Canons and Questions of Value in Literature in English from the Malayan Peninsula[1]

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Abstract

The paper is divided into two parts. The first provides an overview of the role played by anthologies and critical writing in the formation of regional canons of writing in English. The survey draws inferences about the role played by poets, critics, and academics in local canon-formation, as well the role played by Western education and literary models in the formation of a regional tradition. The second part stands back from the historical specificity of regional canons to take a more conceptual approach to questions of value in literary cultures. What are the criteria by which we judge literary productions? In what ways do such criteria bespeak the specific cultural conditions within which they are exercised, and in what ways can they be said to transcend such specificity? What are the connections between canons of the local and regional kind and those that aspire to universal status? What, in short, might we recognise about the dynamics of the cultural politics that underlies all canon-formations? The paper will conclude by bringing together the two strands of inquiry with some general observations on the contemporary situation of the literary cultures in English of the Malayan peninsula.

Keywords

Malaysian writing, literary canons, western education, value in literature, anthology, poetry

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1. The Idea of Literary Canons and the Malayan Situation

The dissemination of writing through publication activates the process of canon-formation in any society and culture. The idea of a canon extends and applies to cultural productions a principle of implied value that is quasi-religious: "Canons are best seen as a necessary evil. In a world beset by the clamour of a populous mediocrity, the principle of selection cuts with an elitist edge. Only thus can room be cleared – ostensibly, to preserve against fashion and time the authors and texts that the age would have us read and cherish; but also, and often covertly, to establish specific kinds of writing by displacing others in the polemic process that we call literary history" (Patke 344). Literary canons imply or promote a sense of value that is alleged to be "objective" and "universalist." Regardless, or therefore, it is imperative for all of us engaged in literary studies to recognise that canons are never truly "objective"; that they are, at best, consensual, relative, polemical, and political. The polemical and political aspects of all literary evaluations entail an investment in promoting specific values and assumptions, both of the broadly cultural as well as of the specifically literary kind, regardless of whether the investment and promotion is explicit or involuntary.[3] It is also imperative to recognise that while there was some point to the provocation offered famously by Northrop Frye in dismissing issues of literary judgment as matters of mere "taste" and the vagaries of pure subjectivity, as the subsequent writings of scholars like Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has demonstrated, the history of taste is not marginal, but central, to the dynamics of canon formation.

In colonial cultures, the function of canon-formation is complicated by several factors, which can be exemplified through the predicament and characteristic features of Anglophone literary productions from the Malayan peninsula before and after Independence. The narrative of how the English and their language came to the Malayan peninsula is long and complex.[4] With a few

[3] We can regard *Tottel's Miscellany* (1557) as the early prototype for the canon-defining power of this book-genre in British writing; later examples include Percy's *Reliques* (1765), more recent examples include Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* (1861), and in the modern period, *Des Imagistes* (1914), Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), and numerous counterparts in North American poetry and the poetry of Britain's settler colonies and the postcolonial literary traditions of the Caribbean, Africa, Asia and the Philippines.

[4] Three large-scale maritime interactions between Southeast Asia and the outer world preceded the entry of Europeans into the region: trade with India, trade between Southeast Asia and China, and the spread of Islam. The first Portuguese ships that sailed into Malacca in 1509 entered a port already well-established on an ancient trade route. European missionaries brought a Western model of education to the region. Traditionally, education in Malaya was limited to boys at a certain age being taught to read and recite from the Qur'an. Parents did not generally send girls to school, and the aristocracy, whose sons were taught at home, was used to leaving the task of writing and reading of official documents to professional scribes, and the creation and transmission of literary or historical works to oral culture (Stevenson 16-18). The British secured their first base at Penang (1786), followed by a struggle with the Dutch for possession of Malacca.

notable exceptions such as British India, colonial writing was generally slow to develop – in British Malaya writing in English did not begin until the late 19th century, and remained marginal, as well confined to specific minorities and individuals, until after World War II. Colonial writing in multi-lingual societies is the cultural by-product of educational policies – in British Malaya the English introduced their language belatedly and selectively. Western schooling entered the Malayan peninsula through missionaries of several denominations. The first English medium schools sprang up soon after the establishment of the Straits Settlements in Penang (1816), Singapore (1823), and Malacca (1826). The earliest ideological contribution to British education in the region took the form of a plan that was as grand as it was impractical. Stamford Raffles, who had acquired the island of Singapore for the Company, described to Warren Hastings a plan for a "Malay College" and a "Singapore Institution." However, Raffles died while the plan was little more than an idea, and his successor advised the Company that the region and its people were not ready for something likely to prove impractical. Therefore, the legacy of the paternalism shown by Raffles was to remain dormant for a long time.

They discovered an alternative outpost along the same sea-route on the island of Singapore (1819). In 1824, the British gave up their interests in Java and Sumatra in exchange for resumed control over Malacca. In 1826, their three outposts – Penang, Malacca, and Singapore – were consolidated as the Straits Settlements. That marked the first stage of British control over the region. The Company lost its trade monopoly in China in 1833, and the Straits Settlements did not show a profit until after the middle of the nineteenth century. By this time, the peninsular population had grown to approximately 100,000 people. British expansion of indirect rule over the peninsula took place in the early 1870s through a process in which the business of protecting mercantile interests led to invited interventions in the internal affairs of local rulers, which led to the appointment of British Residents in advisory roles on Malay affairs, which led to governing Malay territories on behalf of their rulers while protecting the symbolic roles and traditional privileges of the Malay aristocracy. This process was consolidated from 1874 to 1896, creating the *Federated Malay States*. The five Malay states which lay to the north were transferred from Siam to British control in 1909, forming the *Unfederated Malay States*, which were joined by the southern state of Johor in 1914, completing the consolidation of British control over the Malaya peninsula. The result of all this manoeuvring was that the British became the major producers of rubber and tin in the world. The island of Borneo (Kalimantan), situated southwest of the Malaya peninsula, was traditionally ruled by a Muslim sultanate based in Brunei. In 1841 an English adventurer was given territory on the northern side of the island – Sarawak – for having rendered military service to the sultanate; in 1877, an adjacent territory – North Borneo – was acquired by a British trade syndicate. Both territories became British protectorates in 1888, as did Brunei. Sarawak and North Borneo became Crown Colonies in 1946 and joined the Federation of Malaya in 1948. The Federation achieved independence in 1957, and in 1963, Singapore, Sarawak and North Borneo (now renamed Sabah) joined the Federation of Malaysia. In 1965, Singapore split from Malaysia to become a fully sovereign nation. Brunei became independent in 1984. The British presence in the region thus lasted for more than a century and half.

Raffles was also the earliest British administrator in peninsular Malaya to subscribe to an ambivalent stereotype of the Malay as both attractively idyllic and incorrigibly idle: "The Malay, living in a country where nature grants (almost without labour) all his wants, is so indolent, that when he has rice, nothing will induce him to work" (in Alatas 28). Throughout the nineteenth century, a succession of British administrators continued to recommend that the Malay way of life be altered as little as possible. They were motivated by no mere concern to protect the innocence of the Malay; rather, they wanted gratitude for and compliance with the role assigned the Malay in their political economy. They were also wary of reproducing in Malaya the results produced by the Anglicist policy in India, where the widespread teaching of English had created not only the "babus" called for by Macaulay's Minute of 1835 but discontented petty clerks, writers, and nationalist revolutionaries. In 1884, E.C. Hill, the Inspector of Schools in Malaya, suggested that teaching English to Malays would render them "unwilling to earn their livelihood by manual labour," thus creating "a discontented class who might become a source of anxiety to the community" (Pennycook 98). In 1894, Hill agreed with H.B. Collinge, Inspector of Schools in Perak, who reminded administrators that they did not want a repetition of the Indian situation in Malaya, of the kind that would see the peninsula swarming "with half-starved, discontented men, who consider manual labour beneath them, because they know a little English" (Pennycook 111).

When the British took a firmer step towards articulating an educational policy in Malaya, following a growth in the size of the economy and the population, there were three types of school in the region – missionary schools, "Free" schools, and vernacular schools – but "Education was neither free of charge nor compulsory, and as a consequence, students in those early schools were mainly sons from wealthy non-British families" (Low and Brown 2003: 5). The first mission school for girls was established in 1842. Growth in the Straits Settlements was fuelled by two factors. The first was the development of the tin mining industry, which was controlled by the Chinese settled in Malaya, who imported labourers from southern China in increasing numbers. The second was the development of rubber plantations by the British, for which they imported labourers from India, chiefly from the Tamil south. The growth of Chinese townships fuelled the need for schooling in Chinese, which the community funded on its own. Indian labour, which worked on rubber plantations and on road and railway construction, created the need for Tamil "Estate Schools." But the Chinese and Indians often preferred English-medium schools as the more practical choice. Colonial policy decided that schools teaching in Malay and English would receive government aid, while schools teaching in Chinese or Tamil would not.

The Chinese community was good at subsidising its own schools. Teachers and teaching materials were imported from the mother country, teaching was done in the unifying Chinese medium of *Putonghua* (simplified written Mandarin), and the curriculum was centred on the Chinese classics. These factors gave a cohesive communal identity to their school system. The Tamil schools did less well, and that reinforced the tendency for Tamils to prefer English schools. The social profile of those who went to English-language schools during the nineteenth century was specific and very narrow.[5] In general, the British attempt to sponsor education in Malay led to a slow increase in schools and Teacher Training colleges. By 1938, there were over 100 English schools, 788 Malay schools, 331 Chinese schools, and several hundred Tamil schools in British Malay (Solomon 10-16). The Japanese occupation of 1942-45 interrupted the British school system, but normalcy was quickly restored after their departure, and Raffles College and the King Edward VII College of Medicine were merged in 1949 to create the University of Malaya, with a second, autonomous division opened in Kuala Lumpur a decade later. In terms of school enrolment, Joseph Foley provides an overview for the hundred years before independence: in 1856, the number of students enrolled in English-medium schools was 922; in 1876 this had grown to 1,722; in 1891, it had grown to 2,883; by the end of the nineteenth century, the number stood at 7,264; by 1937 it was 17,161; and just before the Japanese Occupation, the number stood at 27,000 (13).

This highly selective account of how English came to the Malayan peninsula helps identify several key features of creativity in English from the region. First, the British were reluctant to spread English to native inhabitants. Second, the eventual dissemination of English across the region politicised the role of ethnicity in colonial educational policy. Third, ethnic exacerbations produced or aggravated by colonial policy continued to exercise a decisive influence on educational policy after Independence. Fourth, postcolonial divergences in state policy continue to shape cultural literacy and the scope of English as a creative medium in Malaysia and Singapore. Fifth, and especially for Malaysia, the impact of a divisive colonial policy on nationalist policy after independence led indirectly to the migration of several Anglophone writers

[5] As described by Anthea Gupta (online): "The people who spoke English and sent their children to English medium schools were mainly the Europeans, the Eurasians (people of mixed racial ancestry), some of the small minorities, such as the Jews, some of the Indians and Ceylonese, and also a group of Chinese people usually called the Straits Chinese, who had ancestors of long residence in the region, and who spoke a variety of Malay usually called Baba Malay which was influenced by Hokkien Chinese and by Bazaar Malay. The fact that all these children would have known Malay probably explains why most of the loan words in Singapore Colloquial English are from Malay."

born in Malaysia to overseas locations. And finally, the poetry anthology in English has played a crucial role in sustaining faith in English as a viable option for creative writing during a period of linguistic and cultural metamorphosis when English has remained marginal or secondary to most inhabitants of the Malayan peninsula: the census of 1957 reported only 6% of the population of approximately 400,000 using English on a daily basis in peninsular Malaya.

The system of education established in British Malaya since the beginning of the twentieth century resumed after World War II, with the difference that the absence of a local university was noticed with increasing frequency. The trend had had a beginning before the war: an essay from 1936 on "Raffles College and a Malayan University" by Tan Soo Chye notes that the lack of a university for the region was the result of a specific mind-set: "It is said that what a city like Singapore needs is an army of typists, stenographers, and book-keepers. B.A.'s and B.Sc.'s would be of very small value to the country" (*Raffles College Magazine* 6.2: 8). The lack was filled in 1949 through the merger of Raffles College and the King Edward VII College of Medicine into the University of Malaya. The creation of a campus for the university in Singapore was followed by the setting up of a second campus in Kuala Lumpur in 1959, and by the separation of the two campuses into autonomous universities in 1962. The sustainability of literary productions in English thus had to await the opportunities afforded by university education. This new productivity had its beginnings in student periodicals and in anthologies. No surprise then that Malayan writers in English took time to arrive, and did so, ironically, just as the region was ready to shed the colonial yoke. No surprise either that while such writers applied themselves to the task of individual and collective self-representation, they did so in literary forms, styles, modes and genres that were thoroughly derivative and imitative.

2. Early Malayan writing in English: Periodicals and Anthologies

The first glimpses of English writing from the region's inhabitants date back to publications by young members of the Straits Chinese community during the 1980s and 1890s. A more sustained type of productivity in English became noticeable from the 1930s. School, college, and university were the institutions through which a small minority of the Malayan population gained access to English and to the jobs and professions that were opened up by English as the language of trade, empire, and modernity. School, college, and university were also the institutions in which the acquisition of English was accompanied by the dissemination of the Western literary canon in the colonies. Admiration for and assimilation of the cultural values it promoted naturally bred in some a desire for emulation. College and university life provided a catalyst for brief forays into the occasional essay, story or verse modelled on Western styles and genres. Few among those who appeared in student publications during the 1930s and

1940s sustained their literary interest after university. The handful who did, laid the modest but lasting foundations for the development of new literary traditions.

The cultural aspirations of typical student publications of the 1930s, as evident from the *Raffles College Magazine*, were limited to effusions of the derivative kind. The issues for 1931-32 reveal two kinds of poem: one pretending hard that it could have been written in some timeless Europe of the mind, and the other willing to tackle local subjects, but unable to avoid banality and ineptness. "The Rainbow," by Philis, begins, "In quest of beauty I have been/ To see fair dawn and sunset glow,/ And fields that are for e'er green/ Where silvery streams laughing flow" (2.2: 9). The same issue includes a poem on a local theme, "Deserted Rubber Estate" by Araum which begins: "It will sink into jungle again,/ The boar and the tiger come scurrying/ Into the desolate marsh and rain" (2.2: 17). This is scarcely any better, unless a Malayan rubber estate is to be preferred to a rainbow.

The critical prose of the period was capable of some discernment. "Aspects of Modern Poetry," by Len Peng Weng in 1934 holds up the poems of William Empson and T.S. Eliot for admiration. "Prolegomena to the Modern Poets," by Teo Poh Leng, dating from 1936, adds to that pantheon the names of Hopkins, Pound, Yeats, Bottrall, and the Auden group. This degree of being up-to-date was rare; and owed something to the presence of Bottrall in Singapore from 1933 to 1937 as the Johore Professor of English Language and Literature at Raffles College. More typically, local writing showed a passive appreciation of a dated past: an essay of 1937, for example, is happy to extol "Birds in English Romantic Poetry" (7.1: 46-48). World War II, and the Japanese Occupation of the Malayan peninsula (1942-45) put most literary aspirations in English in hibernation.

The period after World War II saw an efflorescence of writing in English from Malaya. Student periodicals of the period included the *Raffles College Bulletin* (1948), *Magazine of the University of Malaya Students Union* (1949-52, 1960), *The New Cauldron* (1950-60), *Chichak* (1954), *Write* (1957-58), *Hujan Mas* (1959); followed in the 1960s by *Phoenix* (1960), *The Seed* (1960-62), *Lidra* (1961), *Monsoon* (1961), *Varsity* (1961-62), *Focus* (1961-62), *Tumasek* (1964), *Tenggara* (1967-90) and *Commentary* (1968-). When the *Raffles College Union Magazine* resumed publication in 1946, the poems that appeared there were just as gauche as those of the previous decade. One of the early university poets was Richard Ong, whose "Rumba" acquired a degree of local fame for its articulation of a sense of tension and plurality to a multicultural society. However, his poetic style rarely strayed from the kind of effects evident in a typical quatrain from another poem, "Laura," which goes like this: "Upon a wayside stone I take my seat/ And from the midnight stars fair judgement seek/ Of human bliss – if I might not defeat/ With proud dreams Nature's bounty for the meek" (1: 11). Harry

Chan's "Utopian Peace" begins: "Oh, where is that world where goodwill reigns supreme/ And mankind in peace and harmony dwell,/ Where forbearance against spite, and right o'er might/ Prevails" (1: 25). E.H. Lim's attempt to represent Singapore at the time of the Japanese invasion, in the poem "On the Road to Arab Street," begins: "From deep its bleeding heart/ This broken city disgorged/ A trail of suffering humanity,/ Trudging on,/ To an unknown destiny" (1: 28).

The English prose that resulted from the war experience was far more straightforward and effective than the verse. The literary material that appeared in *The Cauldron*, the "Official Organ of the Medical College Union Literary and Debating Society," which started publication in 1947, and in *The Malayan Undergrad*, which started publication in 1948, remained insipid. The first issue of *The Cauldron* starts off with "Sea-side," by S.R. Sayampanathan, which begins, "The night was soft as a dream,/ Bathing in the light moonbeam" (1.1: 3). The following year, "Sweet Hypocrisy," by the same poet, begins, "A time there was long years ago/ When men a-hunting used to go/ While women stayed and scrubbed the floor" (2.2: 34).

The cultural situation after Independence changed dramatically between Malaysia and Singapore after 1957. The cultural changes that solidified from the 1960s were direct consequences of State policies concerning the place given to English in the postcolonial nation: marginalised in Malaysia, centralised in Singapore. The period also saw the publication of numerous anthologies, whose function as one of the principal instruments of canon-formation shares many features with the role of anthologies in all literary cultures, while it also retains features that are specific to the linguistic and cultural situation in Malaysia and Singapore.

Anthologies made their entrance upon the scene of writing just after Independence. They began with the anonymously edited *Litmus One* (1958), followed swiftly by Tan Han Hoe's *30 Poems* (1958), the anonymously compiled *The Compact* (1958), T. Wignesan's *Bunga Emas* (1964), Lloyd Fernando's *Malaysian Poetry in English* (1966), Edwin Thumboo's *Tumasek Poems* (1966), David Ormerod's *A Private Landscape* (1967), Thumboo's *The Flowering Tree* (1970), Fernando's *New Drama One (*1972), Thumboo's *Seven Poets* (1973) and *The Second Tongue* (1979). These were followed in their turn by many similar compilations during subsequent decades, notable among them the multilingual and multi-volume *Anthology of ASEAN Literatures* (1985-2000). The sudden proliferation of anthologies from Malaysia and Singapore is testimony to the degree of interest in literary creativity in English evinced by university students, not all of whom were either committed to a literary career or able to pursue one without first ensuring a steady means of economic subsistence through careers that often took them away from literary creativity, sometimes for short periods, sometimes more or less permanently. The anthology as a vehicle for collective

self-representation acquires a special significance in these circumstances, and the historicity of this significance raises issues of literary tutelage, elective affinities, and the derivativeness inevitable to all colonial and postcolonial literary canons which must be addressed before we address the issue of how such writing was judged then, or how it might be evaluated now.

3. The Anthology as an Instrument of Canon Formation

If we now stand back a little from the historical specificity of the Malayan context to reflect on the anthology as an instrument of canon formation, it is possible to claim that the anthology serves a set of common functions in all literary cultures, especially for the literary genres that take up less print-space than the novel: poetry, the short story, and the short play. It is a book built on the principle of the selective miscellany. The advantages offered by the format of the anthology are many, and they help poetry the most. Poetry is the least popular form of reading, and most readers like to take the genre in small doses. Most poets work oftener in short spans, which makes it easy to excerpt their work. Most poets are at their best only rarely, making brief representations of the kind provided by an anthology the most practical way of preparing readers for the more daunting option of reading and buying individual volumes of poetry. The anthology as a specific kind of book aimed at the general reader and the student has a longer shelf life and greater accessibility than periodicals, whose capacity to keep writing in print has an element of the ephemeral to which the book format is less susceptible. The canon-forming functions of anthologies are succinctly summarised by Barbara Herrnstein Smith:

> The recommendation of value represented by the repeated inclusion of a particular work in anthologies of 'great poetry' not only promotes but goes some distance toward *creating* the value of that work, as does its repeated appearance on reading lists or its frequent citation or quotation by professors, scholars, critics, poets, and other elders of the tribe; for all these acts have the effect of drawing the work into the orbit of attention of potential readers and, by making the work more likely to be experienced at all, they make it more likely to be experienced as 'valuable.' In this sense, value creates value. (10)

How these generalisations have a bearing on the Malayan context can be illustrated briefly through two examples. First, it is worth noting how a succession of younger poets in Singapore have reinforced the work of reviewers, critics, and anthologists by insisting on writing Merlion poems that allude to – and often in terms that seek to individuate themselves by carping parasitically about – Edwin Thumboo's "Ulysses by the Merlion" (1979). Second, it is worth noting how Arthur Yap's "2 mothers in a h d b playground" has acquired semi-mythical status in Singapore through its frequent inclusion in

anthologies, regardless of the fact that it is critical of the values enshrined in the speakers it dramatises, whose counterparts in "real-life" are more prone to feeling flattered at being represented in a poem than they are likely to be discomfited at having the typology they embody thus satirised.

4. The Relativity of Literary Evaluation

The Malayan situation provides a specific basis for some general reflection on questions of literary value. It is worth noting that the terms used to indicate literary approbation are often couched in buried metaphors transposed from other fields of human action, thought, and belief. Thus a novel, a story, a play or a poem might be described as "great" or "good" or "true to life" or "authentic" or 'sincere," illustrating how ideas of moral approval or representational verisimilitude govern value judgments in the reception of literary works. Negative judgments simply invert the logic of the same procedure. Literary history shows how the expression of value judgments often tends to slide from the simple expression of personal attitude, reaction, preference, antipathy or predilection to the implication that what is approved or disapproved ought to be so regarded by others. Literary value judgments, like all aesthetic judgments, invoke or appeal to criteria that claim, assume or imply a validity that is more than personal or subjective. Literary analysis, and the role assigned to that within classroom pedagogy often assumes or claims, without being embarrassed at its circular logic, that "correct" analysis and interpretation leads to (and in turn is corroborated in its "correctness" by) value judgments that are claimed to be – not the outcome of persuasion, authority, or consensus but – objective standards of merit and worth.

The corrective to such misperceptions about "objectivity" or "validity" must begin with the recognition that to apply notions of "objectivity" to literary judgments forces norms borrowed from the sciences onto the very different ways in which literary works function in respect to their actual and potential readers in society. One way of extending the correction, as developed by Reception Theory and academics such as Stanley Fish, is to invoke the idea that works imply their own interpretive communities. Another way subscribes to an entire tradition focused on the affective function of literature (a trans-national tradition, which includes Ramanuja, Spinoza, Jacques Maritain and others). Charles Altieri, for example, argues that we should treat art and literature as functioning *conatively*, such that "art objects intensify the capacity to keep us fascinated by what remains an 'other' to discursive intelligence, an 'other' keeping intelligence dialectically aware of its own limitations" (Altieri 88-89). That such interpretive communities draw upon cultural presuppositions which are not congruent (or shared diachronically or synchronically across cultures) is self-evident if we consider the highly provocative inclusions and exclusions in the kind of canon implied by E.D. Hirsch Jr., in *Cultural Literacy:*

What Every American Needs To Know (1987), to which the simplest response is enshrined in the hoary Latin tag, *de gustibus non disputandum est*.

The moral recommended by Barbara Herrnstein Smith is the recognition that all canons are contingent tokens of value, whose appeal depends less on argument and analysis than on explicit or tacit concurrences between the assumptions, beliefs and norms shareable between authors and readers. We find ourselves predisposed to "like" works whose values coincide, confirm or reinforce our own assumptions about value. Our "likes" and "dislikes" are likely to depend rather more on our cultural conditioning than on reason and method. This or that approach to literary interpretation and pedagogy is more likely to function as a kind of retrospective rationalisation than as a process of logical inference and analysis that is meant to provide the cause from which we would like to suppose we reach the effect of a value judgment. Frank Kermode enjoins an additional recognition: that the cultural politics which embodies and disseminates literary judgments through literary canons has a vested interest in dissembling its own historicity through the invocation of "transhistorical" canons (108-09).

In colonial situations, authors exhibit the reverse of what Harold Bloom has called the anxiety of influence: we might describe it as *the solicitations of influence*. When English was "new" to authors in British Malaya, it was inevitable that they should look to models from traditions alien to their own cultural circumstances. The self-tutelage they had to undergo was a combination of selective acculturation and conscious as well as inadvertent cultural deracination. Let us consider an early example of literary self-tutelage, a few lines from a poem titled "Ode to an Amoeba," published in *The Cauldron* (1949): "Wriggle, wriggle, little cell/ How I wonder what the hell/ Makes you wriggle all the time/ In an undulating rhyme" (3.3: 28). How might we distinguish between the silly and the admirable here?

Next, consider the Introduction to the first Malayan anthology in English, *Litmus One* (1958), which gestures at the New Critic John Crowe Ransom's description of a poem as a fusion of texture and an abstract structure, then calls for a mythopoeic frame of mind which, it hopes, will help poets tap symbols from a shared cultural reservoir. The Yeatsian flavour of this call point to a lack, and some of the most ambitious poems of later years from Malaysia and Singapore could be said to have been written as a redressal of that lack. The third feature of the introduction is its eagerness to periodise the achievement of a mere decade into three partially overlapping phases.

The implications of contingent value in colonial and postcolonial contexts can be spelt out plainly: the willingness to imitate (even to the point of silliness); the invocation of shared symbols (which begs the question of how symbols from Egyptian mythology, as used in Wong Phui Nam's early poems, are in any sense part of a cultural reservoir that can be drawn upon plausibly by a Malayan

poet); the desire to periodise a mere decade into three phases (caustically challenged by Lloyd Fernando: "isn't it rather presumptuous, if not actually laughable to speak… of 'cross-currents' in the brief space of eight years? Shall we not hang our heads in embarrassment when we read of 'movements'…?" [1958: 10]) – all these tendencies and features point to the strain entailed in the task of self-acculturation. Under such circumstances, what happens to the question of literary value? How can such literary aspirations rescue themselves from the stigma of derivativeness? How might we distinguish historical significance from datedness and literary apprenticeship from literary achievement? Historically speaking, the solutions that the poets of the time tried out included Engmalchin, and the self-appointed task of inventing a "Malayan consciousness" in English.

Engmalchin did not work for obvious reasons: its form of multilingual localism risked confining its accessibility to a small regional audience. The business of articulating a "Malayan consciousness" risked subscribing to what Yvor Winters has called the fallacy of national mimeticism: the belief "that the poet achieves salvation by being, in some way, intensely of and expressive of his country" (441). The more one understands the specific cultural problems that colonial writing faced, the more relativised one becomes in relation to the question of literary judgment as distinguished from literary value. Writing that appears dated or inept can be historically significant in ways that do not need to invoke a sense of consensus or objectivity about literary evaluation. However, to relativise literary evaluation does not mean we need to abandon all scope for contingent value judgments. Why, or how, contingent value judgments are feasible, even necessary, within the historicity of colonial and postcolonial contexts can be exemplified succinctly by distinguishing between imitation and parody, as in the poems of Hedwig Aroozoo.

Hedwig Aroozoo wrote poems for a brief period during the 1940s and 50s, and these appeared in periodicals and anthologies of their time, but they were not collected until recently. Her work could be said to have been ahead of its times to a degree that also justifies the claim that criticism has yet to catch up with what she accomplished in terms of modernity in verse within a colonial context, and a latent postmodernity that predates the term. Her accomplishment has not yet had the impact on Malayan writing that it deserves. It is a small oeuvre that yet awaits its readership. Consider first a British poem of the 1930s, "Bagpipe Music," by Louis MacNeice, which begins:

> It's no go the merry-go-round, it's no-go the rickshaw,
> All we want is a limousine for the peepshow.
> Their knickers are made of crêpe-de-chine, their shoes are made of python,
> Their halls are lined with tiger rugs and their walls with heads of bison. (72)

Now consider a poem that hovers somewhere between adaptation, pastiche, and parody, Hedwig Aroozoo's "Suez Canal Blues," which begins:

> It's no go the Asuan dam, it's no go foreign aid,
> It's no go the promises that were so lightly made.
> The Suez Canal's Egyptian and the ships are passing through. (23)

Shirley Lim has claimed that such poems are dated (164). More convincingly, Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf and Mohammad Quayum have argued that such poetry has not dated (47-57, esp. 53). What does this brief example establish or suggest that could be argued elsewhere in greater detail? Next we can turn to another poem by Aroozoo, which was anthologised in *Litmus One* (1958), "Rhyme in Time."

One might call such verse "imitation" except that it does more than imitate, it adapts or extends a manner and a mode to a different matter. And it has a panache all its own. While the young men around her were first busy getting the weary tones of T.S. Eliot into their verse and then almost as busy keeping them from drowning their own voices, her handling of parody in "Rhyme in Time" produces effects that are both funny and serious. By applying irony to her own borrowing, she disinfects dependency. In the poem, the incongruity produced when a manner grown in a particular culture is transplanted to the circumstances of a different society is both illustrated and turned to something strangely apt. Here is part of the third and final section:

> Let us now praise famous men
> And our fathers that begat us…
>
> Alphonso D'Alburquerque,
> Francisco d'Almeida,
> Ruy de Aranjo…
> The river Rajahs,
> The Hang Tuahs,
> Drake and Hawkins,
> Lancaster, van Dieman,
> And the incomparable
> Raffles.
> For these went down to the sea in ships
> And did business in great waters…
> And did business in great waters…
> Rhinoceros' horns and lice's liver,
> Sandalwood, ebony, ivory, camphor,
> Tortoise-shells, dragons' blood, pepper,
> Peacocks' tails, opium, tin and rubber…
> Forever and ever, Amen.

Government of the people, by the people…
Who are the people?
Tida-apa-la!
Mana boleh-la!—
Let's get out of this place.
And I on U.S.I.S. news am fed
And drink the coke of Paradise.
…. (23-24)

From the perspective of canon-formation and the development of a literary sensibility in the colonial language, such writing is remarkable for the sensitivity it brings to nuances of tone, allusion, and echo. It navigates a narrow path between the dangers of a too literal kind of imitativeness and the opposite danger of going off on a tangent from the cultural and historical specificities of the region from which the poet writes. Such writing invites a commensurate sophistication from the critics and teachers who play a vital role in accommodating regional texts into a regional canon that aspires to add itself to the larger global canon of writing in English. That the achievement of such poets is still too little recognised, even at home, is revealing of the resistance encountered by colonial and postcolonial writing in adding itself to and thus revising the notion of a metropolitan canon adjudicated by arbiters of taste and literary value based in the West, whose awareness of what has been accomplished must be changed before such writing can hope to gain acceptance for the cultural values it embodies.

The point of citing Aroozoo is to underline the degree to which the task of canon-formation and canon-revision is a political activity in which anthologies play a crucial role. But they do not play that role singly. They do it in collaboration with the role of literature in the academic curriculum and the capacity of literary critics and historians to make sense of regional developments within the larger context of global literary canons of writing in English. That the historicity of colonial and postcolonial writing in peninsular Malaya, for the entire period from before to after Independence, provides rich materials for testing the feasibility and necessity of a form of literary evaluation that accepts it own contingency while giving the writing the respect its historicity deserves, without compromising or giving up on the scope for critical evaluations that never forget their own implicatedness in the historicity and relativity of all cultural politics and all literary evaluations.

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