyus. She is therefore the ever popular and very African Earth-Mother, a symbol of fertility, forgiveness and kindness, one of the most attractive in literature. As a character in the novel she is inspired by Mugo to confide her problems to him; as a symbol she inspires him to move out of his isolation and redeem the community.

By Uhuru day Mugo is ready to offer 'a death which will change things', to be the 'true sacrifice' Kihika had called for many years before (p.83). He will be the 'one man to die in behalf of the people' of *John 11:50* and 'the grain of wheat' which, by dying, 'bringeth forth much fruit' of *John 12:24*, texts which Kihika had

misapplied or underlined in black. In its context *John 12:24* refers primarily to Jesus' own death to redeem mankind from Adam's original sin but the next verse extends the idea to all his followers:

> He that is fond of his soul destroys it,
> but he that hates his soul in this world
> will safeguard it for everlasting life.
> (*John 12:25*)

In a similar text, *I Corinthians 15:36, 37*, which Ngugi places before the novel's first part, Paul says:

> Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not
> quickened, except it die. And that which
> thou sowest, thou sowest not that body
> that shall be, but bare grain, it may
> chance of wheat, or of some other grain.

In Part One Mugo waits alone in his hut, unformed, uncertain of the future. He must learn through the next four days to be prepared to die and let the future work out the result of his death; as the Bible says, 'God gives it /the grain/ a body just as it has pleased him' (verse 38). The earlier historical warrior Waiyaki had also done this, dying like 'a seed, a grain, which gave birth to a political party whose main strength thereafter sprang from a bond with the soil' (p.13). Both Jesus and Paul speak of sacrifice and redemption, of physical death and spiritual resurrection. Fulfilled in Mugo and then in all in Kenya who will accept his sacrifice, this is appropriately the central theme of the novel.

The speeches to celebrate Uhuru are prefaced by a prayer and singing. Again both relate to Mugo and his Messiahship. The Reverend Kingori's prayer mentions the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, sacrifice, bondage, the release from Pharaoh, the journey through the desert - all preliminary stages before the great deliverance, the arrival in Canaan, the Promised Land. He concludes by

imploring Jesus' protection on Kenya.

> 'You who said that where two or three are gathered together, you will grant whatsoever they shall ask, we now beseech you with one voice, to bless the work of our hands as we till the soil and defend our freedom.'
>
> (p.189)

The singing also recapitulates, the main historical events on the road to Uhuru - 'land alienation, Waiyaki, Harry Thuku, taxation, conscription of labour into the white-man's land, the break with the missions, and, oh, the terrible thirst and hunger for education' (p.189). Interestingly, in this account the role of Moses is assigned to Jomo Kenyatta, the first Prime Minister after Uhuru (pp.189-190). The earlier speeches recount the sufferings of the Emergency, the growth of the Party and Kihika's exploits. Finally, the crowd is ready for Mugo's speech. But since he has refused to appear, General R. speaks for him and ends by calling on the betrayer of Kihika to reveal himself. Since Kihika is Moses and not Jesus, General R. is not calling for a Judas but for a betrayer of the Mosaic Law Covenant. On the 14th day of the Jewish month of Nisan, 33 A.D., the day of Jesus' trial, two lawbreakers were presented to the Jews - the imprisoned criminal Barabbas, who was guilty of robbery, sedition and murder, punishable by death under the Law, and Jesus, who claimed to fulfil and abolish this Law and set up a new one. In Ngugi's novel Karanja is Barabbas. He has served in the homeguards, identifying Mau Mau men to the English and later hunting them down in the forest; he has also tyrannised over those who stayed behind in the village, seduced Mumbi and, after the Emergency, toadied to John Thompson at the Githima Research Station. More than anyone else, he has betrayed all that Kihika and black Africans stood for. But just as the Jews were persuaded by their leaders to release the real lawbreaker and condemn the abolisher of the Law, so, in Kenya,

Karanja is saved and Mugo condemned to die. But in Ngugi's novel everyone admires Mugo for confessing. To Karanja he is 'a man of courage' (p.197); Wanjiku weeps for him rather than for her son Kihika (p.193). Even his executioners seem ashamed of their deed. 'Perhaps we should not have tried him', Wambui mutters (p.210). Gikonyo expresses the general opinion best of all:

> 'He was a brave man, inside.... Tell me another person who would have exposed his soul for all the eyes to peck it.... Remember that few people in that meeting are fit to lift a stone against that man. Not unless I - we - too - in turn open our hearts naked for the world to look at.'
>
> (p.202)

The universal guilt which made everyone scurry home after Mugo's confession also makes them understand its true value.

After Mugo confesses and leaves the meeting, a strange incident occurs, which Ngugi has prepared us for in the novel's opening pages. The old woman whose deaf and dumb son Gitogo was shot during the Emergency and who, just before Uhuru, began telling everyone that Mugo was Gitogo returned, is visited by him after his confession.

> 'You - you have come back!' she said, her face contorted by a half-frozen smile into something not of this world....
>
> 'I knew you would come, I knew you would come to fetch me home', she seemed grotesque in her happiness....
>
> 'All these years I've waited for you - I knew they had not really killed you - These people, do you know they didn't

> believe me when I told them, when I tell them I have seen you?'
>
> (p.205)

She staggers towards him, falls and dies, smiling. It is a mystical scene and Wambui and Warui, discussing it later, interpret it mystically:

> 'Her son came for her. Gitogo fetched her home on that day,'...
>
> 'Yes. Things started changing in our village the day she started seeing visions of the dead.'
>
> (p.208)

Gitogo's death had been considered by the villagers as martyrdom (p.90); in recognizing Mugo as Gitogo, the old woman acknowledges his imminent death as another martyrdom. But her words, 'I knew you would come to fetch me home' hint at resurrection; 'also, if I go my way and prepare a place for you, I am coming again and will receive you home to myself, that where I am you also may be', Jesus had told his disciples in *John 14:3*. Her next sentence, 'All these years I've waited for you' may remind us of Simeon, the righteous and reverent Jew who 'waited for the restoration of Israel'; God had promised him he would not die till he had seen the Christ. He recognizes Jesus as the Christ when Joseph and Mary present him at the temple, and expresses his readiness to die (*Luke 2:22-35*). And if we are, perhaps, oversensitive to Bible echoes, we may feel it worth mentioning that the prophetess Anna, who also hailed Jesus as the Messiah was a very old woman (*Luke 2:36-38*). Whether we consider these echoes as intentional or accidental, this clumsy but very moving scene, I feel, is important to our full understanding of Mugo.

With Mugo's death the second text introducing the final part of the novel begins to be fulfilled:

> And I saw a new heaven and a new earth:
> for the first heaven and the first earth
> were passed away.
>
> (*Revelation 21:1*)

It appears throughout the novel as an ideal but now the 'New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God' (*Revelation 21:2*) can be realized on earth, in Ngugi's diluted but popular interpretation of the text, but only in the lives of those who accept Mugo's 'true sacrifice'. The corrupt old world continues; the new M.P. for the district cheats Gokonyo and his friends (pp.54-56, 146-147), and his associates promise to be no better. In them the villains of Ngugi's next two novels already reveal themselves. Karanja too has not yet accepted. He is still an outcast, with no role to play in the post-Uhuru world. But at least he has not committed suicide, and he may decide to change. We do not learn what happens to General R. and Lieutenant Koinandu but, though the novel leaves Wambui and Warui still dazed by the events of Uhuru day, they do recognize that life must go on. '"We have the village to build,"' Warui says and Wambui knows she must forget the past and live for the present: 'I must light the fire. First I must sweep the room' (p.210). But Gikonyo, Mumbi and her son by Karanja succeed in fulfilling Jesus' promise in *Matthew 18:19, 20*) recalled by the Reverend Kingori in his prayer:

> Again I truly say to you, If two of you on
> earth agree concerning anything of impor-
> tance that they should request, it will
> take place for them due to my Father in
> heaven. For where two or three are
> gathered together in my name, there I am
> in their midst.

As soon as he hears of Mugo's confession, Gikonyo begins to change, recognizing that his sin has been forgiven. He can now return to Mumbi and accept Karanja's child as his own, thus achieving the Harambee (Unity) which is the

title of the last chapter. In the stool which he finally decides to carve is symbolized everything Mugo represented - the family, the land and fertility for both (p.212). The novel ends with the promise of another child, his own by Mumbi: '"I shall carve a woman big - big with child"' (p.213). For the people of Kenya after Uhuru, Ngugi says, there is a choice - to move into a new system, 'a new heaven and a new earth', or to perpetuate the evils of the old. Both ways will be chosen, but the new world is given the last word. We should remember too that Gikonyo and Mumbi are not only individuals but symbols, the first man and woman of their tribe. A bright future is possible for all.

There is a certain clumsiness in Ngugi's use of Bible ideas and incidents in *A Grain of Wheat*. The Bible patterns are often forced into the African situations. For all Ngugi's attempts to identify Mugo as the Lamb of God who must die for man's sins, his death is still in the African tradition of sacrifice to restore fertility to the land and the tribe. And the water imagery in the novel remains stubbornly tribal in its significance. Indeed, for some it may be an ethical question whether an author has the right to beef up a local story by imposing a universal one on it. But Ngugi knows his Bible well and seems to understand its patterns. The historic situation of his novel also invites Bible comparisons. In Kenya, as in the Middle East, a whole nation was liberated by Uhuru from an 'Egypt' and 'wilderness' of misery into an apparent 'Promised Land', and many liberators prepared the way for this ultimate freedom. In the story of the novel, two liberators appear, one unsuccessful and the other winning the people's hearts and absolving them of their guilt by dying for them. To me Ngugi's Bible borrowings contribute powerfully to the total effect of his novel, far more than Faulkner's uninspired use of Christ symbolism does in *Light in August*, where it keeps uneasy company with a deeply felt existentialist situation. In Faulkner's novel the Bible parallels irritate and bore

me; in *A Grain of Wheat* they, contrivedly but excitingly, give to an already impressive modern story an archetypal significance.

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NOTES

[1] *Union News*, Leeds University, 18 November 1966.

[2] *A Grain of Wheat* (Heinemann, African Writers Series, London, 1975). All page references are to this edition.

[3] In a speech to the Party members he 'unrolled the history of the tribe, the coming of the whiteman and the birth of the Party' (p.15). Can this be a subtle allusion to the book of *Genesis*?

[4] *African Writers Talking*, ed., Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse (Heinemann Writers Series, London, 1972), p.121.

[5] The fullest discussions of this subject are in *Romans, chapters 2 to 7* and *Gallatians, Chapters 2 to 5*.

SAKARAM

by

Alice Samuel Pillay

Life was always such a struggle for Lakshmi and her little family. Ever since Muniandy had drunk himself into his coffin a few months ago, Lakshmi knew that on her young shoulders lay the burden of supporting her two young children. Already the third one within her was making its presence felt. "I hope it's a girl this time - the third girl in the family is considered to be lucky. Perhaps she will have a better life than me and her good fortune may rub off on me." But the baby's little kicks brought to a halt her musings about the future.

Strangely, Lakshmi noticed that it was whenever she brooded that the child kicked - almost forcing her back to the mundane reality from which she longed to escape. Nevertheless, she found it difficult to stop worrying about the future. "One more mouth to feed - there's no justice in it at all," she thought. "What am I going to do this time? Will my master be charitable - as he was this Deepavali when he gave us a bag of rice and some salted fish? That should last us a few months if doled out carefully. Well, my master is honourable enough, though I can't say much for that son of his! Surely he will give me some kind of financial support..." she mused on. She was jolted back to reality as the vibrations of a passing train rattled through the thin plank walls of her hut.

All her life she had lived alongside a railway track, though always at a different stretch of track. Even then there was a monochromatic "sameness" that she couldn't escape from - the sight, smell and sound were

invariably the same. Today however, the track stretched almost haphazardly before her as it wound its way snake-like alongside the squatter huts, seeming to engulf the settlement before it tracked off in a different direction altogether.

"Appu, Appu, wake up now! It's almost six a.m. and amma has to go to work" she said casting her lovely almond-shaped eyes wistfully on the two little children lost in the world of innocent sleep. Why, she too had been a child once, a happy and carefree child, even though her family had been poor. At least her father was a responsible man and her mother knew how to hold her tongue and get on with the business of raising her nine children. She had been doubly blessed; not only had her womb been fruitful but her husband had never yielded to the urge to spend all his meagre wages at the toddy shop. "That's not fated for me, why ... Muniandy turned out to be just another drunkard, useless!"

Forced into an early marriage like the other young girls of her time, Lakshmi discovered prematurely the vicious cycle of poverty and the degradation it brought with it. "It must be my karma." She tried to think about it as philosophically as she could but found no real answers.

"I have to leave now," she cried out wearily to Appu who was still half lost in slumber. "There's some black coffee in the kettle for both of you and a thosai that grandmother allowed me to take home last evening. If little Kannan is fretful, take him to "patti". She knows how to soothe him. Now, mind how you cross the railway track!"

Lakshmi was still an attractive woman in spite of the thin worry lines now faintly visible on her forehead. If at all, motherhood had improved her pallor. She had been much sought after, even after Muniandy's death but not in marriage. Adjusting the crumpled saree that she

had worn to sleep in the night before, and patting some oil into her luxuriant hair and plaiting it, she set off.

There was something brisk to her walk that morning, as if she was propelled by some force unknown to her. Lakshmi passed the dirty little squatter huts with a grace and elegance that belied her true occupation. Always given to thinking, she mused about the opulence of her master's home and the squalor before her. "Ah ... the rich ... with their cars and jewellery ... they don't seem to have a care in the world. What a luxury that is, not to worry about where your next meal is coming from!" The little one's kicks put paid to further reverie.

She let herself in through the back door of her employer's house, wondering whether this day was going to be different from the other days. Somewhere in her womb she was conscious of an excited flutter. "Oh Lakshmi, there you are, I though you'd never get here! You see, today is a crucial day as we are going to see Raja's horoscope. I have arranged for a prominent soothsayer from India to tell his fortune. In this family, this has been a tradition handed down through the generations, whereby the eldest son has to abide by what is revealed. He will be here by ten o'clock. Do get the coconuts and 'manjal' ready."

Lakshmi shuffled about the kitchen going through the household chores in a mechanical fashion. There was a feeling of discomfort she could not explain as the clock ticked sonorously away. It was almost ten when the milk she was boiling overflowed from the pot to the floor. "Is this an ominous sign?", she thought, as she cleaned up the sticky white mess.

The soothsayer arrived with much pomp a few minutes after ten. The entire household was in a flurry of excitement and expectation. Raja watched the "players", strangely detached from this "game" that his father wanted played. "Why do they want to know my future? It's

already assured. The old man and the doting old grandmother will see to that."

The family sat trance-like around the wizened old man as he chanted and swayed in a mystical manner. Cascading beads, then, mute silence! Rhythmic chanting once again. The wrinkles on his aged brow orchestrated at a frenzied pace. Lakshmi watched the whole ritual from the kitchen doorway with a sense of heightened excitement. Then, the soothsayer lifted a fresh coconut. Split it open deftly. Two perfect halves of white and a pulpy bud within - wet, vulnerable. The smell of scented "chambrani" was suddenly overpowering.

"Lakshmi", "Lakshmi", the almost hoary whisper grew insensibly more distinct as the old man's voice pitched in an unnatural tone. But there it was again, "Lakshmi - the kitchen maid." "Surely he doesn't know? Surely he can't know!" The child within her seemed to be at peace at last and for a while she did not feel the weight of the burden within her.

"The seed has to be preserved at all cost!" the oracle had revealed. "Well I'm not going to sacrifice my life for one act of foolishness. The old man can worry about 'preservation' and 'tradition'. I'll not be party to it!" Raja walked nonchalently away from the familiar portals of his father's house.

Today Lakshmi sits in all her finery in the marbled opulence of the house where she once laboured. The Gods of her ancestors had chosen to smile on her and released her from the bond of the "magic" cycle. Little Rajalakshmi knows none of the hardship of her half-brothers. They are her playmates now and the only reminder to Lakshmi of a past life she no longer cares to remember. Perhaps, there's some grain of truth in the myth of the third child after all, she thought, as she slipped into a dreamful sleep. Somewhere in the far distance a train had finally reached its station.

RASA
(to R)

by

Salleh Ben Joned

Vira srngara santa:
Krishna's blood and Kabir's
sings in your blood
as you dance the nine rasas
on this laila of lila.

Diga diga thai ta:
and the demon of demons
is trampled to dust
under your lightning feet.

The concord of Krishna and Kabir
in the keen arms of the crescent
becomes the concord of concords:

of night and day
of earth and sky
of lust and love
of gods and God.

In the illusive mudras of your hands
the yoni yearns for the bhakti of being,
the lingam slides into the silence of stars,
the lotus blossoms into the thunderbolt.

Krishna in Kabir, Kabir in Krishna:
on the tips of the crescent,
the moon of maya.

Siva, grieving
over the ashes of Sati,
danced the saving dance,
and beads of scarlet sweat
fell to the mourning earth
to turn into golden grains.

Let the amber beads of your sweat,
dripping down the waves of your rib cage,
be the beads of remembrance
that liberate,
and drop to this wilderness
that was once
our Golden Khersonese.

And like that awesome destroyer,
trample down with your ecstasy
the shrill screams of the pharisees,
the raucaus roar of the ravanas.

Like Rama, to win back Sita,
build the fabulous bridge
across the strait
that divides rasa and rasa,
man and God.

And like the spirit
of that impious Sufi,
caught between the dark pit
and the blinding fire,
make your supple body sing,
let it be
the sunlit, infinite
song of flowers.

Of this laila of lila:
there is no joy but Joy;
there is no god but God.

March 1983

A LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO INTERPRETING RUTH PRAWER JHABVALA'S *THE YOUNG COUPLE*

by

Henry Thambyrajah

The *Young Couple* is one of the short stories by the Booker prize winning novelist Ruth Prawer Jhabvala in her anthology *A Stronger Climate* (1968). The story, set in India, evolves around Cathy, a young English woman, married to a western educated Indian. An intuitive response to the story suggests that the protagonist and, to a lesser extent, her husband, Naraian, are helpless and alienated in the face of a dominating Indian family, i.e. Naraian's family. It is the purpose of this article to demonstrate a linguistic approach to interpreting Jhabvala's short story, which confirms these intuitions. More precisely, the text will be analysed with ideas drawn from Halliday's theory of Grammar and Pragmatics, the latter being that branch of linguistics concerned in part with the relationship between speaker, utterance and hearer or, in this case, narrator, text and reader.[1] It must be added that this analysis is not meant to be exhaustive.

Central to Halliday's view of language are the three functions he defines: the ideational function, that is the function of language in expressing content; the interpersonal function, which is concerned with the relations between the participants in the discourse; and the textual function, that which is concerned with the creation of the text including inter and intrasentential relationships. Included under the ideational function is the notion of transitivity choices, the choices being made by the language user between different types of processes, different types of participants with different roles, different types of circumstances and different ways of combining participants, processes and circumstances.

Halliday defines three processes which are expressed in the clause, those of material, mental and relational processes. Included under the material process clause is the action process clause, for example, 'John hit Mary'. In this sentence, 'John' is the actor or initiator of the process, 'hit' represents the process and 'Mary' is the goal of the process. The mental process clauses are of two types, the externalised type (e.g. 'John said that') and the internalised type. The latter type is further subdivided into perception process clauses (e.g. 'John saw Mary'), reaction process clauses (e.g. 'John likes Mary') and cognition process clauses (e.g. 'She thought about Mary'). In a relational process clause, a relationship between two roles is stated (e.g. 'John is in the house').[2]

An analysis of clause types within Halliday's framework of transitivity choices reveals that of the approximately one hundred and eighty-two verbs with Cathy as one participant, only sixty-seven are action process verbs.[3] Even when Cathy acts (28), the goal is for the most part either some part of her body (11), or Naraian's (7).[4] All these actions are the result of her tenseness and frustrations (e.g. '... shook her head...', '... flung herself at his neck...'). Only in four instances does she act on some other object. An examination of these four instances, reproduced below, reveals that although she acts on these objects, these action processes are not action processes which show her in control of some event:

(i) Cathy ... lifted the napkin from her lap, and folded it.

(ii) She turned on the light.

(iii) She visited the city bazaar several times.

Not only do both the action process verbs in (i) have something trivial and insignificant (i.e. a napkin) as

their goal, but in addition, these processes are prompted by her tenseness and nervousness in the face of her mother-in-law's questioning. Similarly, the action process verb in (ii) denotes a very ordinary action, again prompted by her tenseness and a need to confront Naraian with his apparent aloofness during the earlier scene with her mother-in-law. In (iii), she does not literally act on the object. There are also two instances where Cathy and Naraian are joint processors:

(iv) ... the new flat they had rented.

(v) They visited a lot of restaurants....

But, again, the object involved is not literally acted upon by both. Perhaps it is these transitivity patterns which contribute to the impression that the reader gets of a helpless, 'passive' Cathy, a Cathy who cannot control the events in which she is involved.

A similar picture of Naraian emerges, though not as vivid as Cathy's, when the verbs associated with him are examined. Of the one hundred verbs associated with Naraian, only thirty-seven are verbs of action processes. Of these thirty-seven verbs, twenty are transitive, with Naraian as actor in nineteen of these transitive verbs. But, as is the case with Cathy, Naraian never seems to act on any object or person other than Cathy or some part of her body. Only in four instances does he act on some object and even then it is an abstract notion /i.e. (iv)/ or some other inanimate and trivial object /(vii)-(ix)/.

(vi) Naraian wasted no time in looking round for a job.

(vii) ... he kicked them /underwear/ aside impatiently....

(viii) he drew a handkerchief out of his pocket and threw it at her.

(ix) he kicked a door....

It might also be added that, as the context reveals, the action processes in (vii) to (ix) are prompted by Naraian's anger and frustrations.

This idea of passivity and an inability to control events/situations that the reader associates with Cathy and Naraian seems to be further carried through by the type of perception process verbs associated with both. All the perception process verbs associated with Cathy (12) and Naraian (10) are of the type 'look', 'see', 'glance', 'notice' - verbs that give the impression of a Cathy and Naraian who only observe situations from a distance, a Cathy and Naraian who do not act within these situations.

In contrast to Cathy and Naraian is Naraian's family. According to the narrator:[5]

> ... there was ... a certain heaviness about the house that weighed on her /Cathy/ and made her feel oppressed, sleepy and liverish. This heaviness was physical ... and in the people themselves ... /including/... the mother ... /and/ ... the father....

In short, Cathy felt dominated by Naraian's family. An examination of the type of verbs associated with Naraian's family tends to support this explicit comment made by the narrator. Of the thirty-one verbs associated with his family, nine are verbs of action processes. Of these nine, five have his mother (or his family) as initiator of the action and Cathy or some part of her body as goal, and all these five are verbs associated with the idea of domination ('took', 'pinched', 'patted' (2), 'fondled'). In the case of the remaining four, the goal is some entity connected to Cathy's and Naraian's lives:

(x) they ... made a splendid wedding for them.

(xi) they ... helped them find this flat.

(xii) She /Naraian's mother/ ... poked around in the cupboards and even under the beds /i.e. Cathy's and Naraian's/.

(xiii) Naraian's mother send another sweeper ... to their flat....

So far no mention has been made of the mental process verbs of the 'cognition' and 'reaction' type associated with Cathy and Naraian. An examination of such verbs in the text seemed to give some indication of the degree of objectivity the narrator maintains from his tale. Of the thirty-three such verbs associated with Cathy, ten are verbs of the 'cognition' type (e.g. 'thought', 'knew', 'wondering'). The remaining twenty-three verbs of the reaction type are 'felt' (including one instance each of '... began to feel....' and '... made to feel...'). These verbs demonstrate the narrator's ability to read the character's mind so as to report the character's thoughts and feelings which are not overtly expressed.[6] In addition, it is through the use of such verbs that the narrator makes his dominating presence felt. In the case of Naraian, there are only two instances of a 'cognition' type mental process verb, and even in these instances both Cathy and Naraian are processors.

(xiv) Both of them knew that she /Cathy/ wouldn't ... be better ... but both of them also knew that they would have to go ... to Naraian's family's place....

Both instances of 'knew', the 'cognition' type verb concerned, are contained in one sentence. Perhaps there is an explanation for the occurrences of 'knew' in (xiv). It is possible that the narrator is reporting the situation as he saw it and is not attempting to read both characters' minds. The opening sentence of the passage in which (xiv) is contained seems to support this view.

(xv) All the week she felt fine, ... but on Sunday mornings she always woke up sick.

As the plural form 'mornings' indicates, this is a situation that is being repeated. Given this information, one might suggest that from the evidence of previous situations that are similar, it has become common knowledge for Cathy, Naraian and the narrator, who observes these situations, that Cathy, inspite of not feeling any better, has to go with Naraian to his parents' place when the car sent by his father arrives, as the reader is told. There are, however, five instances of the reaction type verbs, but all five are process verbs associated with some physically observable reaction (e.g. 'Naraian ... loved being with his friends....')

Although the narrator is for the most part objective, confining himself to merely reporting the actions, physically observable reactions and, in the case of Cathy, the thoughts and feelings of the characters in his tale, there are instances where he drops his objectivity. These instances, where he identifies himself with Cathy, also seem to be intended to evoke the reader's sympathy, as a pragmatic analysis of the text shows.

Consider the following:

(xvi) Naraian ... quite often seemed to forget that Cathy was there with him.

(xvii) Sometimes, when it seemed to her, that she was getting a complex about this....

(xviii) It seemed she had been seen....

In all three, the verb 'seem' is present. In (xvi), the narrator states what appears to him to be the situation, and in (xvii) he states what appears to Cathy to be the situation. (xviii), however, is quite different. In (xviii), in contrast to (xvii), 'to her' is omitted.

(xviii) is an example of free indirect style. In free indirect style, the tag that is necessary for indirect or reported style is dropped. So instead of 'She thought he was coming', or 'She said he was coming' one gets 'he was coming'.[7] In free indirect style, the narrator's voice fuses with that of the character. The omission of this tag allows for that speech/thought to be identified with the narrator and the character alike. In other words, the narrator's viewpoint is identified with that of the character. There are several other instances of free indirect style in this text, as the following illustrate:

(xix) ... she looked again towards Naraian, who was now busy eating the flesh round the stone of his mango, always a delicate operation calling for all one's concentration and skill.

(xx) Naraian too was part of the discussion, in fact he seemed to be the centre of it.

(xxi) But everyone seemed pleased....

(xxii) he ... looked in fact sympathetic. Probably he had recollected the way they had once used to talk....

In (xix), it is obvious from the context that '... always a delicate operation called for all one's concentration and skill' is a mental comment being made by Cathy. In addition, by omitting the tag 'She thought' the narrator fuses his viewpoint with that of Cathy's. Similarly, in (xx) and (xxi), the context reveals that the narrator states what appears to Cathy to be the situation, but as is the case with (xviii) in contrast to (xvii), the omitting of 'to her' indicates that the narrator identifies his viewpoint with that of Cathy's. In (xxii), the omission of the tag 'she thought', which in indirect style would appear between 'Probably' and 'he had recollected...' again indicates that the narrator's viewpoint fuses with

that of the character. In these instances of free indirect style, the narrator is compromising on his objectivity. The interesting point, however, is all of these instances of free indirect style occur in situations in which Cathy feels trapped. Through the use of free indirect style, the narrator shows his sympathy for Cathy in these situations. His relationship with the protagonist of his tale in such instances is not one of detachment but intimacy. Free indirect style also has the added effect of involving the reader in these situations, with the removal of such intrusions as 'she thought that' and the 'to her' after the verb 'seem'. In other words, these instances of free indirect style account for the reader's sympathy for Cathy in her plight.

Instances of the use of the definite article in an unusual manner in the text lend further support to the claim that there are points in the text where the distance between the narrator and his tale, which is supposed to be maintained, is dropped. A definite article is normally used when the referent of the noun phrase is unique to the domain of discourse. Thus in 'John hit the boy', the referent of the NP 'the boy' is unique, i.e. it is the one and only boy in that domain of discourse, and the knowledge of the uniqueness of this entity in that domain of discourse is common to both speaker/writer and hearer/reader. Structures of the form 'The sister came to see him' are highly unlikely in normal circumstances. Instead, one is likely to get 'His sister came to see him'. The possessive pronoun 'his' is intended to indicate the special close relationship that exists between the referent of that possessive pronoun and the referent of the noun phrase 'his sister', i.e. the referent of 'his sister' has the relationship of being sister to the referent of the possessive pronoun 'his'. In this text, however, one finds instances of 'the mother' (6), 'the father' (2) and 'the mother-in-law' (2), but only one instance each of 'his mother' and 'her mother-in-law' and four instances of 'Naraian's mother'. 'The/his mother' and 'the/her mother-in-law' have the same referent as 'Naraian's mother'.

These instances where the definite article is used rather than the normal possessive pronoun tend to carry across the distance between Cathy and her mother-in-law (and father-in-law), i.e. that there is no closeness between them. In fact, the use of the definite article evokes the idea, as it would, of a unique entity shared by narrator, reader and Cathy instead of some entity related only to Cathy, as the use of the possessive pronoun would indicate. This, coupled with the fact that combinations of the type 'the mother' are unlikely in normal English, ensures that the reader is not only made aware of the dominance of Cathy's mother-in-law but together with the narrator shares Cathy's relationship with her mother-in-law, and sympathises with Cathy in her predicament. This conclusion seems all the more possible when one considers that combinations of this type only occur in those very instances where Cathy feels trapped by Naraian's dominating family. Even the four instances of 'Naraian's mother' seem significant. A closer relationship is implied between Cathy and her mother-in-law in 'her (or Cathy's) mother-in-law' than 'Naraian's mother'. In the light of this, it is interesting to note that the one instance of 'her mother-in-law' occurs in that very situation where the narrator reports Cathy acknowledging her in-law's concern in taking her to the best doctor. In this instance, Cathy is grateful for her mother-in-law's (and sisters-in-law's) concern, and the use of 'her mother-in-law' emphasises her gratitude by carrying through that idea of a closer relationship.

Perhaps it is Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's intention that the reader should sympathise with Cathy. Cathy's helplessness and frustrations are carried through by the verbs associated with her in contrast to those associated with her Indian in-laws - at least an analysis of transitivity patterns in the text indicates this to be so. Even those instances of free indirect style and the uncommon use of the definite article seem deliberately meant to evoke the reader's sympathy. Instead of the narrator and reader being merely observers, they become participants with Cathy in those particular scenes. The reader shares

with the narrator an intimacy with Cathy as Cathy helplessly submits to the situation. After all, one is reminded, Jhabvala herself is, like Cathy, a European married to an Indian resident in India.

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NOTES

1. Halliday himself has attempted to analyse literary texts within the framework of his theory. Refer to Halliday (1971). Also refer to Kennedy (1982).

2. Refer to Berry (1975: 150 ff.) for a more precise exposition of Halliday's theory. The exposition given here only includes details necessary for an understanding for the analysis being demonstrated.

3. Figures given are approximates. Allowance must be made for possible omissions in the counting, but such allowance would be minimal.

4. Figures within brackets denote the number of such instances.

5. R.P. Jhabvala (1968), *A Stronger Climate*, p.53.

6. In the case of '... made to feel....' the reaction could be overt.

7. Perhaps it should be noted here that 'She said he was coming' is different from "She thought he was coming' in that the former is an instance of indirect or reported speech while the latter is an instance of indirect or reported thought (i.e. the thoughts of someone else is being reported). (Free) indirect speech and (free) indirected thought are collectively known as (free) indirect style.

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Hell-hallowed
all that flamed
a pyre of pure light
dwindled
to
this
burning
dust
that eats and eats and eats
and leaves
ash acrid in the mouth.

The temple
is become a tomb
within which shadow-puppets
twitching dance
upon a twisted string
Saluting Life!

Niloufer Harben

The mind
ghost-ridden
plays havoc
with the shadow of itself
mocking the echo
of its voicelessness

The scarecrow flapping
grinning in the dark —
mice gnawing straw in the hat.

Niloufer Harben

By which part do we proceed
by which law mask up
a summer smile, a face
transfixed upon a page
while corners crack turn in
upon the laugh
lunging wild and lurid
in the mind
lips curled back
upon a grinning skull.

Niloufer Harben

Unreal shroud of all that was and is
miraged within
I walk in mindless mists
along these labyrinthine halls
through shifting streets
and lifting rocks,
this faceless heap
of automated cloth
bundled up against the blast
of conscious thought.
I tread this weary roundelay
to hold the wind
to stuff the prey,
but close my eyes
and all is turned to seething light
to gaping mouths and bleeding clay.
There is no darkness only day
that leaves me chopping in this febrile sea
a pantomime of memories circle hawk-inspired
to hover-float
descend
deplete
but it is only cloth they tear away
the mind turns on in ceaseless sleep.

Niloufer Harben

Walking

Walking in

Walking out

Walking on

Walking in the wake of what was all
turned to this silent torrid shore
of lonely wind-whipped things:
a coconut husk
a boot sea-spewed
a stump of roots dragged up
upon the hollowing shore.

O lost
in broken glass
in gutted crabs hewn down to shell and claw
in ragged weeds that shift
along the lengthening shore
as shadows stretch and streak
O lost

Fled is the whistling creature of the wind
that once a laughing dolphin ran
in dancing wave and sun
Carved down to this
a rabid jaw
a rotten stinking carcassed fish
sunk fast in grasp
of greedy glistening things
all hungry to consume and to abort.

Walk in
savage the rocks
let all bone break
let all blood pour
in copious waves
upon a copious shore

Walk out
blast wave and storm
let carping wind shaft in
let lightning stun
let waters wall
thrash in to rage and ravage all

Walk on
with boring eyes that will not blink
stare down the sun
the salt sea slam
the burning sting of bitter things
jagged up upon the shore

Walking in

Walking out

Walking on

Walking

Niloufer Harben

MACLALS Workshop: Teaching Language Through Drama

Maclals presented a Workshop on the above topic on 25 January 1984. It was conducted by Hyacinth Gaudart, lecturer in the Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, who was back in Malaysia on holiday from the University of Hawaii, where she is completing work on her Ph.D. It was open mainly to English specialists in secondary schools in Petaling Jaya and the Federal Territory, whose response to the event was overwhelmingly enthusiastic.

We begin our report on this activity with a few words by Miss Guadart. Then we go on to a description of her experience as a participant in the Workshop by Miss Victoria Yan, who then gives her assessment on the use of drama techniques in the actual reality of the classroom situation. (Eds.)

Using the Drama Technique in Language Teaching ... Hyacinth Gaudart

One should begin with a warning that no claims towards universal applicability should be made. The success of the technique depends to a large extent on the teacher's personality and pupils' cultural orientations - taking "culture" in its widest sense.

The workshop began with a demonstration of "warming up activities", aimed at relaxing participants and putting them in a receptive frame of mind. The workshop then proceeded to demonstrate how drama techniques could be geared towards different levels of pupils' language proficiency and maturity. This entailed full participation by all present in a mock classroom situation. No "audience" was allowed.

The workshop ended with a discussion of the practicalities, problems and benefits accruing from the use of the technique in TESL classes.

Drama Techniques in Language Learning ... Victoria Yan

Giggling grown-ups in tight-knit bunches plotting strategies; Tarzan in his primitive splendour sweeping across a crowded room; drum-banging peddlar and her equally vociferous partner extolling the virtues of their $1,000 panacea; ecstatic pet-rock master agonising over the quintessence of the ultimate pet.

A glimpse into fantasy land? No - just a group of teachers "learning" to teach English through drama, and enjoying every hilarious moment of it.

"The right hemisphere of our brain provokes creativity, technical, dramatic and artistic activities, is under-utilised and underdeveloped compared with the left hemisphere, the centre of logic and language," began Miss Hyacinth Gaudart, specialist in using drama techniques in language teaching. Hence the rationale for learning language through drama: here is a real need to promote a more balanced development of both hemispheres of the human brain.

An additional bonus to the use of drama techniques in the classroom is the infusion of life and variety into an otherwise staid atmosphere of the classroom. Drama also provides a motivating force, an important prerequisite to successful language learning.

After the preliminary introduction, the participants were "subjected" to warming-up exercises meant to help them shed their inhibitions and generate spontaneous talk. Seated in a circle, with shoes off and feet touching at the centre, all the participants were required

to get to their feet without bending the knees. The trick was to plan the best strategies for helping everyone to his or her feet in the fastest and most dignified way possible. In the course of this planning, a good amount of talk and laughter were generated and their pertinence to language learning and language use was apparent.

Four other activities which followed, were aimed at promoting team-work and using language to create imaginary situations which would enhance the effectiveness of language learning. Thus, every participant became a component of a machine or instrument, created entirely through body movements and positioning, coupled with the attendant sound effects. The most "challenging" moment came when five separate machines were told to merge into one co-ordinated, functioning whole. The teachers carried off every challenge with such precision and humour that external complaints about the noise were brushed aside with equanimity.

"Selling a $1,000 Item" (actually a twig, a leaf or a stone), was the activity which saw the imagination working at its best, and the participants innate talent at manipulating language to its best effects coming to the fore. Many participants probably went home convinced that they could act better than they had thought possible.

Given the resourcefulness, high level of language proficiency, imagination and humour of the participants, the drama session could not be anything but a success. However, one nagging question which was at the back of the minds of many participants after the session was, "How relevant are all these to the classroom situation?"

Using Drama Techniques - the Reality of the Classroom Situation ... Victoria Yan

Fresh from the exhilarating drama session conducted by Miss Gaudart, this teacher was eager to try "selling a $1,000 Item" in the classroom. Accordingly, two form five classes were assigned the tasks.

The proficiency level in English of the majority of students in these two classes - Form V Arts 4 and Form V Science 1 - was judged to be average or weak. There was also the usual handful of students with high language proficiency at one extreme and very low proficiency at the other. "Selling a $1,000 Item" was assigned as a consolidation lesson integrating two areas of the Communicational Syllabus - "Relaying Messages" and "Description of Processes".

As the task was explained to them, the look of anticipation and pleasure on the students' faces seemed to augur well for these lessons. It was indeed a departure from the routine of English language lessons.

Seven groups of students, with six in each group, were identified and the instructions given. They were given twenty minutes to plan marketing strategies for selling the $1,000 product (symbolised by a thing, a stone, a ball or anything they could easily obtain). However, the twenty minutes stretched to forty minutes and even after this, the students could not demonstrate their marketing plans in front of the class. It was a laborious task for them as they had to plan and write the dialogues, memorise them and decide on the presentation. Spontaneous speech was beyond their reach. Altogether, about one hour was needed for the preparatory stage before the students felt confident enough to act out their roles in front of the critical eyes of their fellow classmates.

One aim of such a lesson was to engender spontaneous talk in the language the students are learning, namely English. However, on the whole, this purpose was defeated as the teacher had to continually remind the students to speak in English as they would revert to the language they were most comfortable in - Bahasa Malaysia or Chinese - at the first opportunity. Insistence on English would trigger off either an awkward silence or some stilted talk among the learners.

The actual acting was quite disappointing as many students tended to be overly self-conscious and some groups even tried to evade the task of speaking by assigning most of the talking to a leader (usually one with higher proficiency) while the other members played the "supporting role" of adding a monosyllable here and a nod in assent there. Among the more extrovert students who had a better control of the English language, however, there were inspiring moments when they attained heights of imagination and dramatisation as they projected an effective corporal image with professors at the helm and research as the root of all innovation. Thus there was a pen that could write on anything - water, air, rock or smoke - and a mini-bomb that was more devastating than the one dropped on Hiroshima.

An observation that may be drawn from these lessons is that drama techniques need to be adapted and judiciously chosen to cater to the needs of individual classes with differing levels of language proficiency. With students of lower proficiency, greater control over the use of dialogues and dramatisation in terms of the levels of difficulty, the syntax and lexis, and the subject matter (e.g. in the vein of suggestions forwarded by Richard Via in his book may be more beneficial in the long run). More activity-oriented techniques, such as games, puppet shows, mimes and charades appear to be accepted with enthusiasm by all learners. However, the limitations imposed by the constraints of inadequate class room space and the need to regulate the noise are obstacles to their regular use in the classroom.

Drama techniques do have their place in the language learning situation. Doubtless they do provide an opportunity for innovating interesting learning situations and are a refreshing departure from the usual teacher-pupil interactive patterns of many language learning classroom situations. In the hands of the resourceful teacher, there can perhaps be no limit to the possibilities which drama techniques have to offer.

Book Review: A.R.B. Etherton (1976), *Communication Skills in English*, Books IV and V, Kuala Lumpur: Longmans

by

S.L. Hsui

Communication Skills in English, Books IV and V, for Forms 4 and 5 respectively, was published in 1976 to meet the novel requirements of the Communicational Syllabus for Forms 4 and 5. At the time of the latter's inception, a climate of uncertainty and controversy had prevailed over the aims and purposes of teaching English, the level of language proficiency of learners at the point of entry and the terminal language behaviours expected at the end of the secondary school course.

Communication Skills in English was published amidst this backdrop of uncertainty. One of the common observations of teachers using these textbooks is that by today's standard, they are not suitable for a large number of students because of three factors: (i) the level of English which the author assumes the learners would have at this disposal is too high; (ii) insufficient control and guidance are exercised in the tasks given and (iii) only minimal attention is paid to a progression from the simple to the more difficult and from the known to the unknown.

Of course at the time of its introduction in 1976, many students (especially those who had had a strong English background in that a number of school subjects were learnt in English) could tackle the texts with ease because of their proficiency in English. However, by today's standards, this is no longer the case. Only the more competent students can profit from the tasks set in these texts and this group of students is decidedly in the minority.

For the more proficient students, I feel that these are some of the most interesting texts in the market because they offer a wide range of learning tasks, a considerable variety of reading materials and afford scope for high quality, original writing. The reading passages, in themselves, are commendable as they offer a variety of styles and are often pertinent to the requirements of each area, either in extending it or in providing living examples of the application of the principles taught.

Learning a language involves developing the four basic skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. While exercises aimed at improving the reading and writing skills are copious in both textbooks, those intended for developing the speaking and listening skills are very much neglected. There is a need for more imaginative and effective exercises which will help create a more balanced learning situation covering the four skills.

Communication Skills in English , Books IV and V, are suitable for students who have advanced beyond just possessing a knowledge of the basics of the English language, and have at their disposal the ability to appreciate the nuances of the language as well as honour the conventions of discourse. For students of lower proficiency levels, however, a judicious selection of the exercises which will appeal to them in terms of interest and difficulty level is required. Teachers would also need to exercise greater supervision and control over the students' written and spoken productions as well as incorporate supplementary materials and teaching aids. However these texts are not recommended for learners of very low proficiency levels.