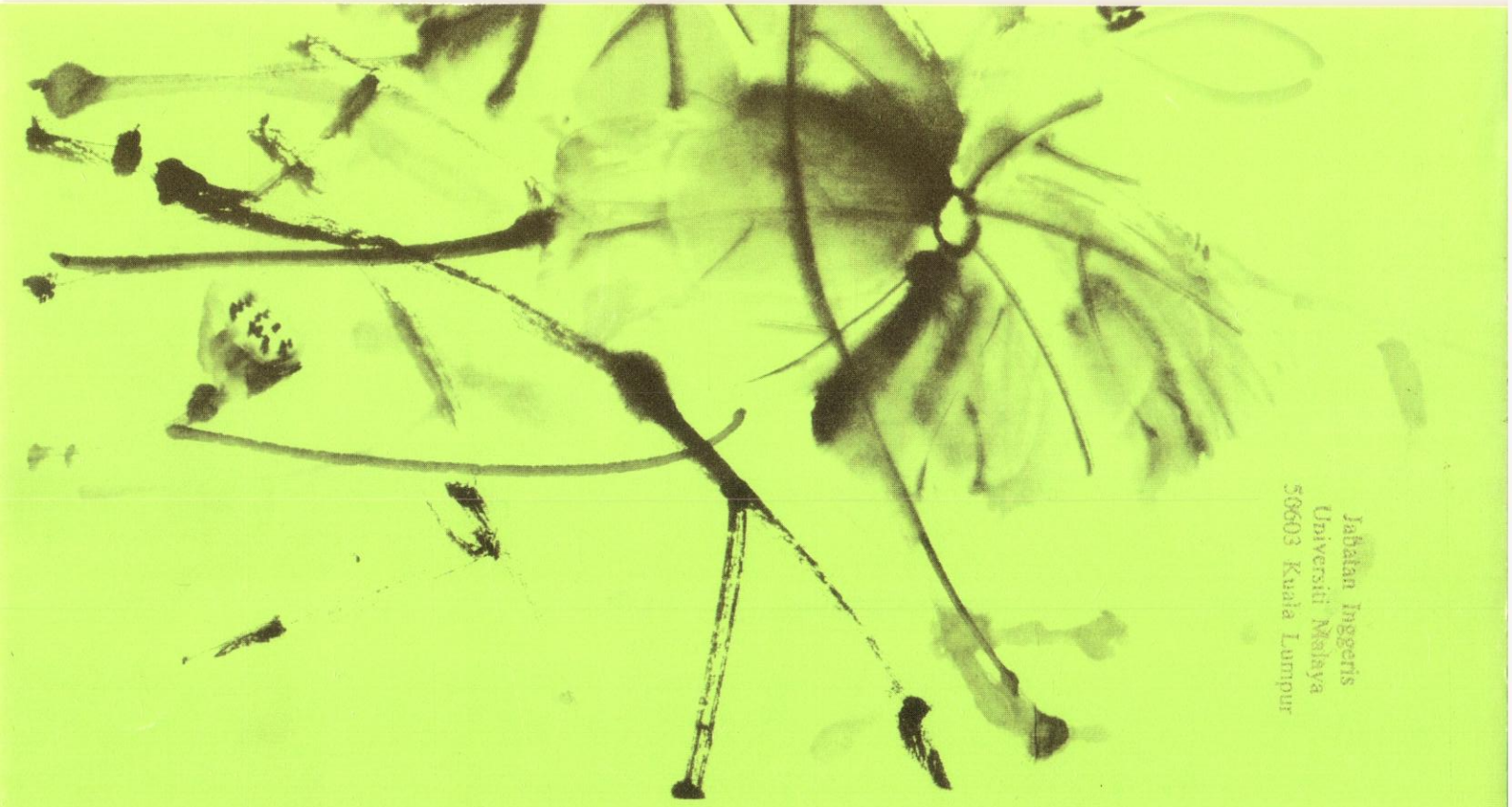

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TEACHING COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN A TECHNOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT

by

Irene F. H. Wong

Background

The Nanyang Technological Institute (NTI) is a university-level institution in Singapore, offering degree-level courses in the schools of civil & structural engineering (CSE), electrical & electronic engineering (EEE), mechanical & production engineering (MPE), and accountancy (SOA). Plans are under way at present for the addition of at least two more courses, in computer science and in commerce, and for NTI to become a full-fledged university in the next two to three years.

In addition to providing facilities for higher instruction, training and research in the three branches of engineering and technology, and in accountancy, NTI also provides a basic compulsory course in Communication Skills (CS), taught by language specialists, within each of its four schools. This set-up has the advantage that the Communication Skills staff can concentrate on the specific communication skills relevant to the disciplines taught in their individual schools.

NTI's provision of a basic compulsory course in Communication Skills is in its strong belief that effective communication skills are essential for its students' academic and professional development. This belief is based on a solid foundation. One can cite numerous

studies which confirm that effective communication skills enhance one's success in one's professional life. It is estimated that professionals can expect to spend 70%-85% of their professional lives in communication, with superiors, subordinates, peers, clients and government agencies. The actual proportion of time spent on different categories of people will of course vary depending on the nature of their job.

In keeping with this realisation, more and more non-language departments in tertiary-level institutions are offering courses in communication skills in addition to their subject specialisations. This paper documents the teaching of a Communication Skills course in the School of Accountancy in NTI, which is one such non-language department in one such tertiary-level institution. Depending on the type of institution and department involved, there may be similarities or differences in both course content and teaching methodology. This paper focuses on the teaching of the Communication Skills course within the technological environment provided by NTI.

The Communication Skills Course

The focus in the course is on providing students with training in the kinds of tasks they will need to perform, especially in the first five years of their professional careers as accountants. Broadly speaking, these fall within three large categories: written skills, oral skills, and interpersonal skills. The written component includes the writing of letters, memos and minutes of meetings, while the oral component covers the skills of group

discussion and interaction (in small informal groups as well as in larger and more formal groups), and those of public speaking in a one-to-many situation.

The third category of interpersonal skills are not taught separately from the other two categories of written and oral skills, since interpersonal skills come into play whenever one deals with another human being in any kind of situation, and so the interpersonal skills element is really interwoven within both the written and oral skills components. For example, one would have to know the appropriate way to deal with the reader (in the case of written communication), and with the audience, be it one or many, (in the case of oral communication).

The climax of the course is the analytical report, which sees the incorporation of all the skills covered. Students work in teams of 4-6 students each to investigate some area of campus life (e.g. the canteens, the bus services, the hostels, the teaching facilities, the sports and recreational facilities, staff-student interaction). The production of the report involves the following skills:

1 Research techniques, which would involve the use of written skills (e.g. in library research and the use of questionnaires), and both oral and interpersonal skills (e.g. in interviewing for information)
   - gathering of data from primary and secondary sources
   - analysis and interpretation of this data

2 Written skills of putting the report into written form

- drafting, organising, editing
- using appropriate visual aids for the presentation of data

3 Oral skills of orally presenting the report
- nonverbal, verbal and vocal elements of the presentation
- using appropriate visuals in the presentation

4 Interpersonal skills, e.g. of working together with peers as a team, of dealing with respondents in the gathering of data from primary sources

The Communication Skills course is taught through both lectures and tutorial groups of about fifteen to twenty students each. The former is necessarily one-way instruction, since two-way lecturer-student interaction is largely made impossible by the size of the class (over 600 in 1987/88 and over 700 in 1988/89). The tutorials, however, are student-oriented and activity-centered. This latter is in keeping with the latest trends in language teaching/learning. It is also in keeping with NTI's practice-oriented philosophy, with its emphasis on hands-on experience, where students learn not only through being told, but by doing and practising. This paper will focus on the tutorial method of instruction.

The NTI Environment

NTI's commitment to the necessity for improved communication skills for its future engineers and accountants has already been mentioned. In addition to the Communication Skills course, there is provision for

Communication Skills laboratories for the teaching of the oral skills, and computer laboratories for the teaching of the written skills. All oral activities are therefore held in the Communication Skills laboratories, while all written activities are held in the computer laboratories. The School of Accountancy has its own Communication Skills laboratories as well as its own computer laboratories.

There is also the necessary technical support easily available, so vital since the language specialists are usually not experts in the use of the equipment in both types of laboratories. For the Communication Skills laboratory there is the Educational Technology Unit, and for the computer laboratories there is the Computer Centre, both with its supply of technical expertise whenever this is required.

Each Communication Skills laboratory is fully air-conditioned and equipped with a video camera with recording and playback facilities (in addition to other features like zooming, tilting, panning, etc.), fixed unobtrusively on the wall at the back of the room. This is operated from a console situated at one corner of the room. The idea is to make the recording as inconspicuous as possible, so as not to distract from the task at hand. At the front of the room are a speaker's lectern, overhead projector, microphone, white board, and screen.

The computer laboratories are also fully air-conditioned and equipped with sufficient microcomputers and printers for the student population. In addition, there are technicians around to help students should they need advice on the use of the computers, especially the word processing packages, in the case of the Communication Skills course.

Oral Activities

As mentioned earlier, the tutorials are student-centred. This is probably best seen in the oral activities which take place in the Communication Skills laboratories. This is where the students get to put into practice the theory and guidelines taught during the lectures. The tutorial activities are designed to take in every student in the group, so that there will be no passive learners. Not only must each student perform a designated task (e.g. making a short speech), he/she also has the additional task of providing constructive feedback on the performance of his/her peers.

This is where the video camera recording and playback becomes most important. Each performance is captured on camera, and each 'performer' gets to see and review not only his/her own performance, but also that of the other students in the group. Each student's role is therefore twofold: to perform an oral task, and to comment on his/her own performance as well as that of his/her peers.

Initially, students need time to adjust to this type of tutorial activity. The more reticent students, especially, need to learn to "come out of their shells", as it were. This is where the instructor needs to have the appropriate type of interpersonal skills to encourage such students to participate actively and freely in the activities at hand. As far as possible, the instructor is there not mainly to instruct but to function as a resource person whenever needed.

The tutorials also provide a good training ground for students, to prepare them for working life. In the tutorials they learn

to give and receive feedback graciously, and in so doing they gradually learn to be less self-conscious and not to be overcome by criticism. In order to work towards this goal, it is important that the students learn to take responsibility for their own learning. As much of the decision-making as possible is left to them, so that each tutorial becomes a matter of the instructor and the students mutually exploring the best ways to approach and solve any particular problem at hand.

Written Activities

The word processor can be an invaluable help in teaching the skills of written communication. For example, Daiute [1983:134] says of the text editor:

> Writers are burdened by physical and psychological constraints that the computer can help them overcome. The physical act of writing is slow and sometimes painful, and revising requires tedious recopying. Psychological factors such as limits on memory add to these physical barriers. One psychological constraint is the limitation of short-term memory, which burdens writers as they carry on the complex mental activities of composing and revising. Another psychological difficulty in revising is that the writer must take the readers' point of view. To take a reader's point of view, writers must be objective about their own writing,

> evaluate it, and find mistakes. Because of these constraints many writers, especially beginners, avoid revising.
>
> The computer text editor is a writing instrument that can lessen the effects of some physical and psychological constraints. The text editor enables writers to compose more quickly and freely because all changes they make in a text are automatically incorporated, thus eliminating the need to recopy. This takes some burdens off short-term memory. In addition, the interactiveness of the text editor stimulates writers to take a reader's point of view and thus evaluate their writing and find their own mistakes.

Of course one major barrier to introducing the computer into writing classes is that the students might be complete novices not only to word processing, but also to computers, and even to the typewriter. However, this need not deter the would-be user since there is sufficient research which has found that even children can master the communication skills needed for interacting with a word processor (see, for example, Roberts 1979, Card et al 1980, and Papert 1980). Learning to use the basic commands takes from a few hours to a few days, but after that it becomes a routine skill, and the long-term benefits far outweigh the initial hours of effort and discipline required.

Given the technological environment in NTI, with its ready availability of hardware, software, and technical support, it is only natural that the CS course would exploit the

computer as a writing tool. This is especially so in a course which aims to prepare students for their future professional careers, where the writing produced should meet rigidly high standards of organisation, correctness, clarity and precision. Such high standards can be met only through experimenting with writing, and through numerous revisions, both of which could not reasonably be demanded of students were it not for the fact that the text editor makes such rewriting relatively painless and effortless. Moreover, the skills of typing and computer literacy should stand the students in good stead when they enter the working environment.

Well-written documents have to gradually evolve through several drafts. Writers have to take risks and experiment with changes in their texts, in order to produce high quality documents. However, most writers are unwilling to take the risk of changing the organisation of a paper or of deleting part of a sentence when it is necessary to recopy the entire piece before evaluating the changes. This is where the word processor comes in. It encourages writers to take risks because the consequences of making mistakes are trivial, and this can only help towards a higher quality of writing. When changes are easy to make, resistance to finding one's mistakes is reduced.

At the moment in NTI, the only software used in the writing classes are a word processing package, with its attendent spelling checker, and a graphic package which allows students to draw pie charts, line graphs and bar charts for the presentation of their data. More software could be used, and probably will be, as and when it becomes more developed, available, and usable. One major problem, of course, is the incompatibility between different computer

hardware systems, which greatly hampers the choice of use of available relevant software.

Some other possibilities in the use of electronic writing aids are briefly mentioned below, but many of them are still only in the developmental stage. However, there is little doubt that rapid improvements are in the offing, and the interested user will have to keep an eye open for whatever becomes available .

Lance A. Miller [1986] divides the process of composing a technical document into seven stages and for a number of them Krull and Hurford [1987:244] list some corresponding electronic writing aids which could be used. They also give provide notes on what these writing aids do.

	Writing Stage	Writing Aid
1	Communication requirements	Outliners and Prompters
2	High-level plan	----
3	Detailed plan	Word Processors
4	Scribing	----
5	Critiquing	Spelling, Style, & Grammar Checkers
6	Release	----
7	Adaptation	Logic Analyzers & Word Processors

Outliners are designed specifically for organising a writer's notes, and significantly supplement the capabilities of a word processor. They let writers record ideas for later organisation, collapse ideas to show only major topics, or expand any heading to show its connected subtopics. They are available for microcomputer systems either as part of advanced word processors or as separate programs on which writers develop outlines for later expansion on a word processor.

Prompters, on the other hand, work by asking writers questions about their goals and text, encouraging reflection on and elaboration of specific topics. Such prompting helps writers by giving them a stimulus to continue writing, with the writing process becoming more like a conversation in which the listener, played by the program, can stimulate the speaker by requesting clarification. Prompting can also draw attention to aspects of writing that often present problems but that might otherwise be overlooked.

No description is needed for word processors, or for spelling checkers, since these have been in use for some time and are quite easily available, in one form or another. Grammar and Style checkers, though, are relatively more recent, and less familiar. However, grammar and style are still quite obscure areas, and such checkers usually only point out problems by checking with lists of words and phrases.

Logic analyzers are as yet still a device of the future. Viewed ideally, they would help determine if documents actually convey the meaning their authors intended. However, no

computer program can yet analyze tests at this level.

Role Play and Simulation

Both oral and written activities depend a lot on the teaching techniques of role play and simulation. These are two relatively recent innovations in language teaching, but rapidly increasing in popularity mainly because of the current methodological trend towards materials based on language functions, and aiming at communicative competence. While there is no precise definition of the two terms (indeed some activities may simultaneously involve both role play and simulation), Livingston [1983:1-2] distinguishes between them in the following way:

> In simulation, each student brings his own personality, experience and opinions to the task; i.e., each student is given a role which is within his own area of operations, and is then asked to work out his own attitude to the problem, and his own strategy for dealing with it. In role play, on the other hand, each student is given particular information about his role, which he must take into consideration. He is not free to present his own opinions, or personal view of the problem; he has to present that of the character he is playing. This is role playing within the context of a simulation. Although the student is free to choose the language he will use to do this, his attitude, the way the

> situation develops, and its eventual outcome have been decided for him. This is role play.

Jones' definition of simulation is as follows [1982:2-3]:

> A simulation is an event. It is not taught. The students become participants and shape the event. They have roles, functions, duties and responsibilities - as ecologist, king, manager, explorer, reporter, survivor, administrator - within a structured situation involving problem solving and decision making. The teacher, as Controller, introduces the simulation and is in charge of the mechanics of who is who, and who sits where. But the Controller does not interfere with the decision making and is thus in an excellent position to monitor the language, behaviour and communication skills of the participants.
>
> In a simulation there is reality of function, not pretence. The chairman in a simulation really is a chairman, with the full powers and responsibilities of chairmanship. This reality is often augmented by the realistic nature of the simulated documents and materials, when letters and memos, treaties and balance sheets are reproduced to look like the genuine article.

Although the CS course is not basically a language course as such, it still finds the techniques of both role play and simulation ideally suited for providing the required practice in the skills of oral and written communication. Moreover, it might even be said that the techniques of role play and simulation are essential to a CS course like that described in this paper, which prepares learners for future professional employment while they are as yet still only undergraduates. And so the situations they are likely to face in their future professional careers are simulated, as far as possible, within the confines of the Communication Skills or computer laboratories.

In these simulated situations, students get to play assumed roles in organisations. They conduct meetings to discuss a particular issue, or write letters, memos and reports in their various roles, perhaps as chief payroll accountant, or purchasing officer, etc. Although this is admittedly not ideal (the ideal would be the work place in actuality), role playing and simulation at least provide opportunities for practice where the ideal is not possible.

Conclusion

This paper has described a few of the uses to which some devices of modern technology can be put in the service of a course like the teaching of Communication Skills. However, it does not make the claim that this is the best way, or the only way, to teach such a course. What it does is state that, given such a technological environment, it is only natural that use be made of the technology available in the teaching of the course. Given some other

environment however, there is no doubt that similar courses could be equally taught even with entirely different sets of teaching aids.

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A MAN EATING ICE-KACHANG

by

Shirley Geok-lin Lim

The block whirls in an iron clamp,
shaved so quick so fine the ice falls

as snowy dust, a mountain of cold
melting melting in your hot mouth.
Like woman's beauty or a crowd
betrayed, these sweet tingles
evaporating on your tongue
dissolve the afternoon into
only a memory of sweetness.

MALAYSIAN NOVELISTS IN ENGLISH:

THEMATIC PREOCCUPATIONS*

by

R. Bhathal

The common thematic preoccupations of the major writers in Malaysia (Chin Kee Onn, Lee Kok Liang, Lloyd Fernando, K. S. Maniam) rest basically on the search for identity and the realization of the self. These concerns are manifested in two major themes -- the search for national identity and the theme of alienation. Unlike the conventional forms of alienation associated with Western literature of the twentieth century (Kafka, Camus, Sartre), local writers explore this theme in the idiom of the new literatures.

The local novelists, writing in a foreign tongue with a tradition of its own, "adopt it for their purposes, and reshape it in accordance to local life, as their perspective of what is significant is transformed from European to national society."[1] The change in local literary writing moves from a primitive form of national literature to an exploration of the individual and his environment.

In Third World literature, the theme of

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*This paper is based on my M.A. thesis entitled "The Malaysian and Singaporean Novel in English 1952-1981: A Critical Survey," University of Malaya, 1984.

the search for identity is a predominant one. Whether the search is for a national or a cultural identity, "the symbolic figure of the displaced or culturally dispossessed individual" is always present in it.[2] The cross-cultural context of the country often creates a feeling of displacement and the individual searches for a realization of himself in the mire of conflicting value-systems as a result of his intense need to belong.

The region's first significant English writer Chin Kee Onn dealt with the theme of national identity from a propagandistic point of view. The novel of propaganda had its heyday during the fifties and early sixties. It is clear from Chin's writings that the novel was in the early stage of development and was nationalistic to a high degree. Chin's *MA-RAI-EE*[3] and *The Grand Illusion*[4] are both novels dealing with the history of Malaya. *MA-RAI-EE*, anti-Japanese and pro-British, is based on the Malayan people's experiences during the Japanese Occupation. *The Grand Illusion*, which deals with Malaya after Independence, is anti-Communist and pro-Malayan. Both books were written in an attempt to highlight the problems that existed during the time of the nation's birth. The theme of national identity was developed from the political environment of a nation undergoing the transition from a colony to a sovereign state.

Nationalism implies the political consciousness of a group of people, irrespective of race or creed, identifying themselves with the country. It is evident that Chin Kee Onn expresses this sentiment. The fictionalized autobiography *MA-RAI-EE* deals with the hardships faced by the people of Malaya under the yoke of the Japanese rule and ends with an assertion of

the growing consciousness of the people of Malaya to achieve independence. There is a definite statement on this towards the end of the book, when the narrator expresses his belief in the strength and resilience of the Malayan people: "For there were thousands of silent sufferers, of all races, of all ranks and walks of life, who defied temptations, overcame hardships ... They were the redeeming feature of Malaya, for they fought a continuous moral war, and, although battle-scarred, were undefeated" (p. 298). In *The Grand Illusion*, on the other hand, the evils of communism are dramatized and a call for the preservation of democracy is issued.

Chin Kee Onn's novels do not delve deeper than the purely nationalistic to explore the problems of the individual. Instead, they are narrated from the perspective of what is beneficial to the community and uphold one set of beliefs while renouncing another. The main theme that runs throughout the two novels is that it is important to be a loyal Malayan, to support the government and defend the sovereignty and independence of the country.

In Lloyd Fernando, the idea of nationalism takes on a different dimension. Written fifteen years after Chin's second novel, *Scorpion Orchid*[5] raises more complex issues and searches for more meaningful answers than the ones offered by Chin Kee Onn. The question of national identity is studied alongside the concerns of cultural and political identity. Whereas Chin felt that all races belonged to Malaya and were patriotic towards it, in Fernando the question of racial problems emerges in the quest of nation-building and it is not assumed that all races feel equally at home in the country. Chin wrote at a time when Malaya

was on the threshold of independence and the pro-nationalistic flavour of the novels reflects this fervour of belonging. There was (or seemed to be) no question of national unity in the face of the enemy.

When Fernando wrote his novel, the race riots had made obvious the fact that national unity was only a thin veneer and that deep down the various races had yet to achieve a true understanding of their place and function in Malaysia. *Scorpion Orchid* deals with these latent tensions as seen in Peter, Guan Kheng and Santi, who belong to the migrant races, and Sabran, the only indigene of the group.[6] Since each one symbolizes the race he represents, Fernando illustrates how ethnocentricism can destroy the fabric of national unity. This is seen most clearly in the differing reactions to the riots which drive each one of them deeper into the safety of identifying with his 'own kind.' Fernando stresses the importance of people's attitude towards each other and the necessity of having one language to unite the races for the purpose of nation-building: "All that is necessary is that we all speak the language" (p. 131). The split loyalties and unresolved tensions that occur in the novel reflect the state of the nation during this period. The conflict that each character faces, whether to remain loyal to one's own race or to adopt a new identity, a Malaysian identity, irrespective of race, is seen as each character finds himself forced to make that choice. Fernando, through his historical excerpts, invokes the past ideals of a united country to counterpoint the present situation.

To draw attention to the problems in the national psyche, he concentrates on the dilemma of the individual who is displaced and

disorientated because he does not belong to the old country and yet does not feel at home in the new. Santi, who does not return with the rest of his family to India, and yet does not belong effectively enough to Malaya to want to try to stop the riots with Sabran; Guan Kheng, who is glad that "he partially knew where he was and what he stood for" (p. 71); and Peter, who feels most acutely the conflict of ways aware that he is leaving for a foreign country because "They speak the same language" (p. 132), all reflect this crisis of identity.

Guan Kheng thinks of his culture as a "certain way of life, with habits, attitudes and beliefs which ... had shaped his personality.... issued from an admixture of past customs and ideals, which only one without a sense of history would fail to recognise" (p. 71). He sums up the cultural and psychological conflicts that were occurring on a personal and social level (manifested in the riots and in the rapid disintegration of the friendship between the four) at the time.

Fernando does not provide specific solutions to the soul-searching process that each character has to undergo, though he does hint at them. He seeks a national identity that does not destroy the separate cultural identity of a person. He speaks of "the need to adapt and change, to preserve unity and identify in terms of both race and nation, with room left for variety, for challenging and creative conflicts of traditions."[7]

K. S. Maniam's novel *The Return*[8] while looking at the search for identity through the growing consciousness of a child, seems to transcend the theme of national identity from a purely nationalistic point of view. A conflict

of cultures ensues when Ravi rejects the insulated culture of his father in an attempt to merge with the dominant one of the country. It is a more painful, exploratory and sensitive work than Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* partly because it deals with the character's childhood memories of a Tamil way of life and the crisis he faces when he rejects it as he changes and grows older. On the other hand, Fernando deals with four adults with ingrained cultural beliefs whose sophisticated ideal of racial unity is shattered with the onset of the riots. Although human feeling and personality are brought into play, it is the adult mind attempting to fit in with the 'natural' scheme of things that is important in Fernando.

Maniam also fuses the theme of alienation with national identity, making both an ongoing process, and traces the psychological effects on a boy who grows to young manhood and the adjustments that he has had to make along the way. The alienation from his family and culture arises as a result of the need to survive in the world. It is maintained and even heightened from the need to belong, to attain a sense of national identity, which unfortunately does not allow for the propagation of one's own culture (or at least Ravi the child, does not know how to balance the two). The break must be clean and only when the wounds heal, perhaps, can a balance be sought. This conflict between the generations is a dual process of gaining national identity on the one hand and becoming increasingly alienated from one's own culture on the other. As Ravi gains assimilation into the dominant culture through education, he loses his original Tamil identity. Ravi, who does not wish to remain stagnant in his society because he wants something more in line with the changes taking place outside his world, does not realize

at the time that remaining with one will result in divorce from the other. The transformation that he undergoes in his search for identity forces him to break away from his people to assimilate with the new culture. This encounter of two cultures results in the rejection of his parents and their migrant culture and the gaining of a new one through the English-medium education that he has at school.

The transmutation of Ravi's character, which results in him being displaced and caught between two cultures, is expressed in the poem he writes for his dead father. In concrete terms, Maniam has chosen opposite images which represent the choice between the two: the well versus the tap and the taste of clay in well water versus that of chlorine (p. 183). The writer's representation of Ravi seems to be a symbolic projection of the universal theme of the search for identity peculiar to all Third World literature. In a way more intuitive than actual Maniam has portrayed through Ravi the conflict that occurs in any migrant family in any part of the world, when their own language and culture have to take second place to those of the host country. The pain and the anger of the generations in conflict occur at this stage, when the younger members do not actually want to leave but have to, for they perceive their families as backward, and later regret it because they now lack the culture to complement their education. The gap between the generations is made wider by the most basic of cultural differences, language. "It is a double exile, in culture and in the tongue by which the exile chooses to live and work."[9] This "double exile" in Ravi when he has to choose between Tamil and English, can also be viewed as an attempt by the writer to distance the problem faced by Malaysian youth today with the

possibility of three languages to choose from: English, Malay and their mother tongue. Though not clearly delineated in the novel, this separation process does occur and is envisioned by the telling of the story without the espousing of the theory. This alienation, a result of education, which in turn induces the search for identity, results in Ravi being cut off from his culture and his 'roots,' making him unstable until he reorientates himself.

This loss of cultural identity in the search for a national one is most compelling in Maniam's work because he dramatizes the metamorphosis of a young boy. The values that Ravi grew up with are no longer valid for the new life he is pursuing; as a result he is uncertain as to where he belongs. Words do not serve to convey his feelings but instead will remain "lustreless, cultureless,/buried in a heart that will not serve" (p. 183). He becomes a loner among his people, enhanced by the social structure of the Indian world which he rejects because of its demeaning aspects. The psychological disorientation which is manifested in the separation from Ravi's family is less pronounced in Fernando where the four friends find their concept of racial unity torn apart by the riots and each looks back to his own race for self-confirmation. Peter represents one result of psychological disorientation and a lack of cultural and national identity. While Sabran looks to his people for a national identity and Guan Kheng finds reassurance in his cultural identity, Peter feels the need to emigrate to a place where the language is familiar rather than remain and go through the process of "detribalisation" once more.[10] He refers to how painful this process can be but it is illustrated in Maniam's work. Seen together, the two novels represent the process and the

consequences of "detribalisation" in the search for national identity as well as the futility of not assimilating. A common culture and language will give a person a sense of national identity and the search for it is seen most clearly among the third and fourth generation immigrants to Malaysia who originate from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Lloyd Fernando deals with adults who have had the old ways imprinted on their memories. Their modern élitist attitude rejects them but when deep responses are required, they revert to familiar patterns. Ravi, on the other hand, loses his culture while he is young and in the formative stages of development. His rejection of his culture is not intellectual but brought about by the very basic need to survive and progress in the world. He is aware of what he has lost in the process, whereas Fernando's characters do not lose their culture while attempting to reach a new equilibrium. While Fernando emphasizes the struggle for national identity on a personal and social level, Maniam concentrates on the personal crisis that occurs in the search for identity.

These three novelists, Chin, Fernando and Maniam, have explored the theme of national identity from very different angles. In Chin, we find the exploration at an early imitative stage where the assertion of national identity is strong and loud. His novels are propagandist in nature although there is sufficient material to prevent them from being regarded as purely rhetorical. The anti-colonial attitude does not play any important part in the novels of Fernando and Maniam, and it is virtually non-existent in Chin's. It would be fair to assume that the evils of colonialism do not preoccupy the consciousness of these writers. Whatever

anti-colonial feelings they might harbour they have professionally kept them at bay, but this in no way undermines or saps the nationalistic flavour of their writings.

Chin Kee Onn conveys his message through the historical aspect and tries to portray the *esprit de corps* of the Malayan people in the fight against a common enemy -- first the Japanese and later the Communists. His two novels have a definite didactic commitment -- to teach the Malayan people to remain united. While Chin does not deal with broader issues, Fernando does so by using the past as a background for the exploration of deep-seated human impulses.

In Fernando, the external incident of the riot is used as a starting-point to study the internal motivations of the characters and how the differing reactions contribute to the disintegration of their friendship. He advocates values contrary to those held during an era of turmoil and speaks out against the segregation of races, hoping that by highlighting these problems a national identity will evolve.

Both writers record past events and include hopes for a united future. Both attempt in their novels to mirror national character through the analysis of individual motivations. In *The Grand Illusion* Chin tries to analyse individual political behaviour and gives reasons for the appeal of communism to certain factions in the country. The changing values of such a turbulent era can result in either a sell-out or a regeneration on the part of the individual. In *The Grand Illusion*, Kung Li ultimately rejects communism for democracy and Peter in *Scorpion Orchid* returns home to Malaya.

The search for national identity incorporates the problems of assimilation and acculturation in Fernando and Maniam. In their two novels, the characters are studied as individuals who have particular responses to a certain situation. Ravi, in *The Return*, reacts to the changes brought about by education by rejecting the attitudes typical of his race and by adopting those of the dominant culture. In *Scorpion Orchid*, Peter reacts first by leaving the country only to realize that he belongs nowhere else and so returns home to begin learning the process once again, of adapting to the predominant culture. Conversely, Guan Kheng reacts by going deeper within himself preventing any attempt at assimilation. In both novels, the search is for a definite cultural and national identity.

The presence of conflicting cultures makes the search for identity a difficult one. The characters all suffer a sense of loss of the self and perceive themselves as incomplete persons split in various ways according to their allegiances.[11] The catalyst for Malaysian writers is the "cross-cultural character of their situations"[12] and this intensifies the search for a home as a base and a source of identity, a country of the body as well as of the mind.[13] What makes the search for national identity such a pressing theme in local literature is "the preoccupation with self-definition in a New World time and place (the new home)" and "an awareness of ideas that were shaking the foundations of the Old World (the old home)."[14]

The theme of alienation is manifested in the realization of the self and the search for identity. In Lee Kok Liang it is the realization and the expression of the true self

that is prominent. Using alienation from society and from the self as his foundation Lee looks into the values and structure of society and the way in which these beliefs affect the individual. The alienation from society is envisioned in the way people are experienced in terms of their exchange value and the individual man feels no contact with or responsibility for the social system. In the alienation of the self, the individual feels fragmented and split into at least two parts which have become alien to each other. In both cases, "in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger.... This divorce between man and his life ... is properly the feeling of absurdity."[15]

In Lee Kok Liang the vision of the world is sombre and the characters tinged with a certain evil and malevolent touch. There are no really 'good' people and everyone seems slightly jaded, including the mutes in *The Mutes in the Sun* who serve as the whipping boys for the rest of mankind. The parents in this novel are singularly evil and all the adults (including the lawyers who seem crow-like in their black robes) lie, conspire and cheat. Although Mr. K. in *Flowers in the Sky* seems to be a mild father, there is in Lee no relationship between parent and child as we have seen in Maniam. The reason is that Lee's world is different and darker. Apart from a few indirect remarks about the government by Mr. K. the theme of national identity does not feature at all.

In *The Mutes in the Sun*, the alienation is that of the poor and those rejected by society. It deals with the victims of society and from among the victims emerges the heroic figure. Written in a surrealistic style, the victims of society in *The Mutes in the Sun* are

abnormal or sub-normal. They are the oppressed, the rejected, the deformed, who are misfits in society. Lee's concern with this group of people represents an attempt at a critique of society, to show that there are the oppressors and the oppressed in any place. He uses the social alienation that the man and Kee Huat feel to emphasize society's rejection of them and the way in which adults abuse the young and helpless. The story is narrated from the viewpoint of the man and makes it obvious that Lee wishes to draw attention to their plight.

The characters are creatures of an environment which seems determined to warp and mutilate them. The various incidents which lead to the alienation of the man from society and the deformity in his friend show the effect that these events have on the psyche of the mutes. Lee focuses on a single issue -- the oppressed victims of society and the effects of their oppression. The tension and hatred created by the atrocities and cruelty of the adults are released by a decisive ending -- the burning of the saw-mill. The characters are closely integrated with the climactic act of arson that occurs in the end, an act which signifies the retribution of evil, and the achievement of a personal sense of self. They have managed to transcend their alienation and have found unity in the face of a common adversary (the man's father as symbolized by the saw-mill which he owns). With that, they move forward together to a new world.

In *Flowers in the Sky* the search is for values untainted by materialistic considerations. The issue of values is more diffused in this novel and does not strike the reader as immediately as the issue of social injustice in *The Mutes in the Sun*. Both novels

however scrutinize narrow segments of life seen through the unfailing eye of the author. *Flowers in the Sky* deals with the question of material versus spiritual wealth. Lee is concerned here with the spiritual aridity of the middle class as opposed to the social problems encountered in *The Mutes in the Sun*.

The theme of alienation is used to show two men who are out of touch with and alienated from their true selves. A part of society and not estranged from it, they are more out of touch with themselves than the mutes who are able to express their true selves. Mr. K. and Venerable Hung are paradoxically victims of society too, trapped within society's impression of what makes a successful and fulfilled man. They have more or less sold their souls for money, and Lee uses the theme of alienation to show how the rich and successful can be, in effect, poorer and emptier than the destitute and the rejected. It is as if the novels, written seventeen years apart, function as a two-way mirror one reflecting the poor, and the other, the rich. Seen together, the novels show that being poor and alienated from society does not necessarily mean that one is less well-off morally and spiritually than the affluent.

In *Flowers in the Sky*, Mr. K. and Venerable Hung are searching for spiritual peace for they have found that wealth cannot provide it. Lee assumes an anti-materialistic stance when he shows the aridity of their lives. Both have lost their sensitivity and the spiritual side of their potential selves, since they are weighed down by monetary concerns which prevent the realization of their potential. In *The Mutes in the Sun* the author's anti-materialistic stand is evident in the depiction of the rich as cruel and selfish beings. There is no definite

conclusion in either novel. In *The Mutes in the Sun*, a whole new world awaits the two friends and adventure is in the air as they set off together. It is a journey of two battered souls into a new world and the reader senses that they have more chances of spiritual renewal than the characters in *Flowers in the Sky*. No new world awaits Mr. K. and Venerable Hung unless they can change their perceptions and aims in life. The characters are left taking stock of their lives as Venerable Hung leaves the hospital, but the reader does not know if they will succeed in making the necessary adjustments for a fuller and richer life. Lee questions social values and human nature through the depiction of realistic situations but does not pass judgement or suggest solutions.

The theme of social injustice in *The Mutes in the Sun* where human identity is denied in society is treated differently in *Flowers in the Sky*. Alienation is used to analyze the individual and the values that he feels are important for giving him a personal sense of self.

The themes in Malaysian literature in English revolve around a search for identity, personal or national, and a reappraisal of the values which either aid or prevent the attainment of that identity. The theme of national identity has developed from the purely nationalistic to a more profound study of the traumas encountered in its achievement. The search for a personal identity is well sustained in Lee's work without his having to venture into the realm of national identity.

The writers who have been discussed in this paper do not live by writing alone. With the exception of Chin Kee Onn, they have been

educated up to tertiary level and are professionals in their respective fields. They express the multiplicity of Malaysian life but in the end concentrate on and depict the people they know best, that is their own. The exception is Fernando who tries to provide an over-view of all the races. Among the novels surveyed in this paper, the two best are *The Mutes in the Sun* and *The Return* for their ability to narrate compelling and thought-provoking stories. But it may be said that all the novels are written in a manner not beyond the pale of the foreign reader's imagination and that these themes are discernible in the literature of other Third World countries.

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NOTES

[1]Bruce King, *The New English Literatures* (London, 1980), p. 50.

[2]Guy Amirthanayagam and S. C. Harrex, *Only Connect: Literary Perspectives East and West* (Flinders, South Australia, 1981), p.6.

[3]Kuala Lumpur, 1981; first published in 1952. All further quotations are from this edition and are given directly in the text.

[4]London, 1961. All further quotations are from this edition and are given directly in the text.

[5]Kuala Lumpur, 1976. All further quotations are from this edition and are given directly in the text.

[6]The term "indigene" here refers to the groups of people who are generally considered to be native to the country -- the Malays and the indigenous tribes of Sabah and Sarawak.

[7]Ooi Boo Eng, "Malaysia and Singapore--Introduction," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 17 (1982), 101.

[8]Kuala Lumpur, 1981. All further quotations are from this edition and are given directly in the text.

[9]Andrew Gurr, *Writers in Exile* (Brighton, 1981), p. 28.

[10]As used by Lloyd Fernando in "The Relation of Sectional Literatures to the National

Literature," *Tenggara*, 6 (1973), 125.

[11]It is worth noting that this need for a sense of home does not feature in literature from Singapore, perhaps because with the majority of the population being Chinese, there is no conflict of interests.

[12]Amirthanayagam and Harrex, p. 3.

[13]Gurr, pp. 13-14.

[14]Amirthanayagam and Harrex, p. 7.

[15]Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London, 1980), p. 13.

THE SANDPIT : A MONOLOGUE*

by

K.S.MANIAM

Character: Santha, a woman in her late thirties

SCENE

The verandah of a wooden house, the type found off Jalan Bangsar or Kampung Baru or Sentul. The cement verandah is slightly raised, needing two or three steps to reach the ground. There is an old-fashioned, roughly-carpentered chair to the right. A woman, Santha, is seated on the floor to the left of the chair. It is late at night, verging on midnight, and she has been working on a wide and long piece of cloth that she has in her hands. The sari that she has on is worn primly and tucked tightly at her waist, its border wide and stiff.

SANTHA: I've always made my own sari border, putting in the silver or gold thread, carefully, patiently. (Holds up the sari border.) This one I started a month ago but the work was slow.

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*Staged by Five Arts Centre as a workshop performance at the British Council, Kuala Lumpur, 28.5.1988.
Directed by Krishen Jit.
Acted by Anne James.

I started a month ago but the work was slow. Only during the last four days has the work gone forward. (Looks at the sari border.) Almost a yard finished.

(She puts the sari border on the chair back so that it hangs down almost to the floor.)

If he doesn't come the whole border will be finished. No cooking for the last four days. Just waiting.

And that woman, Sumathi, she can't wait in the house. She must go after him.

He didn't marry her like he married me. Disappeared for two days. Didn't tell me anything. I had to run here, run there. For the first time after coming here had to go to the shop by myself.

That Chinese man, No-Fear-Tan, comes and tells me, 'Your husband coming with a new woman. Asked you to do the Indian ceremony.' I had to buy the coconut, prepare it for their arrival. Sumathi didn't even wear a sari when she came. Just a dress. I was angry, still I broke the coconut and circled the kumkum-and-camphor tray round their heads. Why didn't that ceremony take away all the bad luck from this house?

Only more bad luck came into the family. Athan stopped listening to me.

For my marriage everything was done correctly. Everybody consulted, the priest, the horoscopes, the elders. My relatives came and cleansed me. Athan had no relatives, so substitute mother, father and uncle were found to carry out the responsibilities.

Athan brought his own people, a bus full of young men, to help with decorating the panthal and serving the food after the thali-tying ceremony in the big hall. The whole town said it was the best and most expensive wedding it had seen.

Now there's nothing to show for the marriage.

He didn't disappear that time he went to be married to Sumathi. I knew he would return. Now it's already four days since I last saw him.

He's a man who doesn't like to be helped. Told me a story about how he got his strong body. When I saw him the first time I couldn't believe there was such a man in the world. Shoulders wide as the brow of the copper pot used for festival cooking. Waist narrow as a woman's. His hands and legs thick only like a betel nut tree trunk.

He got his strength from the sandpit, he said. Told me so many times it's like I'm there beside the sandpit. People laughed at him all the time. His legs didn't work. They were useless sticks fixed to his waist. He had to look up at the men, women and even boys. He hated that. He said he would make them look up at him one day.

So he thought and thought about how to make his legs live. At last he found a way. If he could just stand in some hole, his legs would grow nerves and veins. Then the blood would flow through them.

No one helped. He allowed no one to help him. He scratched the ground with a bent nail. Then when there was a small hole, he used the

spade Chinese men use for making the cement smooth. He dug and dug until his arms became thick with muscles. They were so strong he could stand on them. But he wanted to stand on his legs.

The day came when he entered the hole. Still no one helped him. When he got down and piled the sand around his body, his hands lost grip and he fell down. He lay there, the sand covering his face and shoulders. He couldn't breathe. He was like dead. He felt like dying. Young men stood around the hole and kicked more sand on his head. He was not going to die for them.

He lifted himself up with great struggle, his hands digging into the hole sides like crab claws. Then he was standing. And he saw the world right side up for the first time in his life.

He stood there for months and months until even the sand changed colour. From white to yellow, then brown, finally black.

'I stood there in all that filth,' he always said to me. 'That's the sandpit. There were insects, cockroaches, worms and flies. There was the blackness that was dirt. I understood life. The sandpit keeps me alive.'
'That man can lift a bus,' my father said, proudly.

Now all that's gone. When Sumathi came the going began.

Why doesn't that woman come and tell me what's happening? Gone with Arumugam, that Six-face man. The man who found her in a hotel room. Athan told me. 'The girl had to be saved.

Ran away from home. Couldn't take the punishment her parents gave her.' Told me after he brought her here. After he made her his second wife.

Punishment? Didn't know how to behave properly. 'Teach her how to be a good housewife,' athan told me. Just to give power to the first wife. If I told her to sit like this, walk like this, he interfered. Don't look at men when you talk to them, I said. No need for that, he said. She deserves to be punished. A woman who can't be a woman.

The way she sits! (Comes down to the steps and sits with her legs spread out, her breasts thrust forward.) Like this. All the winds in the world blowing between her legs. All the men in the world touching her breasts with their eyes. Tcha! That a woman?

Hotel-room woman. What else went between her legs? Always going with that Arumugam. (Mimicks) 'He's like my brother. Brought athan to save me.' How can she use that word?

What does he see in her? All that body not properly covered up. When you see flies sitting on a lot of flesh, you lose your appetite for meat.

The both of them behaving like they're the only people in the world who have bodies. He doing all those exercises, she putting all kinds of oils on her body in the bathroom. Yes, I've seen her. And before sleeping all those perfumes. As if women don't have their own smells to bring the men to them.

(Gets up and goes to the chair but sees it more as her husband's territory or even as her husband himself.)

I never sit on this chair. From the time I came to this house, twenty years ago. When we were both young. He wasn't young to me even then. This chair was always his. He sat there when important matters had to be talked about. I sat here. (Indicates a spot at the foot of and a pace away from the chair.) Never too near. When people passed by they saw husband and wife in their correct places. They respected us.

Sumathi doesn't care for respect. 'What can you do with respect?' she says. Makchik came yesterday. An old woman. Knows athan from the time he was born. She delivered him into the world. She said, 'Can I do anything to help you?' Somehow she knows athan is in trouble. I know he's in trouble. Sumathi pretends not to see anything. 'He has to go back there,' she says. 'That's the only place that gives him strength. Keeps him alive. You want him to die?'

She's always talking like that. About death. She said her parents were killing her, that's why she ran away. How were they killing her? I told Makchik yesterday to find out what the wise woman will say. I told her what Sumathi told me. (Takes on Sumathi's voice.) 'I'll be doing the housework day after day. Then I'll go for a walk. Go to town to buy a red ribbon for my hair. One day I came back tired and sat down in the doorway. My mother was taking down the clothes from the lines. A wind was blowing. It lifted my skirt to my thighs. Before I could bring it down my mother saw. Didn't say anything.

Heard my mother and father whispering that night. You know what they did that week? Conducted a puja. A strange puja. My mother made me wear a sarung up to my chest, then took me to the bathroom. There she poured water over my

head and body. Poured and poured until the body was cold. Poured and poured until the body was numb. Poured and poured until I couldn't breathe. Then she took me to the family shrine. Made me kneel down in front of all those pictures of gods and goddesses, dead grandfathers and uncles. She said some prayers. My father said some prayers and held me down by the hair. Then he sat nearby on a stool, watching me. I was not to lift my head and body until the sarung dried. The wet cloth sucked my blood away, sucked my nerves away. You call that living?'

Makchik laughed and said may be Sumathi's parents didn't understand her. What's there to understand? If she knows how to wear a sari, she'll know how to be a woman. Like me. I wear this sari even when I sleep. She wears one of those dresses that doesn't hide anything.

I talk to Makchik. She talks to me. My neigbours come in the evenings and listen to me. They're not here today. They know I'm going through some troubles. But athan and Sumathi won't let me talk. So I pretend I've lost my tongue. It has been many years since athan and that wind-rubbed woman listened to me.
Makchik told me something was wrong with athan's legs when he was born. Couldn't walk. Was crawling all the time. His mother said, 'Siva! Siva! why did you give me a child that's an insect?' His father wouldn't look at him. Stood in the sandpit for days and days, months, year. The sandpit he said was a hole he dug and somehow made himself stand there with the sand covering him up to the waist. May be if he had waited a year or two his legs would have got the strength to walk. But he's impatient. How can you cure crippled legs when the doctors and other medicine men can't do anything?

When he leaves the house I ask him, 'Where are you going?' He says, 'To the sandpit. Where the insects crawl. Where there's a lot of filth. Where you've to be strong to be respected. I clean up the place.' That's the name he has given to the place in town where he goes. Comes back late at night. Has money with him. Throws the money at me the next day. 'Go and buy whatever you want with Sumathi. A car will take you to town.'

Sumathi is excited. She gets ready. Wears her short dress, puts make-up on her face. I go to please athan. Not to make him angry. Every time a different car comes to take us to town. 'See, no need to buy a car. Athan can get any car he wants,' says Sumathi.

Once No-Fear-Tan brought him in a car when the cock was about to crow. Sumathi didn't even hear them coming. Sleeping with her legs east and west. That Chinese man, No- Fear-Tan, said strange words to me. 'You haven't seen me. You don't know me. You haven't seen your husband. You don't know him. Don't let him outside the house. The police or any man you haven't seen before come and ask for Dass say you don't know the name or the person.' He just went away leaving athan inside the house. You think Sumathi got up? No, she stretched out her legs some more and snored louder.

I've never seen athan like that. His face was swollen. There was blood on his mouth. He was trembling like a child who had seen a ghost. Who looked after him? Who boiled the water and washed his face? This woman in the sari did. The woman in the dress was dead to the world.

In the morning when Sumathi heard athan came back in the night with cuts on his face,

she was more frightened than him. They were like two children the outside world had bullied. Who looked after them?

No one came but athan didn't leave the house. No-Fear- Tan didn't come. Arumugam didn't come. Even Sumathi didn't go near athan. He was to them like he had a disease that would spread to them. I looked after him. This woman in the sari stood outside the latrine making sure he didn't fall down. This woman in the sari put spoonfuls of chicken broth into his mouth.

Luckily no one came. But the luck didn't last for many days. Once he stopped staring everywhere as if someone was looking for him, he began to walk about the house. First inside, then at the back. Sumathi suddenly became brave. She went with him all the time.

Then he began doing exercises again, there at the back of the house. He wouldn't let anyone see, not even me. Only Sumathi could be there near him. He would finish exercising and come here. Lie down on the floor. Sumathi would put a towel on the chair, like that sari border there now. She told me, 'Have his tea hot and ready.' As if I was the servant woman. She rubbed his back, legs, hands and shoulders with camphor ointment. 'Have the hot water ready for his bath.' As if I was someone she paid to do the job. People passing by didn't see husband and wife. Only a hotel woman and a man who paid for being touched.

At that time she should have left him alone. I left him alone. I wouldn't look at him. I didn't care whether he went to the sandpit or not. I had been waiting for that time since I married him. Whenever my father visited me he asked, 'Where has your husband gone?' 'Gone to

work in the town,' I said. 'At night?' he said. 'They work at different times in this big town,' I said. I knew what athan was doing all the time.

Athan wouldn't listen to my silence. He listened to Sumathi, the chatterer. He gave her that name. He called me the silencer. 'Don't open your mouth,' he said. 'You'll ask me to stop doing what I'm doing.'

So I kept quiet. But I didn't stop watching him.

(She comes to the steps and looks at the road in front of the house.)

He won't come today. It's the fourth day. A bad day. He shouldn't be out there. Two, four, six are bad numbers. When he brought Sumathi home, I knew we would have trouble. Two wives in the same house! I lost the only child I could have that year. Makchik came and cleaned up the baby for burial. Only four months old. Just dropped out of my womb one morning.

Why didn't Sumathi see? Why can't she see now?

(She returns to the chair and takes the sari border and wraps it round her knuckles.)

Athan would punch the bag filled with coconut husk. He would lift himself up the bar across the two posts. But for a long time he didn't use the metal wrapped round his fingers. Like the sixth finger with its four blunt knobs. Why couldn't Sumathi see?

(She begins to imitate her husband's punches with the knuckle-duster and his

movements.)

He saw everybody as enemies. He punched and punched as if he saw real faces before him. Sumathi clapped, sitting on the chair. Why didn't he ask her to get up from the chair? Then Sumathi came in front of him. 'Punch me,' she said. 'If you can punch me, you can punch anyone.' She was lazy most of the time but when she was quick, she was quick. Why did he let a woman humiliate him?

Slower than a woman. He was slowing down. His shoulders were not round and powerful any more. It was painful to see him trying to make his body strong and fast again.

They were like two children. I've seen children play like that. (She begins to laugh and enters a lighter mood. She imitates and parodies her husband's and Sumathi's behaviour.) He would take a few steps and kick, she would clap. 'Do it again,' she would say when he did something like this. (Recalls and carries out a series of taekwando movements.) Put his hands across his chest, move forward, hit with his left hand, hit with his right hand, kick. (Laughs) One time he nearly fell. Sumathi caught him.

She was always there to encourage him. His partner. His playmate. He would put his hands round her neck and she would try to release herself. Here, in front of those people passing by. After Sumathi came into the household, he touched me only a few times. And not like a husband a wife. Like a man in a hurry doing his duty. But he and Sumathi! The things they did! No, no, no need to think about that now.

Did she go after him because of that? The modern woman. 'Have a child,' I told her. 'My womb is too old.' 'What for?' she said. 'To stay in the house all the time?'

(She puts the sari border back on the chair.)

Putting all that strength into his body. Nothing left to bring a child into the world. 'You've seen those married men with children?' he said. 'Fat stomachs, thin hands and legs. You want me to be like that?'

I think he was afraid. Didn't want any child to be born like he was. Crippled. Sometimes when he came home drunk he talked in his sleep. 'No, no! There must be no children. To be hated by his mother, ignored by his father, humiliated by the neighbours. No! No!' He was thinking about himself.

'You're like ice,' he told me. 'Don't know how to play. Sometimes I'm afraid to breathe in front of you.' He didn't know how to play with me. I don't play with my clothes all taken off. I don't go everywhere with him, letting all kinds of men's eyes fall on me.

After his exercises, after Sumathi had rubbed his body with camphor oil, he sat on this chair, shining. He pushed up his shoulders like this (Wriggles her left and right shoulder blades.) whenever anyone passed the house. Then he stretched his hands and made his arms tight so his muscles would stand out. For all to see. Somebody bigger and stronger will come one day. The people will flock round him.

He won't listen to me. 'I found my legs. I made my body strong. Do you know how many

people are afraid of me because of that? Do you know I just have to stretch out my hand and they put money in it?'

What happens one day when you can't stretch out your hand because you're old or sick? He wouldn't answer. He knew but wouldn't admit the truth.

But he changed. He began to save his body, not use it so much. That's when he brought home that cane and that rayfish tail. He has funny names for them. The Firemaker. The Stinger. Two more playthings. More stories to tell himself. More untruths.

Why didn't Sumathi help me to wake him up? For her anything he did was right. Even when he beat her with the cane, The Firemaker.

Even I, a woman, felt like beating her. May be that's why her parents punished her. For not seeing things in the right place. When athan brought the cane and rayfish tail, she came running to me like a child.

'No need to worry any more akka,' she said. 'I know you think he's too old to use his body. He won't have to use his body any more. He has found something more powerful. The Firemaker. The Stinger.'

'Go and play with them,' I said.

'Only he can touch them,' she said. 'Come out and see what he does with the cane and the whip.'

(She begins to make the chair the centre of her attention. After some time, to all intents and purposes, the chair is her husband.)

I saw. Why didn't she see even at this late stage? You sat there on the chair first swishing the air with your cane as if beating flies. Sumathi, why didn't you see? The story you told me about The Firemaker, athan, can that be true? (She goes and takes the sari border from the chair and twists it into a thin band to make it look like a cane.) You said it was the thinnest cane that your friend, the rattan-hunter, found. So thin it could wrap itself round a tree trunk. (Flicks the twisted sari border at the chair leg.) Can something so stiff bend itself round anything? (Addresses the chair.) Why do you call it The Firemaker?

You used it only on Sumathi. I was there all the time. Why didn't you use it on me? I remember what you said as you beat her. 'There! This will make your body burn. Little knots of flame all over.'

I also remember something else. That time you finished your exercises and Sumathi wasn't home to rub your body down with camphor ointment. I said I would rub the ointment into your muscles. 'No,' you said. 'You can't make my body burn like Sumathi.'

Where is she now? Somewhere with Arumugam, enjoying herself. I've been here all the time, eating nothing, drinking only water now and then. I've given away my body. Made it live for something else. For you.

Remember you said, 'God gave us bodies to live with them, not just inside them?' Why didn't you make me live with it? You had to go and get that cane, The Firemaker. You had to go and get that Sumathi.

You think I can't be like her? It's easy

to be like her even when wearing a sari. (Goes and sits on the chair.) Just this one time let me sit on this chair and show you how she behaves when you're not at home. May be like she's doing now in some hotel room. (As she talks she loosens her hair and arranges it round her shoulders and face.) That's how she puts her hair down. (Next she unwraps her sari border which has been tucked tightly round her waist and brings the upper section of the sari over her shoulder and designs it like a skirt around her hips.) That's how she wears her dress. (Spreads her legs out and sits back slatternly.) There, I can do it too. Let all the winds in the world blow between my legs!

(She gets up from the chair and faces it as she would her husband.)

You respected me too much, let me live within my silence. Where did that silence come from? From all the hundreds of years women lived in the shadow of their husbands. That made you angry, made you rage. You didn't raise The Firemaker on me. You raised The Stinger.

Before bringing it down on my body, you told me the story of the rayfish. Did you want me to see some meaning? Not an ordinary rayfish, you said. A big one with fins as large as waves. Had been lying on the seabed for years. Its back was covered with a layer of hard sea things, almost like a rock. Its underside was white and soft. That made you angry. And its eyes had the look of having seen hundreds of years. The fish was still alive when the fisherman asked you to cut off its tail. You cut it off with one blow. When you brought home the tail, it was still smelling. The skin was not completely dried. There was flesh over the bones. I saw you curing it, drying it in the sun, oiling it until you could roll it up into a small coil.

You took it to town, hiding it under your shirt. When I asked you why you were late one night you beat me with it. What were you beating? The Stinger didn't touch my body at all. It only tore my sari and blouse until I was almost naked. Yes, I still have that sari in the house. Just to remember and learn the meaning. But I didn't feel naked.

Today, when I'm by myself, I still don't feel alone. You're somewhere near. And you'll come when you know my true self. Sumathi can go and throw herself on you but you'll know who has been here all the time.

(She looks at the twisted sari border and then unwinds and smooths it out.)

No, I wouldn't turn this sari border into some smelling, dried up rayfish tail. Even if you call it The Stinger. I started this border the day you ripped my sari with The Stinger. I've put twenty years of our life together into its golden threads. I've put the years of suffering in silence into it. Now I'll place it on the chair where you always sit.

(She places the smoothened sari border on the back of the chair, stands away and contemplates them.)

Soft cloth and hard wood. Just like the rayfish you talked about. Soft underbelly and hard top skin. We're like that -- you and I. Sumathi is some cheap cloth and sour perfume which won't last for long.

(She moves away from the chair but still talks to it as if her husband is seated there.)

We've have always been together. We'll

always be together. I'll be the silence, you the noise. You think I don't know you? Yes, I haven't been to that street where you're the master and everybody obeys you. Here we work together. You can be me, I can be you.

Sumathi chatters away, puts on all kinds of dresses and perfumes. I put on different things, enter different smells and bodies. My work is with people. I've watched you all these years. Know your movements and your feelings. Sumathi sees only the outside of you, your body. I go inside you and can become you.

(She tidies her hair and works it into its old bun at the back of her head. She readjusts her sari, tightening and tucking it at her waist.)

During the last few months you've come home beaten many times. Not blows on your face or cuts on your hands. That happened many years ago. You gave back blow for blow, cut for cut. But these recent months you couldn't give anything back.

You returned one night quietly. No car brought you back. I was still awake. You just have to breathe and I know you're there.

(As she talks she begins to take on her husband's problems, moods and movements.)

You stood here near the chair. Not straight but like a tired old man. Your legs were trembling. You started talking to your legs. Yes, I saw and heard everything from the door, which I had opened to a small gap. You were so busy with yourself, you didn't notice anything else.

Left, are you ready? Right, are you there? (Bends down and listens.) What? You don't want to work today? Worked for too long? Nobody rests. You only rest when you're dead. (Listens) You didn't want to be born? I didn't want to be born. But I was born with you as useless sticks. The bidan, Makchik, brought me into the world. As a human being? No, as a worm, an insect, that crawled on the floor. My father didn't look at me, my mother didn't want me. So, don't talk about being born.

That's how you talked and stood all the while without moving. A man once strong. A man with shoulders round as the earth.

Left, you're all right, you said. Right, you're the stubborn one. I gave you blood and nerves. Now move. (Listens) What? Still won't move? (Listens) What? Nothing to move for? When you've legs you move, that's all. (Listens) Must move for something, for somebody? You move for me. I'm somebody. Somebody big. Not any more? Because you don't obey me.

The legs didn't move. They were there stuck to the floor. You thought and thought. I saw your face trying to hide the suffering. Then you bent down again.

I know how to make you move, you said. I stood there in that sandpit for days and months so you could get your blood and nerves. I'll open your nerves and veins! (Listens) Part of me? If you're part of me you'll obey or else ... I'll give you a beating. With The stinger.

(She reaches out her hand for the sari border and almost falls.)

You almost fell. But you didn't give up.

Stood straight again. (Listens) I'll suffer pain? That's nothing new. I knew pain even as a child. The pain of being humiliated, of being treated like an insect. They said, 'There goes the cockroach. There goes the lizard. It's going to the hole. Give it a shovel. The job will go faster. It can finish itself off.' They wanted me dead. Buried.

If you behave like the dead, people will step on you, crush you. Now move!

You forced yourself. The legs moved a few paces. You took The Stinger off the hook. (She takes the sari border and treats it like a whip.) There, you said, you can move. Only have the determination. Think of those years of silence from which this rayfish tail comes. Those eyes that watch without feeling. You must care for yourself, live for yourself.

And then you struck your leg with The Stinger.

(She strikes her right leg repeatedly.)

Punished yourself. Like Sumathi's parents punished her. Beat the blood out of your leg. Your face couldn't hide the pain any more.

Isn't there something beyond pain? Isn't there something beyond determination. Isn't there something beyond the body? So, I know about you. I may be the silence you talked about, the ice that wouldn't melt.

During the day I work. During the night I lie awake listening for your footsteps. Fear made you find your legs, fear made you stand up. That fear is detroying you now, bringing you down to your knees.

You want me buried. You and that woman. The silence buried me all these years. Like you I've entered the sandpit waiting for you these last few days. But the fear of your not coming back is not going to make me bend my knees. I'm your right leg, stubborn, and working only with half understanding all this time. I'm The Stinger that will tear you to pieces as you tore my sari to shreds. I'm waiting here for you without fear, filled only with that hard rock of patience that's my life.

(Turns to the chair and addresses it directly.)

Can't you see? Why do you try to catch the flashes in the sky? Why don't you be the sky, rising above everything, silent, watching, waiting?

(She comes forward and sits down to the left of the chair and smoothing out the sari border begins to work on it. She looks in front and sees that the sun is about to rise.)

I'll not just put gold and silver thread into this sari border. My patience is not born out of being passive. My patience will be the anger I haven't used since I married you. If that woman can be like a man, I'll be both man and woman, the left and right legs.(Pause.) It's going to be the fifth day. A good number. I'll sit and wait and work on this border. May be before I finish it you'll come. We'll make another beginning, start a new border.

Glossary

athan : the term Hindu wives use to address their husbands

panthal : raised wedding dais, decorated with arches and young coconut leaves

thali : holy, yellow string tied by the bridegroom round bride's neck during the wedding ceremony

puja : a prayer ceremony conducted sometimes to ward off evil

akka : elder sister

7th May 1988

NORTH-EASTERLY

by

Leonard Jeyam

Then you will go to the fields, Sumi
And toil until sundown
That night when all is still
Your yearning will return like a malady
Because I am in the city
Strangled by the silken threads
And have turned into a statistic with the rest.

TRIM SUTIDJA
'Wind in the Third Month'

(Translated from the Javanese.)
by S. O. Robson

There's a past I've forgotten
When I would wake
With the morning chill,
With the continuous sea-breeze
Blowing from the sea.
I still recall evening showers,
Leaving cold nights
With the wind soughing,
And on many sunless mornings,
Waking with the falling rain.

The last months of the year
Brought wind, storms and water--
Where November would quiver,
As the winds blew into December.
December then shivered, and
Would remind January
As the rains fell,
And she would also shiver,
And remember, the seasonal return
Of the north-east visitor.

Threnody

As if in tune
With the sound of the waves,
This man plays on his bamboo flute
One song that spreads out
Across the white sands
And blue waters.
This is Pak Long's silent tune.

From a sampan
Under twilight's brooding shadow,
A fisherman hurls his net into
The South China Sea,
Oblivious of its nearing emptiness;
Because in the tenth month
The winds will blow,
Rains will return
And the best fish will be far away
Deep in the ocean.

And in a tiny hut along the coast
A lamp flickers.
In it, a woman prays
To a merciful God high above:
For her husband--
A better catch today;
And her son far away in the city,
Enticed away by progress--
May God guide him always.

Pak Long
Tomorrow progress will call the tune again;
For there will be no fish to catch
In the tenth month,
Neither will there be rubber to tap
Nor paddy to grow when the rains come.
And in the new year
When the rains continue to fall,
You and your wife will chase
Development like a malady,
Together with your son in the city.

There's a wind-swept and deserted beach,
And there, Pak Long plays no more.
No flute, no tune, no song
To echo with the sandbars
And hurry across the waters.
There's just the sad murmur of the ocean:
It's a yearning for a fisherman's
Love of the sea.

Burning Lamps

It is midnight,
And the kerosene lamp
Is burning, burning, burning bright.
Crouched under its light, a man
Is reading a letter from his family,
While his wife is asleep,
Knowing they are safe, and wanting
To forget her wicked dream of life.

Pak Hassan, there is a tear
Rolling down your left cheek -
Why, aren't your children well?
Have you not been blessed with a grandson?
Or are you recalling those bygone days
When you praised the land
With the plough and buffalo;
And when your children played in the mud
And you teased them
The spirit of the mud would catch their legs;
And when the paddy was ripening,
The wind would whisper across the fields
And you could hear the bamboo flute playing;
So what has happened
To those simple days of happiness,
Even though you were poor?

Yes, life will soon be different
In an alien city with your kin,
Because the monsoon winds have not
Glorified the fields with rain this year;
And even though you prayed to God for it
And have not received a smile from above,
You accept life as it is.
You are a proud man.

The face of reality is hard to understand,
So tomorrow, you flee from the truth.
Tomorrow, you will have to find the money
For the busfare to the city.

I saw a Ghost
Visit Pak Hassan's home last night:
Gone are its inhabitants,
Gone are Pak Hassan and his wife,
And gone are two sinless people of the kampong.
All that was left was the kerosene lamp
Burning, burning, burning out.

Tok Dalang

Floating leaves falling at twilight
A man is buried underground.
He left no skill dying at night,
Just memories, staring at the mound.
Fleeting images, rustling wind,
History has made its statement.

Those leaping shadows I have seen
With strange tongues and ancient raiment,
And loudly, heard gendangs pounding,
Kesi knelling, canangs clanging
All night: one man bringing to life
Enchanting figures caught in strife.

Life's essence learnt, with its lessons;
Today it's a graveyard silence.

Perempuan Dengan Ombak

Betapa ia tiada menangis
ombak itu telah membunuh kekasihnya
ombak itu telah meracuni hidupnya
ombak itu telah menamakannya 'janda'.

Nor Aini Muhammad

The wind
that carried your husband
out to sea
today surges back
wanting,
calling you a widow,
and the cry of seagulls
that once lulled you
now sounds discordant,
like a distant,
vacant
cry.

The sea
has not the power to reason,
only God does;
but it can tell you
what it understands
and what it sees.
Woman,
listen to those sounds
so many have heard before:
the froth that returns
with the seadrift tell you
a fisherman is dead.

Letter

Lady, your hands clasped in prayer
February through July,
You appear again and again
In my disquieting dreams,
Praying at the shrine morning after morning,
Smelling like the dew-dropped jasmine.
As soft as a whisper, mother,
I hear you speak, and as soundless as sleep
You tell me that father has returned
To the ashes he once came from.

Today my search in this city has ended.
Today, I'm ostracized,
Feeling the guilt of another time.
If only all those years ago
I had listened,
If only I knew,
If only, I understood.
Please forgive the sins of your son mother,
And dry the tears he has caused to fall
Now as it is, and as it will be.

Lady, as the sun
Embraces a new day, I shall walk
Taking the shortest road, through
The city to my home and
I'll come running between
The sunset rows of rubber-green trees
That protect the blue, free sky,
And I'll come hurrying
To see your prayers and your love
Touch the ending of another day.

The Death of the Kitemaker

Yesterday evening I saw a tiny object
Move and shuffle with the clouds;
I thought I saw a kite.
Painstakingly, I searched the sky again,
And I saw an old man's soul
Tied to the tail of the kite,
Sailing and hurrying as if
Heeding the call of the wind.
An almighty wind.

I waited for the kite
To come back, and it did,--
Bereft of the kitemaker's soul.
That evening the windblown skies
Made me realize that God had called
For a gifted kitemaker
To shape and style an especial kite
For Him to fly
In the supernal skies in heaven.

SHAKESPEARE AND THE FUNCTION OF ART

by

Pun Tzoh Wah

When the question of Shakespeare's aesthetics arises, one is inevitably reminded of what Wilson Knight says in his famous introductory chapter in *The Wheel of Fire*:

> In Shakespeare's best known passage of aesthetic philosophy we hear that the poet's eye glances "from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven," and that the poet's pen turns to "shapes" the "form of things unknown." It "gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name." That is, the source of poetry is rooted in the otherness of mental or spiritual realities; these, however, are a "nothing" until mated with earthly shapes. Creation is thus born of a union between "earth" and "heaven," the material and the spiritual. Without "shapes" the poet is speechless; he needs words, puppets of the drama, tales. But the unknown "forms" come first.[1]

This is surely an extreme view that cannot possibly have gone unchallenged. The opposite extreme is represented by the Bradleians, the Chicago Aristotelians and such Marxian critics as Robert Weimann,[2] who would hold on to Hamlet's injunction to the Players to hold the

mirror up to nature as the central tenet of Shakespeare's aesthetics. In the latter case, much depends on how one interprets the mirror image. A typically modernist view, however, is advanced by William Carlos Williams when he characteristically observes:-

> I suppose Shakespeare's familiar aphorism about holding the mirror up to nature has done more harm in stabilizing the copyist tendency of the arts among us than --
>
> the mistake in it (though we forget that it is not S. speaking but an imaginative character of his) is to have believed that the reflection of nature is nature. It is not. It is only a sham nature, a "lie."
>
> Of course S. is the most conspicuous example desirable of the falseness of this very thing.
>
> He holds no mirror up to nature but with his imagination rivals nature's composition with his own.
>
> He himself becomes "nature"-- continuing "its" marvels -- if you will.[3]

Williams is certainly right when he claims that Shakespeare's work rivals nature's, and that Shakespeare himself becomes 'nature' -- a view which recalls Pope's dictum that "Nature and Homer were ... the same."[4] To this question of the relationship between art and nature we shall address ourselves in greater detail later. But it may be pointed out here that Shakespeare's use of the mirror metaphor, condemned by Williams as having helped to stabilize the

copyist tendency of the arts, must be seen in the light of the Renaissance practice of the dramatic art.

It is a well-established fact that during the Renaissance Aristotle's *Poetics*, 'discovered' as it were for the first time,[5] exerted a tremendous influence on the literary scene which had been dominated by Plato. Both Plato, who banished the poets from his ideal state, and Aristotle, who provided the rational justification of poetry and drama, defined art in terms of mimesis or imitation. And the mirror metaphor was used not merely by them but also by Renaissance critics who followed in their footsteps:

> Plato in the Republic compared the poet's imitating of things to a mirror image. Renaissance scholars found in Aristotle mirror references linked to imitations. The classical locus for the mirror figure was the phrase the fourth-century grammarian Donatus attributed to Cicero: comedy is "an imitation of life, a mirror of custom, an image of truth." Renaissance man could find the same significance in Horace's *exemplar vitae*. The mirror metaphor was abundantly used also throughout the middle and late Renaissance. Of this there can be little question, unless asserting so much implies in any way that the statement "Poetry is a mirror" was central in Renaissance theories of poetry as imitation.[6]

Does Hamlet merely echo the popular theory of the day when he says that the function and purpose of drama

> both at the first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.[7]

As Hamlet surveys the scene from the very inception of the theatre to the Elizabethan Age, he presents the Players with the mimetic theory of art in a nutshell. And the emphasis is as much on mimesis as on ethics when part of the function of art is said to 'show virtue her feature.' Indeed, the emphasis can be made to shift from one to the other, as Harry Levin has suggested: 'The Elizabethan conception of art as the glass of nature was ethical rather than realistic; for it assumed that, by contemplating situations which reflected their own, men and women could mend their ways and act with greater resolution thereafter.'[8] And Roland Frye, who has examined Shakespeare in relation to the Christian doctrine, concurs: 'The purpose of such a mirror, in addition to providing aesthetic delight, was to help a man to know himself and the human situation. Hamlet said that "to know a man well were to know himself," and Calvin wrote that "whenever I see a man I must of necessity behold myself *as in a mirror*." Implicit in these two statements is the full rationale for self-knowledge gained vicariously through the experience and knowledge of others.'[9] This is a far cry from any interpretation of the mirror metaphor as the mere reflection of nature.

Williams himself in his *Autobiography*

admits to making a return to Aristotle's theory of mimesis.[10] The position he adopts -- a typically modernist position -- is that imitating nature, which must be differentiated from copying nature, involves active invention, the active work of the imagination, and that consequently a work of art, whether it is a painting or a poem, constitutes an extension of nature rather than a representation of nature. This modernist approach to art is a legitimate one; but it is misleading to ascribe to Shakespeare the same approach.

While no one in the Renaissance could wholly escape Aristotle's influence, it is my contention that Shakespeare's aesthetics represents a departure from that of Aristotle, and indeed from that of classical writers as a whole. We are not here concerned with the knotty problem of Shakespeare's 'small Latin and less Greek.' He would at any rate have become acquainted with Aristotle's ideas through the numerous Italian and French commentators such as Robortelli, Castelvetro, Scaliger, Minturno, Daniello, Pelletier, or through the popular English critics of his time, such as Sidney, Puttenham and Wilson. For example, it would be practically impossible for any one, including Shakespeare, to ignore Aristotle's distinction between poetry and history. The famous passage must be quoted again:

> From what has been said it is clear too that the poet's job is not to tell what has happened but the kind of things that *can* happen, i.e., the kind of events that are possible according to probability or necessity. For the difference between the historian and the poet is not in

> their presenting accounts that are versified or not versified, since it would be possible for Herodotus' work to be put into verses and it would be no less a kind of history with verse than it is without verses; rather the difference is this: the one tells what has happened, the other the kind of things that can happen. And in fact that is why the writing of poetry is a more philosophical activity, and one to be taken more seriously, than the writing of history; for poetry tells us rather the universals, history the particulars. 'Universal' means what kinds of thing a certain kind of person will say or do in accordance with probability or necessity, which is what poetic composition aims at, tacking on names afterwards; while 'particular' is what Alcibiades did or had done to him.[11]

In the above passage, as Spingarn points out, 'Aristotle has briefly formulated a conception of ideal imitation ... which, repeated over and over again, became the basis of Renaissance criticism.'[12] What is so significant about the passage is that it not only constitutes a reply to Plato's indictment that 'poetry cannot represent truth because it cannot penetrate to the Ideas but stops short at the veil of Appearance (particulars)'[13] but also furnishes a rule as to how poetry should be written. There is no need for me to dwell on its insistence on universal truths, an insistence that has become a characteristic feature of Shakespeare's works,

as attested by centuries of critics.

Nor is there any need for me to show that Aristotle is the source and fountain-head of the Organic Principle that has been the unquestionable principle of composition for writers and artists ever since, not excepting Shakespeare. Aristotle has given it so much thought that he repeatedly draws our attention to its importance:

> Hence, just as in the other mimetic arts a single (unified) imitation is of a single object, so also the plot, since it is an imitation of an action, should be an imitation of an action that is unified, and a whole as well, and the constituent events of the plot should be so put together that if one of them is placed elsewhere or removed, the whole is disjointed and dislocated. For a part which, by being added or not added, does not lend any great clarity, is not a part of the whole.[14]

> Now about the kind of imitative art which is narrative and works in verse, it is clear that one should give the plots dramatic construction in the same way as in tragedies, that is, center them around a single action which is whole and complete and has beginning, middles, and end, so that like a single whole creature it may produce its proper pleasure.[15]

The above extracts sufficiently demonstrate that Shakespeare's aesthetics is in

part derived from the *Poetics*. But where Shakespeare departs from it, he does so quite radically, else his plays will not essentially differ from the works of Homer and Sophocles, on which the *Poetics* is mainly based. The mimetic theory of art which Aristotle shares with Plato and Horace necessarily presupposes the supremacy of nature: art can only be an imitation, whatever that may mean. This is how the sixteenth-century commentator Donatus Acciaiolus interprets it:

> He [Aristotle] says also that nature is superior to art, and this seems to be true since art is the imitator of nature, and that which imitates anything is less perfect than that which it imitates; hence art is called perfect when it is most closely assimilated to nature.[16]

Shakespeare may be said to have adopted a bifocal approach to this problem: in his tragedies, where 'humanity must perforce prey on itself, like monsters of the deep,' nature is indubitably the norm, while art, the work of depraved humanity, is downgraded, but in his comedies, where even the stubbornness of fortune can be translated into a quiet and sweet style, art reigns supreme. Such a bifocal approach was implicitly suggested by Evanthius when he said:

> ... all Comedy is made up of feigned actions, but Tragedy is more often fetched from historical belief.[17]

In our days Northrop Frye likewise makes a distinction between tragedy and comedy:

> In watching tragedy we are impressed by the reality of the illusion: we feel that, for instance, the blinding of Gloucester, though not really happening, is the kind of thing that can and does happen. In watching romantic comedy we are impressed by the illusion of the reality: we feel that, for instance, the conversion of Oliver and Duke Frederick at the end of *As You Like It* is the kind of thing that can't happen, yet we see it happening. In the action of a Shakespearean comedy, however, the kind of force associated with "wish fulfillment" is not helpless or purely a matter od dreams. It is, in the first place a power as deeply rooted in nature and reality as its opponent; in the second place, it is a power that we see, as the comedy proceeds, taking over and informing the predictable world.[18]

For Frye the distinction between a Shakespearean tragedy and a Shakespearean comedy is that while the former adheres more closely to reality, the latter evokes an illusion that is nevertheless rooted in nature and reality: it is, in short, a distinction between nature and art.

This bifocal approach, as we shall see, will shed some light on Hamlet's use of the mirror metaphor and on his implicit elevation of nature to become the norm by which art is measured. Lear, who invokes nature time and again so that his wicked daughters may be delivered into the hands of justice, something

that he himself has tried in vain to find in the world of man, unambiguously asserts the supremacy of nature:

> No, they cannot touch me for
> coining; I am the King
> himself.
> ...
> Nature's above art in that
> respect.
> (*King Lear*, IV. vi. 83-6)

'Nature's above art." Nowhere else is Shakespeare so explicit about nature's superiority over art. Even in *Troilus and Cressida*, where Shakespeare paints a gloomy picture of man, Ulysses the cynic shows how 'one touch of nature makes the whole world kin,' (III. iii. 175) though nature in this instance comes in the guise of Time the Destroyer. In tragedies like these and in places where the mood is predominantly pessimistic, nature's superiority over art is never in doubt, and the mimetic nature of Shakespeare's art is most in evidence.

But in comedies and in places where the mood is predominantly optimistic, art triumphs. In *Two Gentlemen of Verona* the might of art is irresistibly felt, for it tames nature, whether animate or inanimate:

> Ay,
> Much is the force of heaven-bred poesy.
> ...
> For Orpheus's lute was strung with
> poets' sinews,
> Whose golden touch could soften
> steel and stone,

Make tigers tame and huge
   Leviathans
Forsake unsounded deeps to dance
   on sands.
(III.ii./0-81)

The epilogue spoken by Feste in *Twelfth Night* may also be construed as an attempt to show how art can serve as an antidote to the ills inherent in the human condition as well as in nature.

When that I was and a little tiny boy,
  With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
A foolish thing was but a toy,
  For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came to man's estate,
  With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
'Gainst knaves and thieves men shut their
    gate,
  For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came unto my beds,
  With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
With toss-pots still had drunken heads,
  For the rain it raineth every day.

A great while ago the world begun,
  With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
But that's all one, our play is done,
  And we'll strive to please you every
    day.

The play, looked upon as an emblem of art, alone can provide you with the happiness you need in your daily life when nature, in the form of the wind and the rain, never ceases to batter you.

In Shakespeare's happier moods, art is no longer subject to nature, but actually improves

on it. This view is memorably expressed by Polixenes in *The Winter's Tale*:

> Perdita. For I have heard it said
> There is an art which, in their piedness, shares
> With great creating nature.
>
> Polixenes. Say there be;
> Yet nature is made better by no mean
> But nature makes that mean: so, over that art,
> Which you say adds to nature, is an art
> That nature makes. You see, sweet maid, we marry
> A gentler scion to the wildest stock,
> And make conceive a bark of baser kind
> By bud of nobler race. This is an art
> Which does mend nature -- change it rather -- but
> The art itself is nature.
> (IV. iv. 86-97)

Wolgang Clemen suggests that 'these last words of Polixenes certainly hold true for the whole of Shakespeare's drama.' Clemen does not play down the mimetic element, for the final impression he has of Shakespeare is that 'he is "holding a mirror up to nature".'[19] Yet the most important idea contained in Polixenes's words is the Renaissance belief that art improves on nature: 'there is an art which does mend nature -- change it rather.' This view, which can be traced from *Two Gentlemen of Verona* to the romances, including *Pericles* and *The Tempest*, represents a radical departure from Aristotle's aesthetics. And it is a view which

Shakespeare shares with many of his contemporaries both in England and on the European continent. As has been pointed out by scholars, the speech of Polixenes has much in common with George Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), in which art is spoken of as 'not only an aide and coadiutor to nature in all her actions, but an alterer of them, and in some sort a surmounter of her skill,' and with Bernardino Daniello's *Poetica* (1586), which asserts that 'many things in nature ... are improved by human art.'[20]

Modern scholarship has discovered that during the Renaissance there was in Italy a movement against the mimetic theory of art. Francesco Patrizi, the influential first holder of the chair in Platonic philosophy in the Sapienza at Rome, made a frontal attack on mimesis, whether Platonic or Aristotelian, in his *La deca disputata*, the second volume of his *Poetica* published in 1586, saying that 'if the poet imitates and is an imitator and if poetry is really an imitation he should make resemblances and be a maker of resemblances and poetry should be a resemblance.'[21] As Hathaway puts it, 'Patrizi's attack upon the mimetic concept can be thought of as one of the polar positions in the triangular tensions of Renaissance speculations on the question, Beni's and Mazzoni's Platonic interpretation representing another, and the Aristotelian orthodox view the third.'[22] Even Scaliger, an Aristotelian, maintains, as Spingarn says, that 'in imitating what ought to be rather than what is, the poet creates another nature and other fortunes, as if he were another God.'[23] Thus, Aristotle himself has paved the way for a Renaissance view of art which is anti-mimetic.

Sidney, who came under the influence of

Scaliger and other Italian critics, takes up a position which bears a striking resemblance to that of Shakespeare. In Sidney's *Defence of Poetry* the idea that art improves on nature finds its fullest expression:

> ... the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature, as the Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, chimeras, Furies, and such like: not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit. Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with so pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden.[24]

Nothing so openly and yet so splendidly affirms the humanistic confidence of the Renaissance: a man-made world is better than what nature can offer. This confidence, among other things, is tied to the idea of progress, without which art gwill for ever remain in subjection to nature, instead of altering it, improving on it, giving man a better world to live in.

NOTES

[1]*The Wheel of Fire* (London: Methuen, 1930), p. 8.

[2]Cf. R. Weimann's essay 'Mimesis in *Hamlet*' in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, eds. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 275-289.

[3]J. Hillis Miller, ed. *William Carlos Williams; A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1962), pp. 23-4.

[4]*An Essay on Criticism*, 135.

[5]According to J. E. Spingarn, 'during the sixteenth century itself there seems to have been a well-defined impression that the *Poetics* had been recovered only after centuries of oblivion. Thus, Bernardo Segni, who translated the *Poetics* into Italian in 1549, speaks of it as "abandoned and neglected for a long time"; and Bernardo Tasso, some ten years later, refers to it as "buried for so long a time in the obscure shadows of ignorance."' (*A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance*, 2nd ed., New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1908, p. 17).

[6]Baxter Hathaway, *The Age of Criticism: The Late Renaissance in Italy*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1962), p. 5.

[7]*Hamlet*, ed. H. Jenkins (The Arden Shakespeare), III. ii. 21-24.

[8]*The Question of Hamlet* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 157.

[9]Roland Mushat Frye, *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* (New Jersey: Princeton University press, 1963), pp. 268-9.

[10]p. 241.

[11]*Poetics*, trans. Gerald F. Else, 51a36-b11.

[12]J. E. Spingarn, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

[13]Gerald F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 305.

[14]*Poetics*, trans. Else, 51a30-35.

[15]*Ibid.*, 59a17-22. H. House claims that the comparison of a work of art with a living creature 'goes back to Plato's *Phaedrus* (264c) where Socrates says, of a speech, that it: "ought to be put together like a living creature, with a body of its own, not headless or footless, but having middle parts and extremities properly in keeping with each other, and with the whole."' (*Aristotle's Poetics: A Course of Eight Lectures*, London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1956, p. 49; but Plato has not given the idea the prominence it deserves.)

[16]D. Acciaiolus, *Commentarium in Ethica and Nicomachum*, II. vi. 32; p. 87. Quoted from J. E. Hankin's *Backgrounds of Shakespeare's Thought* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1978), p. 195. Hankins finds two references to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in Shakespeare which bear significant resemblances to Argyropylos's translation with a commentary by Donatus Acciaiolus (1565). (*Ibid.*, pp. 14-15).

[17]Quoted by Nevill Coghill in 'The Basis of Shakespearian Comedy,' *Essays and Studies*, new series, Vol. III (1950), p. 2.

[18]*A Natural Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 123.

[19]*Shakespeare's Dramatic Art* (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 211.

[20]See Harold Wilson, 'Nature and Art in *The Winter's Tale*,' *Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, 18 (1943), pp. 114-120.

[21]Quoted in B. Hathaway, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

[22]*Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

[23]J. E. Spingarn, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

[24]*Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan Van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973,) p. 78.

BEYOND WORDS

by

Anne Fairbairn

A Soldier Dies:

HOA DA, SOUTH VIETNAM 1975

In the gathering dusk, fireflies,
Air-light like prism beams,
Dance away the shadows of my fear.
Now I hear the thinking reeds
And the stillness beyond the wind
As my blood soaks into the sand.
All life is tidal, father,
I am going softly with the tide.

His Father Remembers:

DI LINH, SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM 1985

Words are weapons and wounds, my son,
An old man murmurs in Di Linh.
But you listened to the thinking reeds
And the stillness beyond the wind.
Now, under a silent moon,
Our ancestors' dust answers your own.
Yes, life is tidal my dearest boy,
You went softly with the tide.