

Poetry and the Politics of History: Revisiting Ee Tiang Hong¹

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Abstract

The Malaysian poet Ee Tiang Hong was troubled by the fundamental changes being introduced by the leaders to ensure that Malaysia (which Ee always referred to as Malaya) became centrally a Malay nation. Not only was Ee trying his best to dissociate himself from what he termed the “mimicry of foreign birds” (i.e. the language of the colonial masters) but he was more critically searching for a new idiom which would give freshness to the rendition of the Malayan experience. While this struggle was in process, the tragedy of May 13 (1969) struck: here was a blatant illustration of the extent to which greed and power could bring people into conflict, with the dominant ethnic group claiming victory over misplaced emphasis of national values. Unable to accept the new order, Ee migrated to Australia in 1975, forever lamenting the breach which thus occurred. Throughout his poetry are powerful reminders of what happens when a sensitive poetic mind is traumatised by prejudice writ large. For Ee the politics of history demanded urgent attention and in his own unique way he attended to this, giving us some of his best poems along this painful journey.

Keywords

History, politics, poetry, good, just, nationalism

Each of us carries the burden of history. This is not accidental, incidental or fortuitous: it is a fact of our existence. Inheritance writ large is one way of defining history. Another is to think of history as baggage. Whichever way we look at it, history is a burden. And there are, essentially, two main facets of history: the external and the internal. The external is the official record and

¹ Ee Tiang Hong passed away in April 1990. The author was with him.

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document of happenings as these occurred. The internal is the residue of the external by way of an individual's personal internalisation of the external. We could describe the internal as psychic history, while the external could be national or international history. In both instances, the history is not limited to just a single perspective: even in extreme cases, such as that depicted so powerfully in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*, there are multiple perspectives, albeit some more privileged and foregrounded than the rest. Ee used to remark that a person's dreams often illustrated the internal or psychic history – hence the heavy emphasis placed on trying to fathom, interpret, and understand dreams. Certainly, we recall Freud educating us by stating that dreams were the royal road to one's unconscious, that hidden or deeper self we outwardly often didn't dare to show, acknowledge.

The poetry of Ee Tiang Hong is manifest testimony to the burden he carried – both external and, more significantly, internal. Much of what he articulates in his poems about history, especially the convoluted history of Malaya becoming Malaysia and becoming a nation, is uncomfortable. The trauma of internalised realisation of what history was doing to his beloved country, how history was unfolding before his very eyes, how, indeed, history was being made and manufactured (that is, how history was being distorted/modified/communicated en masse/altere/d/edited) so as to fit the times and the morals, as he ruefully put it in one of his poems. As Ee grew older and his poetry became more and more concise – the economy of words used deftly underpinning the intended meanings – we become aware of the crucial significance Ee allotted history and its (often) damaging impact on human beings.

We may begin our short exploration of Ee's musings about history by citing an early poem: "Dead End." Written while still an undergraduate in the University in Singapore, this poem makes explicit the poet's sensitive but marked helpless appraisal of a search for an authentic idiom, an authentic voice which would signify the maturity, coming-of-age, as it were, of Malayan poetic sensibility:

No more for me frail butterflies
 Drifting round about the bushes,
 Sipping sour-sweet tears, the pretty lies,
 Golden wings of schoolboy crushes.

No more the days I would compel
 My heart to make up words,
 Waste all my time at singing well
 Come mimicry of foreign birds.

And yet, for all the mining pools

The latex flowing all year long,
 What power can drive Malaya's pulse
 Or tap a rhythm for its song?

(“Dead End,” *I of the Many Faces* 24)

The poet is fed-up; he has had enough of Keats and other Romantic poets, even Tennyson. The “sour-sweet” poems of these acknowledged writers of the colonial masters now lose their appeal as the young poet begins to search for a voice of his own. Turning inwards towards his own country he finds a complex paradox: while the economic side seems to be in good form and shape, the more personalised aspect of history's flow proves problematic leading Ee to ask where the possible inspiration might be for a genuinely Malayan poem. There is the fusion of the external with the internal here; a fusion which is, at best, neutral in terms of what it conveys about the state of the nation vis-à-vis the people. Having learnt that being even the best of copycats will not provide the needed joy for originality, Ee is searching, clearly, for a uniqueness of expression which will, beyond doubt, signal that Malayan poets have come into their own. It is useful to note that Ee acknowledges that he too, like so many others, did attempt to write like Keats and the other writers his colonial education exposed him to. Here the burden of history as it took strong roots in the growing consciousness of a young population being educated in the ways of the colonial masters is powerfully communicated through imagery which both alludes to and spontaneously rebukes the process. Ee cannot now carry on in this way; his own sense of self will no longer allow this; that peculiar comfort of knowing one can imitate and get away with it, possibly even impress and be rewarded (for the colonial masters took pride in creating clones!) now proves troublesome as the poet craves for a real identity. The politics of the situation is starting to create a deep feeling of alienation.

Throughout his life Ee concentrated on knowing about politics: how it fashioned nations and peoples, how it wrought its heavy weight on those directly involved, how it damaged sensitive souls, how it led to corruption and misrule. He always told me that we must never neglect history as a subject in our schools and frequently lamented that one reason why the politics may not be so good could be that the players in the game didn't know their history. When I probed and asked why he thought history was so necessary for good politics to obtain, he almost always replied, “If the key players in our political arenas don't know history they will, for sure, repeat history's terrible mistakes...” This, he said, would prove “tragic.”

Ee firmly believed in Aristotle's dictum that man is, by nature, a *political* being. He repeatedly drew upon this core belief of the great ancient philosopher to justify his own incursions into politics by way of his poems. Indeed, stretching Aristotle's views on the difference between “art/poetry” and

“history,” Ee passionately believed that in order to know the truth of history we should turn to writers, particularly the poets because in their works we will find the real truths of history lived and experienced. When I used to press him for answers to the age-old question about personal prejudice and the inevitable subjectivity found in poetry (as distinct from the “objective” positions adopted by historians), he would mockingly laugh, have another deep inhale of his pipe (he loved smoking a pipe) and pause and looking at me directly in the eyes say, “Do you truly believe that the historian is objective? Have you read X? Do you think he is telling the truth of what transpired? No, no, Kirpal, it is us, poets, who finally tell the truth because we cannot help it – the truth gnaws at us, demanding we let it out. Sure each of us will let it out in our own unique way but let it out we must. And it will be honest. It will be TRUTH.” Listening to him at these times, I knew for him being a poet meant he carried a very heavy responsibility – that of being the good citizen whom Aristotle talks about, the man who knows what is good and what is just. Goodness and justice tormented Ee. Here was the main realm of politics. And politicians, those in power, had to stand or fall depending on how they dealt with these time-cherished and time-honoured human pursuits. From the conflicts of personal interests (selfishness) to a mad obsession with power (dictatorship) to the manner in which politics treated its dissenters, Ee discerned and discriminated his multiple interpretations and insights, frequently writing poems about his responses to the ebb and flow of history as he saw it, as he lived it, as he experienced it, and, most critically, as he assessed it.

Let us re-visit another early poem of Ee’s to see just how seriously he took the role of the good citizen. Though not explicitly stating the obvious (that this is a poem about goodness and justice), it is only too evident that these are the underlying values Ee is concerned with and about. The slightly comic tone of the poem notwithstanding, it is noteworthy just how here, what I have called the “politics of history,” plays out:

I hear not
The infectious complaint
Of a sick people
Queuing for dispensation.

I see not
The collected mob’s
Retreat from Justice
Purging the streets.

I must mouth not
Grievances or retribution
What I know you all know

Spite of gag, hood and plug.

I of the many faces
 Helpless fall
 Guilty and penitent,
 Assume a mitigation
 Of what you will pronounce,
 When the peoples' court arise,
 Of my being a puppet
 Of a government
 Not of the people.

Will you not judge this
 Adequate atonement?

(“I of the Three Monkeys,” *I of the Many Faces* 1)

Using the common “3 Monkey Rule” (speak no evil, hear no evil, see no evil) but overturning and reversing its reluctance to point to a political situation in which those who do see, hear, and speak out against injustice are invariably punished, Ee challenges us to reflect, weigh, and consider, like judges, and pronounce our sentences. The direct reference to a religious order which by its paramount emphasis on a deep sense of personal guilt requires us to be direct participants in the observation and condemnation of a “government/ Not of the people” must, certainly, be provocative to any authority. “Atonement” is not a word to be lightly used or lightly taken – and we, the readers, are confronted in plain, blunt terms: “Will *you* not judge this/ Adequate atonement?” (Emphasis added). Will we? Or will we, like the 3 monkeys of ancient wisdom, turn our heads away and refuse to engage? Is this why the persona is presented as a mere “puppet,” helpless, guilty, and penitent?

One of Ee’s constant themes is, to what extent does the common man experience real history? Does history move on without affecting the masses, save when someone – deemed to be a nuisance or a trouble-maker, an agent provocateur – draws the common man’s attention to manifest deeds of injustice, unfairness and even downright cruelty? Often in our discussions, Ee would remind me of Roman history: one, he would insist that we tend to underplay the “Anthonys” of our world, those with the gift of a glib tongue (it should here be noted that Ee did not hold Anthony in high esteem; indeed, he cautioned against believing in those who had smooth, oily tongues); two, he would insist that the Caesars, the leaders, were held to account, each time and every time though some of the Casers forgot this and arbitrarily acted in ways which history subsequently exposed and condemned in no uncertain terms. There are parallels, Kirpal, he would tell me, between our world and the world of the Romans, a lost civilisation but not before it made its impact on human

sensibilities all over the globe. Here was external history being processed in a remarkable way by one of our region's great poetic minds: even in the small body of poems Ee left us there is shining evidence of his own struggle and involvement with the politics of the day, a struggle which most scholars and critics seem to either ignore or be very uncomfortable in engaging with on a more sustained basis.

We all know how tremendous the effect was of the notorious May 13 incident on Ee. When he finally decided to leave his beautiful Malaya (he mostly referred to his home as Malaya, even after it had become Malaysia) in 1975 it was only too clear he was doing this because he truly felt a terrible sense of loss and helplessness to deal with events the way they were unfolding after May 13, 1969. The six years subsequent to the horrible tragedy of this devastating event did not, it appeared to Ee, mitigate anything, least of all the underlying causes. In fact, he was convinced that things were getting worse, that his beautiful homeland was now facing a real scourge, a scourge which would only end with the claiming of numerous sacrifices. Ee's mind, particularly when it was at its poetic intensity, took on an epic-like stature and it dawned on me that for this poet, poetry itself was meaningless unless it grappled with those larger issues and challenges which faced him and his fellow human beings. Ee's own comment on May 13 is revealing of how fundamental a loss he felt, and again we notice the religious refrain: the poem is titled "Requiem":

Date from this day onwards
 Whatever you will,
 Use the momentous day
 As it suits you, but with reverence,
 As befits the great divide.

Tell your children to remember
 The lessons of May 13,
 Or tell them to forget
 The friends or relatives who died,
 It makes no difference,

Sun and moon will rise tomorrow
 Sun and moon will set

For all our sorrow.

("Requiem," *Myths for a Wilderness* 55)

For all our sorrow. Against the backdrop of history's terrifying sweep, the small, gentle voice of the poet laments. Nature, having known history in its multifaceted modes, is neutral, so the sun and moon continue their daily course while

the humans involved try to discover and make some sense of the insanity of their history, the actions of players big and small. The great divide that Ee refers to is not merely the gulf between races which triggered the tragedy of May 13, it is, more quintessentially, ubiquitous – and it is this that most worries and concerns the poet. The apparent despairing tone is not without good reason, for the poet knows that the historic event itself will be attended to without reverence: otherwise why would he exhort us to attend it *with* reverence? This is not just clever wordplay or rhetoric at work, it is a profound engagement with a deep feeling of helplessness and grief, and with the realisation that the politics of history will simply not allow/enable the good and the just to thrive; these values do not, it would appear, matter during times of turmoil, turbulence, only brute force triumphs – as it seems to have done on May 13.

I made reference to the “common man” earlier. In several conversations Ee stressed that throughout history the common man, the ordinary individual, has been hopelessly at the mercy of the great tides and waves of history. History is essentially determined, he said, not by the masses (except in very rare instances) but by leaders – kings, emperors, popes, presidents, and prime ministers. Thus the onerous roles played by these men (mainly men, occasionally there have been women) invite commentary and poetic gloss. Far too often, these leaders seem to betray gaping blanks, blind spots, which, being left unattended, rear their ugliness unannounced and the consequences prove disastrous. Again the common people bear the brunt of these, while those who bring these about rationalise their own behaviour and make a virtue of their shortcomings. In this respect it is worthy to read, closely, Ee's poem “The Common Man”:

Not the collective man
 With his collective strength
 And fury,
 Who has his strong man
 Or some vocal champion
 To rouse and rally
 Round a common cause,
 And nothing to lose,
 For whom the consolation
 Guarantee of a powerful future –
 Salt of the earth,
 Inheritor of heaven.

The common man
 Is he who slinks alone,
 No prophet to lead him
 Framing his speech.
 Who, lacking the courage

And the masterly cunning
 That makes the orator
 And man of action,
 Speaks only to himself
 And in the refuge of his home.

Helpless voter,
 Helper of hopeless causes,
 The common man
 Is history's
 Poor left-over.

(“The Common Man,” *Myths for a Wilderness* 45)

This direct comment on the common man being “history’s/ poor left-over” is, certainly, where Ee’s moral dilemma lies: how can the ordinary human being cope with history’s relentlessness? How does the mind engage with the abject and the commonplace? Ee always saw himself as belonging to the community of common men. So frequently did he remind me that like his common man, he, too, mostly spoke only to himself and in the refuge of his home. I always insisted on saying that this just cannot be the case because in penning his feelings in all their complexity meant he was adamant in wanting people to hear him and, possibly, discuss his viewpoints. To this Ee’s response, usually, was “I cannot and do not expect my readers to resort to action; if they so much as reflect I’d be very grateful.” Ee’s humility is to be admired; his definite assessment of history’s indifference to the common man is something which politics universally is today revisiting for the on-going persistence of this condition results mainly in a tepid body-politic. Those in power, those at the top, benefit and enjoy, while the masses suffer toiling away in the belief that their labour will eventually lead them to some earthly paradise. That word “slinks” has multiple layers of meaning, as it has its obvious bluntness.

Ee belonged to the people we call the peranakans, the straits born. The “straits” here is the Straits of Malacca which saw the coming of huge junks, boats and later ships from china bringing with them multitudes of men who, upon settling in this new land, took native women as wives and over time brought about this confluence/admixture of two major cultures resulting in their progeny inheriting both traditions. The history of the peranakans is complicated not simply because the colonial masters had a fondness for them and their women and so took a little better care of their needs and aspirations. It is also because they were and have been always a minority but a significant minority given their privileged status as well-heeled, educated, and cultured. The good and the just have always meant more for them than those around them. Of this Ee was convinced. But he also firmly believed that the future of his homeland, surely, must also lie, even if only metaphorically, to the peranakans –

the majority of Malayans imbibing both the sensitivities of the dominant ethnic groups: the Malays and the Chinese. Going back several generations (incidentally, many tracing their ancestral roots to the exploits and adventuring journeys of Admiral Cheng Ho – a Chinese converted to Islam) the pernakans gloriously enriched the peninsula's cultural landscape and stoked the spirit of its inhabitants. They have always been gentle and gracious, observing due ceremony and respecting the rights, values, and beliefs of those surrounding them. Living harmoniously with as little conflict as possible was and continues to be a hallmark of the peranakans. Ee's family went back at least seven generations and this sorely added to his sadness and reflections on Malaya's history.

Ee's *Tranquerab* is dedicated to his mother "who has seen it all." The opening poem of this collection is aptly called "Statement":

Let it not be said
that when we might have
given a hand, a token –
we balked, counting the odds,
and withdrew.

Let it not be said
that when we had to be
explicit and to the point –
we waxed poetical,
and hedged.

Let it never be said
by our own children
that on the night we had
to stand up and be counted –
we sat at our tables,
scrabbling. ("Statement," *Tranquerab* 1)

Ee's gift of using words which are so familiar and yet whose deft use by Ee leaves us fascinated, paves the way for a new approach to his dilemma. Now he realises he does need to "take a stand." By the time *Tranquerab* was published (1985) Ee had lived in Australia for close to ten years. Being away must have provided him with a new sense of appraisal of his role in Malayan (Malaysian) politics. Scrabbling is a perplexing word, admonishing and, worse, reducing people to the level of animals for whom survival is of the "fittest," the most powerful who will easily push others away to get at the food, the goodies. In a painfully telling section of the sequence entitled "Heeren Street," Ee writes:

We know,
 We've learnt how history is created,
 written, re-written,
 at times made to order,
 the facts, the interpretation.
 We've seen how human, how so fallible
 the motive and the methodology.

Let them rewrite,
 and if they so desire,
 uproot these houses,
 return to mangrove, sand and mud.

Or let them seek the truth'
 sieve fact from dross,
 here were we used to cycle,
 when the street was golden,
 paved with grit,
 and the commitment of our fathers. (*Tranquerah* 54)

It is difficult to read these lines without acknowledging that Ee's candour must – and will – hurt, especially those who chose to betray from within either directly or indirectly. *Tranquerah* is a highly personal and personalised narrative of Ee's innermost unease, that which pertained to the hypocrisy embraced by those he thought should have known better.

The road remains
 for those who are left,
 a fragment for us exiled,
 unacknowledged generation,
 a long, frayed chapter,
 poor adjunct of Heeren Street.
 But only it, there, here,
 not some remote village in China
 once upon a time
 was all the earth and sea and sky
 and rainbow, golden dream
 we owned,

and were compelled to leave.
 (“Epilogue,” *Tranquerah* 67)

That last line has tremendous force for it cancels, in one quick stroke, the entire richness of the history of the peranakans, as Ee sees it. Words like “frayed” and “unacknowledged” point to the uneasiness at the heart of the poet's response to

the politics of history. His personal story has been ravaged and savaged by those who, being insensitive and greedy for a different order of things, undermined the grandeur of generations. Hence friends, even some close friends, come for critical scrutiny here, and for fellow poets Ee has both a lamentation as well as a purpose. In the "Epilogue" to this alarmingly frank poetic response to the political events taking place in his beautiful Malaya, Ee states:

All these may well
come to nothing,
and all the hopes.
World doesn't owe us poets
a reading.

Or if it does attend,
we may not tell
how mind or heart
should turn its meaning
but where it will.

And some there are
who have denied us all
fellowship and identity,
reserved their rank
in the national roll.

But should you read these lines,
and if they move,
I would you share their longing
with a friend, our people,
and all who love.

And let those scribes
at every turning
think up new barriers,
let them repress
a common yearning. (*Tranquerah* 49)

Towards the end of his life, Ee had begun writing poems which drew inspiration and emotion from his Australian residency, his Australian experience. These poems are collected in *Nearing a Horizon*, and though they are meant to record his Australia-ness, so many keep referencing Malaya/Malaysia as a backdrop but certainly the mainstay of Ee's poetic self. To say that it is a pity Ee left us when his poetic fire was turning to face new encounters will be to ungraciously admit the courage he displayed both in his poems and in his

living. When very sick and knowing that death was looming, he told me “What’s the point of a man’s life if he can’t even enjoy a good smoke?”

For Ee, life, our feelings and our attitudes, were all of a bag: strangely and complexly mixed-up, the genius creation of a God who, for reasons best known to himself, stayed mostly out of the daily hubble-bubble of quibbles and politicking. But human beings, unable to fathom why after centuries the just and the good were still unreachable, could not restrain themselves but take into their own hands their destiny. History, sadly, disallowed them, the common ones, to move anywhere beyond the nearest step, for history demonstrated its power and strength through the stark reality of those who were in command, in charge. Perhaps this is why, the one poem Ee wrote for his only son, speaks volumes and is worth reading, rereading and re-rereading:

One bright auspicious hour
 You will hear your elders speak
 Of Freedom soaring in the sky,
 And hovering on a cloud, and stirring
 In the leaves of sun-aspiring branches.
 Inspired, you will burn in your passion
 To hack through treacherous swamps
 And the darkly creeping *blukar* of oppression.

One quiet evening you will return
 To join your elders speaking
 Of Freedom hanging in the sky, and
 Inspired, you will relate on wings
 Of such eloquence the burden of a dream
 That your children, discontented,
 Will take up your theme,
 And seek their godhead, feel their age.

So it will go on and on,
 The flame, the smoulder and the ash,
 Clearing after patient clearing,
 As you cut and criss-cross
 Every hydra creeper of the mind
 Obscuring caves and corners
 Of an elusive wind.

(“For My Son,” *Myths for a Wilderness* 49)

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