

## **Out of the Stony Rubbish: A Personal Perspective on the Writing of Verse in English in Malaysia**

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

In view of the very long histories and traditions of the lands from which the immigrant peoples to Malaysia are drawn, it may seem surprising that the communities which they make up should provide almost nothing in their traditions for the cultural and spiritual nourishment of their members. To explain this, it is necessary to consider that the immigrant peoples did not arrive in the country as communities such, for example, as the Mayflower founding fathers, who consciously transplanted themselves as a community to a new land in the cause of religious freedom and brought intact with them as part of the fabric of the life of the transplanted community a body of received beliefs and tradition. Malaysians arrived mostly as individuals, infrequently as families, up-rooted or forced out from their homelands by war, famine, oppression or just simple poverty and want and, most significantly, they were brought to the new land, as mere factors of production. They were allowed in solely on the ground that they were useful and could contribute as productive factors to the economic life of enclaves established by the ruling colonial power in the new land. They were only means to further the economic and commercial ends of someone else. The communities that eventually developed out of the growing number of arrivals were thus not whole and intact vehicles for the extension of a "mother" culture carrying on and fostering a live tradition in a new land but a fortuitous coming together of individuals and

families where accident of language and a commonality of geographical origins facilitate their casting in their lot together to further a common interest in survival.

The origins of the individuals and families which make up the immigrant communities ensured that even before their removal to the country of their eventual domicile they would come to the new settlements in a culturally (and spiritually) denuded state. By and large they belonged to the poorest of the poor classes in their homelands. My own antecedents, as were those of the majority among the Chinese, were at the outermost periphery of the then existing Chinese socio-economic order. The accretions of more than three millennia of history had left them unburdened of the ancient classics, of religious insight, of the Confucian precepts for correct social relationships, of poetry and letters, the fine arts and so on. The inner guides to behaviour were a debased form of Taoism mixed with the veneration of ancestors and worship of household and other familiar spirits and a sense of kinship loyalty. These were the scant inheritance they brought with them to contend with the wilderness.

The wilderness provided soil for growth of a life whose interests extended little beyond the realm of the material – of things to be possessed. Such life as grew out of the inhospitable soil was lived out for the purpose of maintaining the economic operations of the enclaves which as economic creations of the ruling power were informed by values which were not so much values as valuations of the market place, calculations of enterprise directed toward the technological exploitation of the environment for profit. The bare inheritance which the immigrant peoples brought with them was easily subverted by the new "values".

As purely economic ancillaries to the metropolitan centre of empire, the enclaves could not, by their very nature, have much else to offer. Though it might have been thought that the metropolitan power could be a source of an alternative inheritance, what it did in fact offer and what took root were little more than civic virtues of a humanitarian society, modern methods of organisation and administration necessary for maintaining the externalities of life of modern economic communities and ideas for creating the political framework for a later emergent independent state. The metropolitan power itself was part of a larger civilisation which had already gone far into the process of secularisation and consequent fragmentation and of the undermining of its traditional values and beliefs. Its heritage, which could no longer be easily taken for granted

as a source of vital life by its own people, could not be appropriated by the enclave communities. Without that affinity of spirit that comes from a shared past, all the riches of the culture of the metropolitan power could not but be a heap of broken stones to the enclave communities – infinitely more so than to an Eliot contemplating the ruin of Western civilisation from the perspective of the nineteen-twenties.

Outside the enclaves, there were the older settled communities of the hinterland. As is usual with hinterland communities, agriculture was (and is) the basis of their economic life. In time, this was made over also into ancillary activities in support of the larger life of the enclaves. The hinterland supplied rice to these centres and grew a variety of cash crops, the principal one of which was rubber (now rivalled by oil palm) and the produce from these pursuits were sold to the centres for eventual export by agency houses to the metropolitan country. In becoming, in this way, economic ancillaries to the enclaves, these older settled communities which began as small riverine settlements in a new land, also experienced a change in their way of life. Apart from Islam, which served as an integrating factor, this way of life was also subverted by the new valuations of the marketplace. A large part of the impact of this change was in men being drawn away by economic and other attractions to the enclaves. As Malay and, to a little extent, Arabic, taught in the religious schools, were the languages of these communities, they were not places out of which one would expect English writing to grow. As for the dispossessed persons in the enclaves, they were at that time not equipped, both linguistically and culturally, to attempt to write – not that writing was a priority in their lives anyway.

Though Malaysia has been officially declared a nation since 1957, the reality of its inner life is still that of the enclave. If anything, there has also grown into mature fruition by now out of the barren ground a pervading spirit of grasping individualism which encompasses a single-minded dedication to the pursuit of self-interest. This is invariably centred on the acquisition of possessions, status and power and consolidation of the means for their preservation. For the individual, all of the impulses toward a vital life are directed toward externalities such that the psyche is left unchecked to treat the world as object to be used in the fulfilment of its desires and to feed itself with its own dreams and fantasies about such fulfilment. Greed, anger, lust, and a "boastful pride of life" are thus given free rein. In the guise of progress and development, we have in consequence raised up idols of wealth, prestige and power and concupiscence whose worship

is evidenced in the corruption, abuse of privilege and power, and lax sexual morality much rumoured about in public and business life. By the force of dedication to these gods, Malaysians have not been able to see the true wasteland that they inhabit among the stones of their high-rise buildings, traffic flyovers, bridges, dams, eight-lane highways, harbours and so on.

In such a wasteland, the realisation of a life enhancing vision through art by the writer will be almost, if not altogether, impossible to achieve. There cannot be the ambitions of a Yeats to reach back into folk tradition and myth to realise from their elements a transfiguring vision for a nation or even the failed attempts of a Hart Crane at creating a living myth to integrate the United States' vast, complex technological civilisation with a pre-Columbian past. In Malaysia, there are not available elements which an artist can draw together to create for the people an integrating vision of a possible inner life. What are available have so little power to move the spirit that they may more appropriately be seen as phenomenon for observation rather than elements for an integrating vision. Such observation involves reporting - a reporting of the pain, desolation and even horror of an inner state that has little possibility of mediation towards meaning, of the psyche being lost into itself to struggle in a morass created of itself of undirected feelings, fantasies, dreams and deeply buried unnameable primordial urges.

A strategy for rendering a true report on this inner state would be to find objects, places and situations in the external world as embodiment of the movements of the inner life. If there is to be a point to such "reporting", there must be implied norms as to what is the good ultimately in the life of a person and of a community. These are approached tangentially and implied in their absence in the inner life "reported" on. In my own practice, the implied norms, for instance, are those that would have served as sources of enlightenment or restraint on the behaviour which reveal the psychic lives of a number of relatives in the sequence "Remembering Grandma" or a "happier" inner state that could have prevailed in the place of a wasteland populated by dragons, snakes, pigs, dogs, bats, worms, tigers, even vegetation and such inert physical features of the landscape as bodies of water taking on the life of animals.

Though there is no explicit statement of such an inner state, there is, in the best of Malaysian poetry in English, in the work of Ee Tiang Hong and Shirley Lim a deep-seated unease that pervades the "reports" on the lives of men and women, in the relationships between

themselves and others and between the individual and family, in the poets' psychological states, and even, as in Tiang Hong's work, the dissatisfactions with bureaucrats, institutions, official policies and so on. In his work, this comes out in the little ironies in such phrases as "men who mount" which appeared to have affronted the sensibilities of one or two people who, I had thought, would have been more perceptive. In the best work, there is also an absence of any inclination towards the definition of a "national consciousness" or aspirations towards the creation of a "Malaysian culture". There is no temptation to do any of these things unlike the situation in Singapore where even so astute a poet as Edwin Thumboo (a poet of sometimes the most exquisite lyricism) has not been entirely able to close his ears to the siren calls of "national purpose" but his response to the call is always complex and he is never guilty of uncritical assent to the official position. Ultimately, artistic work for the national cause (at least this is made patently clear to writers in English in Malaysia) will be doomed to failure.

As irrelevant as writing for a "national purpose" would be is work which relies on a surface style that combines knowingness, mild irony and polish, spiced with references to international events and personalities and work that passes itself off as "protest poetry", an infection caught by the practitioners very much in the out-dated fashion of the sixties during their carefree student days. The former avoids the real issues involved in artistic venture in Malaysia, indicating an unwillingness to pay the price of commitment the vocation demands, while the latter reveals a total and blissful blindness to how deep the darkness is in which we are plunged. The so-called protest poet in Malaysia is not a blind Tiresias who sees all. He only sees what he thinks are the "goodies" in the national product and questions the basis of the sharing of these "goodies" and thinks that by a mere redistribution of power and hence share of the GNP, he can hope to create a heaven on earth. While verse of the urbane and writing international style is still readable and at times entertaining, protest verse, at least in Malaysia, is always specious. The "poet" does not explore but begins with givens (provided by protest literature in the erstwhile colonial countries) on which he has already made his decisions and which he then attempts to "sell" to the reader. Like pornography, protest verse of the Malaysian kind is just another species of sentimentality.

A further option to the Malaysian wasteland is to opt out. This has most frequently been done by lapsing into silence. There are a few poets who have begun promisingly at university but have not been heard from again. Cases in point are Lee Geok Lan and Pritam Kaur. Even those

who continue writing do so in brief periods of activity with long years of silence in between. It would seem that the richness of feeling of each encounter with their daemon soon wears thin and the horror of the brute unadorned physicality of their existence shows through. The recourse in the face of such agony that surfaces is silence or emigration. Ee Tiang Hong and Shirley Lim are no longer with us (in a geographical sense, that is). Neither are Chin Woon Ping, T. Wignesan and Goh Poh Seng, all originally, I think, were Malaysians. In the Malaysian landscape, artists are, therefore, the maimed and the dead. Conditions do not make for the writing of poetry, let alone the hope of major poetry. There is no evidence of that yet – even in languages other than English. Barren ground is no ground for the attaining of transforming visions – a necessary though not necessarily sufficient condition for great poetry.

The way out of the desert seems to point towards the transcendent. It is a way that involves the finding and staying in touch with one's spirit. But this is not a way that an individual can carve out for himself on his own. He cannot invent his own myths or borrow them or go about in the modern manner of self-help to perform a variety of esoteric exercises to induce the sought for state. To be invested with authenticity, the individual has to submit himself to the disciplines and be guided by the beliefs of the great religions. This may be a way of liberation of man as artist up to a point. Beyond that point, we are always reminded of the choice between "perfection of the life" and "perfection of the work". But this could yet prove to be a fallacy. I believe that out of the transformation of life through seeking "perfection" there could come a kind of art that points beyond the wasteland. This will be the art of the man who has seen and comes back with a transformed vision of humanity – even perhaps of God in humanity. It will be an art of love, compassion and inward joy.

I am not sure that my contemporaries, Edwin and Tiang Hong, will agree or even approve of what I am going to say about language. However, I cannot evade the issue as I have always been exercised by the thought of my total dependence on English when I write. But I should say beforehand that, I do not subscribe to the myth of one having to imbibe a language together with one's mother's milk in order to be able, in a mysterious way, to use it with authority. In other words, I do not believe I am second best merely on account of the fact that there was only Cantonese in my mother's milk. I do believe that facility in a language is a matter of sensitivity and the capacity of the individual to internalise it together with its traditions – and therein lies the rub.

To internalise a language is to allow it and the broad assumptions that the community of its native speakers hold about the universe to become a part of oneself. The non-English writer who writes in English and has no similar recourse to his own language is thus, in allowing English to take over his affective faculties, in a very deep sense a miscegenated being, very much and yet not an heir to the tradition of Shakespeare and Milton. The language he uses to name, organise and express his experience of the life around him removes him from that life and, whether he is aware of it or not, he becomes a stranger cut off and always looking in as an outsider into that life. In that sense, the more facility he has with the adopted language, the more unauthentic he becomes. Culturally and so, spiritually, he is induced to place himself in exile from England and be cast out of an imagined Eden. There is much irony in the older generation of Malaysian Chinese being "thrilled" at climbing the slopes of Mount Rydal or taking coffee at the London coffee house where Johnson used to hold court or be "at home" in London after Europe – something he would not say of Hong Kong or Taipei.

I think it is this cultural displacement, more so than a matter of mother's milk, which makes it extraordinarily difficult for a Malaysian (or Singaporean) writing in English to achieve authentic life in poetry. It has always made me self-conscious about using English. To avoid inauthenticity in my own writing, I try to give primacy to immediate experience, to transform it into an internal event that assumes a sensory and emotional life of its own (much as in a dream) and then let it find outward expression through the mediation of words which are so organised as to give at the same time pointers to the possible meanings of the appropriated experience. The process may be described as involving a flooding out of English words with one's own immediate apprehension of the world to clean out their traditional English connotations whenever they intrude inappropriately into the texture and feel of the writing. To put it in another and very elementary way, it is the wiping away of "each soft incense that hangs upon the boughs" on a summer night or the colour and movement of daffodils from the word "flower" and putting in their place the rude, odourless and pendulous beauty of the hibiscus. The process of doing this is not a conscious 'one but is taken through by "feel" or a kind of instinct and in explaining it in the way I have done I might have even falsified it. However, in this way, if the genealogy of one's inner life is dominated by forebears with such strange sounding names as Mr Pope or Mr Wordsworth, one may contrive to appear as Malaysian as one possibly can.

Nevertheless, if the writer has to use the language, he has to treat it with respect and not do violence to its native genius. To achieve poetry, the use of words that make up the verse must give them resonance which comes from the emotive and intellectual associations acquired through the actual history of their usage. As the Imagists have shown, a purely physical poetry is limited in its possibilities. The Malaysian writer in English cannot avoid, despite what I have implied about the risks involved, falling in with the thought habits and conventions established in the native tradition of its usage. To maintain the tension arising between the demands of authenticity and genuine speech without the language breaking down altogether, the writer must then have a sense of occasion. He must know when to put the "thingness" of an experience into the words he uses and when to play this down and to allow for the connotations growing out of the tradition of the language to work and so give to the writing resonance. This sense of occasion comes out of and is guided by a sensitivity to words - individually, in phrases and in sentences - a sensitivity to their sound shapes, the sensory impressions they convey, their feel, their emotional and intellectual associations, and their etymology (particularly important in English which, because of its hybrid Norman French-Anglo-Saxon character has a very wide "tonal" and "colour" range to be exploited to great effect). A sense of occasion is also relevant in a consideration of verse form and metre, though for the Malaysian writer in English the options available amounts to little more than an eschewing of traditional forms and metres. Strict form is too much a part of the English tradition to be easily carried over into Malaysian writing. Since the only tradition and cultural achievements that our Malaysian forebears can lay claim to do not go beyond rice fields, river house-boats, small shops, artisan's workshops, servants' quarters, labour lines and so on, English verse forms, which are an expression of a long tradition of Western letters and scholarships whose sources of inspiration go back to the ancient Greek and Latin classics, cannot be easily appropriated by Malaysian writers to serve their own totally different ends. However, one would read it, a Shakespearean or Miltonic sonnet written in Malaysia would be too artificial a device to ring true. Malaysian poets, (I hope I am not pontificating here) cannot afford to risk more than writing fourteen-line stanzas, which through the organisation of the argument in eight- and six-line segments or three four-line segments with a concluding line pair merely suggest the form of a sonnet. This, together with unrhymed three-liners, suggesting the *terza rima*, and other pieces using verse paragraphs with a fixed number of unrhymed lines appear to be the most feasible approach to form for the Malaysian writer. For lack of an old hinterland steeped in a feudal/rural culture that has continuity with our present situation, even the ballad in however vaguely suggested a form, will not work in the Malaysian wasteland.

As is the instance of verse form, traditional English metre is very much of an inheritance from the classical literatures of Greece and Rome. In the very best practice, however, there is a freedom with which English poets handle prosody allowing the rhythms of the native speech to break out of the strict confines of rules derived from the practice in languages in which the measure of a metrical foot is counted by vowel lengths rather than by stresses. Here the Malaysian writer finds authority in the English tradition itself to follow natural speech rhythm and the sound shape of the words he uses in constructing his lines rather than worry over much about counting feet. As Malaysian practice would not be different from practice elsewhere in the world where English verse is written, there is no need here to deal at greater length with the matter.

An external aspect of the Malaysian poetic wasteland is the lack of, for want of a better word, an infrastructure for the support of its propagation and growth. There are almost no opportunities for publishing, no audience (except for isolated individual readers here and there), no forum for critical discussion and certainly no official encouragement of good work through the giving of awards and so on. The official attitude on the teaching of English is based on the belief that learning and mastering of a language can be achieved even if it is severed, nerve and artery from the body of the literature and culture in which it thrives and finds continuing life. Writers in English are left very much alone, though in a recent anthology of Malaysian English verse in translation into Bahasa Malaysia, there is some small acknowledgement of the existence of serious writing in languages other than Bahasa Malaysia. The cavalier fashion in which the English is translated, however, raises doubt as to whether the best interests of the writers have been served. In the instance of my own verse, "started" in the sense of a sudden movement or a sudden waking up from a reverie has been rendered as "bermula" which is the Bahasa Malaysia word for "commencing" or "beginning" while the glass panel on my step-mother's coffin becomes, in the translator's eyes, "cermin mata" or spectacles.

The critical question for the Malaysian writer in English is one of audience. To whom does he address himself? Largely to the dead in Baudelaire's sense of the unborn. To say this is to risk appearing to make large and pretentious claims. Yet, the claims reside only in the hope that what is written will be read some time into the future – the hope that here and there in the present and in the future there will be those who are interested in Malaysian writers as witnesses to a time and place and what has been identified, named and brought to outward expression as the

psychic/spiritual contours of their inner landscape and such "truths" as they may happen on about the human condition. This hope is surely the motivation of the Malaysian writer for lack of a direct living audience and if he fails in its realisation, his only consolation is that he would not be around to endure the pangs of his disappointment. As a last word, I will say only that should Malaysian serious writing in English survive, it will not be so much Malaysian writing as a part of Malayan-Singapore writing if only on the ground that, for poetry at least, we have common beginnings in the late 1940's in the University of Malaya in Singapore. This is despite the tendency of the younger Singapore writers to go their way to construct a Singapore "national" literature albeit it will largely be in English. For Malaysians our hope is that writers, poets in particular, will not conveniently die out like dinosaurs.

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