

Introduction to *An Acre of Day's Glass*

KS Maniam

In Wong Phui Nam's poetry there is a recurring reference to light and, often enough, to darkness. But it is the imagery centred on light and brightness that finally gain ascendancy. One comes across lines such as “you slipped into the plunging bright arc of your descent” or “And then ... a new daybreak” or “to think of the splendour of the breaking light at dawn.” These lines and the cluster of similarly veined images encapsulate for the reader not just a world lighted up but a world awaiting discovery.

This is the persistent note of expectation that runs through the collection: the need always to discover. A close reading of Phui Nam's poems makes one realise that this persistence is not centred on some immediate need to extract the epiphanic from a particular, ordinary experience. The many and various linkages and interconnections between the poems themselves suggest the contrary. Behind the 'I' in the poems there is a questing, probing consciousness that grows from a self-seeing itself in a relationship with its surroundings to one that sees itself as a part of a larger, human continuum.

While this is true of poetry written in any time and in any part of the world, the social, cultural and political situations in Malaysia make different and arduous demands on the writer. In addition, there is that complex linguistic ocean to cross and make one's own, especially when the writer uses English - not his mother tongue - in his works. This is not so apparent in these not-so-postcolonial times when some of the leading literary figures in Britain and France are from the former colonies. It is more than apparent now that English is a global literary language. Writers from Africa, India, and the West Indies have amply driven this point home. The struggle of Malaysian writers, however, to reach the point of no return in terms of linguistic choice is hardly known or only remotely understood.

In examining Phui Nam's development as a poet, I am not approaching him merely as a poet but as a poet who has had to reach his present achievement through a persistent struggle with

language and cultural perceptions. This is where the history and social structure help or hinder a writer. In a country with established linguistic and literary traditions, the writer is able to assert his distinct imaginative personality by rebelling against those very traditions. Phui Nam did in fact contemplate writing in Malay, the National Language, but finally opted to continue writing in English. He documents this poignantly in the section titled 'Interregnum.'

The writer using English inevitably found himself in a dilemma. Could he use the language in the form he inherited from his colonisers? If he did, he would be undermining his role as a poet. A poet is a transformer, not a follower. A poet transforms, that is, he reaches into the centre from which he feels all life – that of individual human beings as well as of cultures – comes. For him, this involves the process of unveiling or reinstating shapes, colours, thoughts, feelings, and social structures as they would have come from the original creative fires.

In the political, social and cultural contexts this would mean unmasking the false, decrying the hypocritical, denouncing the despotic. But above all, he attempts to remove, if only by eroding attitudes and prejudices, the schisms caused by communal loyalties, political power bickering, and cultural dogmatism. He counterpoints the present, hollow living with a vision of man and society living under a sky of larger myths, in dignity.

All this implies that language cannot be used in any inherited sense. Phui Nam recognized this when in his introduction to the first edition of *How the Hills Are Distant* he wrote: “On looking back I realise I have written these poems for those who truly understand what it means to make one's language as one goes along.” The poems in this collection testify to that recognition: the language does not merely function as a medium that carries with it all the associations it has accumulated through the years in another country. While the basic meanings of words may be retained, the poet has had to infuse newer significances that more than adequately reflects his own cultural outlook and values.

Phui Nam has titled each section of the collection in a significant way which allows the reader to follow, among other aspects, the development of the personal brand of language he has developed. I will refer to certain sections to exemplify this and other concerns of the poet.

The *Hills* cycle of poems examines the poet's relationship with the peoples, cultures and politics of the country. He seeks, through them, an identity with the cultural and historical past of the multicultural society in which he lives. To this complexity he brings his own cultural inheritance, namely, that of the Chinese tradition, that residue of memory originating in China and reaching him through the line of predecessors who formed the first five generations of settlers in Malaysia.

The main support of the series comes from the landscape that represents simultaneously the physical country, the social environment, and his interior consciousness. The landscape, recording the archetypal memory of man, evolves from a natural, rural environment, shaped by the elements, through to the urban, moulded by man. Phui Nam develops an imagery that originating in the pristine, intuitive nature of man, reaches through to the urban rational sensibility of modern man. The language, as does the style, gradually discards the old, mythic features in order to reflect man's present intellectual approach to life and a consciousness that relies less on a spontaneous surrender to the emotions.

“Candles for a Local Osiris” represents a confrontation with himself. It is a psychological recognition of his personality, leading finally to the birth of an aesthetic and spiritual self. 'Osiris' takes his psyche to the precipice so that the poet can know the limits of his present consciousness and, subsequently, enter a new one. The theme and connecting thread in all these poems is death. There is the death of meaning, emotion, courage, the intellect, and the spirit. The landscape here is interiorized and becomes the landscape of an inner consciousness or soul. As in the Osiris myth each of the poems represents a part of the poet's present psyche that must be killed and buried before a wholesome rebirth can occur. The tone in each of these poems is that of a steady confrontation leading to recognition and then acceptance. Taken together they define the cyclic nature of man's emotional, intellectual and spiritual selves. With this recognition he is compelled to make, more consciously, a world-view that keeps pace with his developing consciousness. The poems in 'Osiris Transmogrified' counterpoint the descent into despair with the positive, life-giving desire to create, at least for oneself, the more complex and inclusive consciousness.

This inclusive consciousness helps the poet from being trapped within a particular, xenophobic cultural encasing. In a multiracial society virtue can be made of the practice of extolling

the qualities of one's own culture against that of others. The poet recognizes the danger in this attitude: it could lead to an intolerant, narrow-minded smugness. The poet counterpoints this with what I call, for want of a better term, the more fulfilling process of inhabitation.

This process of inhabitation is tied to the expectation of discovery mentioned at the beginning of this introduction. While this can be treated merely as a literary activity, it can be more fruitfully viewed as a practical need for the individual in a multicultural society to leave behind the self shaped by his own cultural milieu and enter the self of a personality shaped by another culture or cultures. Through the use of inhabitation, Phui Nam makes ironic comments on one's roots. The roots one sees as one's cultural history proves to be the opposite: one's own cultural history is merely a passing expression of one's social existence. The real roots lie beyond the cultural and social traditions man has evolved for himself. They lie in that region of the original life-force and the force of the imagination.

Inhabitation is the process of continually entering, immersing in and emerging from one form of culture/existence and then entering through the same process another form of culture/existence. The section, 'Blind Exits', demonstrates the workings of this process. "A Death in the Ward" details a Chinese boy's entry into the mind/mindlessness of Manickam, an Indian. The images here function to reveal both the boy's and the Indian's aborted lives so that the reader is emotionally compelled to equate the boy's life with the old man's life.

"Blind Exits", "Spirit Rampant", and "A Night Easter" reveal how one can outgrow self-locking outlooks and attitudes and enter an awareness that continually enlarges one's perspectives and personality. In 'Spirit Rampant', Phui Nam manages to break into the Indonesian poet Chairil Anwar's bold intimacies and abrasive but delightful bringing down of conservative attitudes and attachments.

"Temple Caves" goes deeper into the spiritual awareness of man than either "How the Hills Are Distant" or "Candles for a Local Osiris". In this series of poems, one enters into the agony of the man, the 'being of the senses', who is unable to discover the proper expressions for his spirituality:

All that we can hope to know about being more
than merely human is held fast, mixed in with coarse grain
in bodies, calcified into substance
that daily becomes more solid, more resistant than stone.

Yet this recognition in itself is a discovery; his awareness of the more than human is expressed through the pain of being only bodily human.

The anxiety and uncertainty about one's spiritual nature does not trail off into a contemplation of the void; that would be a surrender to hopeless and unwarranted despair. Could not the mystery that surrounds the spiritual origins of man be celebrated in a realistic manner and in the most mundane of surroundings? Phui Nam demonstrates in "Night Easter" that this is not only possible but also necessary. While this long poem refers to Christ's resurrection, it also dramatises the possibility that Christ or the god-head can be found in any ordinary man. Through the voices that speak, mourn and recall all the unnamed man's violent death in the estate lines, the poem raises the ordinary man's demise to the level of Christ's crucifixion. This is done not just to strain at parallels but rather to give spiritual value to the passage of any man through this world. More than that, it evokes, once again, for us the feeling that every life comes from the god-head and therefore is the god-head.

The poems in *Remembering Grandma and Other Rumours* section examine the struggles of a Chinese family coming to terms with its history in an adopted land, with an almost aloof tone of close scrutiny, reflected in the first few lines of the opening poem "Remembering Grandma":

When yellow deepened in the cheeks
of mother's sharp, dry face, Grandma
knew. A canine instinct
nosed out all the soft parts
that death had already slightly smudged.

The impartial but probing tone examines all the weaknesses, strengths, ephemeral success, and individual excesses or predilections, all of which taken together go to memorialize this family's endurance and unbreakable spirit.

The poems in *Against the Wilderness* seem to counterpoint the poems in *Remembering Grandma and Other Rumours*. Phui Nam says in his introduction that “there is, in the mere need for making these poems, an implicit faith in the existence of appearances to the contrary in these most unpromising times.” The epigraph to this section is Sonnet I xxvi from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*. The following lines from this sonnet are of particular importance in following the experience offered in this section:

you drowned their loud and raucous cries with lovely order
and rose from their destructiveness in your song that heals.

The men and women who figure in the *Against the Wilderness* poems seem less than human. In 'Antecedents' the persona says:

Nursing with paps

blackening from the teats, I was death for our howling son.
In the city, we gave him up that we might eat.
Though we were ghosts, we found it very hard to die.

The landscape in this country of the wilderness is bleak, where human beings, as the last line in the above quotation says, are ghosts who do not think of parental sacrifice but are only ready to sell their son so they can live. This country is an “acid, cindery netherworld that choked up the sky” (“Mining the earth”). It is a godless country, where mercenary instincts override every other responsibility. A woman, for instance, is seen as a “fecund belly-heaviness of bitch and sow” into whom “burrowed, a fly into carrion, to seed me with his death.” Part of the cause for this dehumanisation is colonisation. The colonised “think it right to take to their ways, and learn/to speak and mouth the syllables of their tongue/babbling, in time, even of their green fields, of

golden daffodils.” In this way, this section compels the reader to contemplate a world which men, having lost their original nature, have turned into a wilderness. Most of the poems are sonnets, a disciplined and disciplining form, which brings to the poems that 'lovely order' mentioned in the epigraph to the section.

Phui Nam also renders Tang poems into English, I say renders, because these are more creative versions rather than translations of the original. He illustrates this process at the end of the collection. He extends this process also to poems from German (Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*) and French (Charles Baudelaire's *The Sunset of Romanticism*).

An Acre of Day's Glass embraces various concerns to all of which this introduction cannot give the necessary and rewarding attention. What is obvious, however, is that here is an effulgent intelligence that tries to find for itself a meaningful place in a multiracial as well as a globalised society. In doing so it has avoided the parochial and has tried to place the poet's Malaysian experience within a universal, human paradigm. The collection, as a whole, demonstrates that the concepts about culture, history, and language have to be re-examined so that broader human and spiritual expressions of these important aspects of man's existence can be continually rediscovered, re-evaluated, and redefined.

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