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Editors

Abdul Majid bin Nabi Baksh
and
Margaret Yong

MACLALS
Department of English
University of Malaya
Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia

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HOME AT LAST: THE SENSE OF PLACE IN
V.S. NAIPAUL'S *A HOUSE FOR MR BISWAS*

by

Sharmani Patricia Gabriel

V.S.Naipaul's dramatization of the plight of the homeless refugee, as best epitomized in *A House for Mr Biswas*, is a recurrent theme not only in his body of fiction but in the literatures from the post-colonial societies of the Commonwealth and beyond. The practitioners of the new literatures in English have, in their attempts to delineate the displaced and alienated psyche, taken recourse again and again to the journey and house-building motifs, in themselves suggestive of the plight of the culturally restless and destitute.

A House for Mr Biswas, as a case in point, highlights the tragic predicament of Mr Biswas, surely new literature's most endearing portrait of alienation, who, deprived of a fixed cultural and political legacy, seeks continually for an unshifting geographical location, a place, he can call "home". The process of self-determination, as powerfully expressed in Mr Biswas's allegory of hope and disappointment, is one of endless voyaging. Ambitious, in his own way, and recalcitrant till the end, the novel's wandering hero scurries from one old and decaying house of strangers only to enter another, each move, nevertheless, a necessary component of the search for self.

Significant to the novelist's world-view and lying in the heart of Mr Biswas's quest to gain possession of his own life is the central metaphor of the house. The overwhelming image of the house is invoked in the novel as a trenchant symbol that frames its action and sustains as well as initiates Mr Biswas's search for both a physical and spiritual artifice to check his historical displacement. The house stands, then, as a shaping and organising symbol that leads Mr Biswas to the cultural "life that he had yet to live" (495) and by so doing arrests "his descent into the void" (237).

In the first few lines of the novel's anticipatory Prologue which could very well sum up as an obituary for the protagonist, we are informed that "[t]en weeks before he died, Mr Mohun Biswas, a journalist of Sikkim Street, St James, Port of Spain, was sacked.... [He] was forty-six, and had four children. He had no money. His wife Shama had no money" (7). There is only one, singular possession that redeems Mr Biswas's death in poverty--a two-storey house in Trinidad's Port of Spain. Mr Biswas's thoughts of this house, his acquisition of it, elicit from him, even as he lies in wait at death's door, feelings representative of the colonial experience:

... he was struck again and again by the wonder of being in his own house, the audacity of it: to walk in through his own front gate, to bar entry to whoever he wished, to close his doors and windows every night, to hear no noises except those of his family, to wander

freely from room to room and about his yard, instead of being condemned, as before, to retire the moment he got home to the crowded room in one or the other of Mrs Tulsi's houses, crowded with Shama's sisters, their husbands, their children.... (8)

The protagonist's elation at being in his own house, as owner of it, with the freedom to walk in and out at his own will, is the culmination of a life-wish, the wholeness of which, however, threatens to be in question. For the house, we learn, is a caricature of Mr Biswas's dream of freedom; "[t]he staircase was dangerous, the upper floor sagged; there was no back door; most of the windows didn't close; one door could not open..." (12). Further, the house has been mortgaged beyond any possible means of payment. We learn that "Mr Biswas owed, and had been owing for four years, three thousand dollars. The interest on this, at eight percent, came to twenty dollars a month..." (7). Yet, it is the peculiar nature of Mr Biswas's triumph which makes him rise above these considerations to regard the house still his own, a legacy, even, to his children:

From now their lives would be ordered, their memories coherent.... And rapidly the memories of Hanuman House, The Chase, Green Vale, Shorthills, the Tulsi house in Port of Spain would become jumbled, blurred.... (581)

The gross structural irregularities of the house, then, and its irretrievable mortgage can, in no significant way, impair the validity and significance of Mr Biswas's achievement. The house, for Mr Biswas, holds incredible metaphoric and spiritual manifestations which include and go beyond the traditional meaning usually associated with it. The house, for Mr Biswas, *his* house, does not merely function as a shelter, a physical edifice. It is a structure that represents the quests and dreams of the colonial man, a creation of a personal landscape that seeks to efface a personal history of humiliation and deprivation. For Mr Biswas, the house is a powerful indictment against the nothingness which is his cultural, political and geographical inheritance.

Mr Biswas's psychologically compelling and near fanatical desire for individual ownership of a house must then be viewed in relation to his plight as an exile in an alien land. It is a history that he shares with his fictional creator. Born in Trinidad, a third-generation West Indian of East Indian descent, Naipaul perfectly understood the sense of dispossession, dislocation and estrangement that assailed a transplanted colonial like himself. Economic necessity, interpreted as "fate" by both his and Mr Biswas's predecessors, had brought them from India as indentured workers to supplement slave-labour in Trinidad's sugar-estates. The new immigrants lived an uprooted existence, shunting from one ramshackle mud hut in the swamplands to another. Thoughts of their eventual return to India and of Trinidad being at best only a place of "temporary exile" prevented the effective forging of links with

the new land. The East Indian immigrants could speak no English, the language of the colonisers, and were not interested in the land on which they lived, having neither adequate knowledge of local ways nor the interest to acquire any.

The unprofitable estates, however, even after decades of hard labour, could not yield enough to take the labourers back to their land of origin. Even when the opportunity could have been seized years later, many of them were afraid to leave the "familiar temporariness" for India which after all these years of enforced exile in Trinidad had become just as unfamiliar. The Indians were, thus, left to decay, with a lost sense of place, no historical identity, deprived of their roots in a spiritual sense as well. With no cohesion, no sense of identification with their new land, they lacked the stabilising influences of a settled community. The "familiar temporariness" was paradoxically to become the permanent condition of life for the East Indian West Indian, a nomenclature itself indicative of the forces of cultural chaos at work.

The inhabitants of Naipaul's fictional world are caught in this phase of turbulence and historical alienation. Marooned in an insecure and nightmarish "derelict land" and viewed as the descendants of semi-slaves, they find themselves struggling against their cultural and geographical dispossession, victims of, to use David Ormerod's expression, "aimless isolation" (81).

The Biswasian experience is a microcosm of the Caribbean impermanence created by this sense of acute isolation and depersonalization, central to the theme that dominates much of Naipaul's fiction. Born a second-generation Indian in a colonial society that had lost touch with its indigenous cultural roots, Mr Biswas suffers a despairing sense of violation and psychic loss as introduced by his displaced birth and exacerbated by the absence of familial ties and the failure of relationships; "with his mother's parents dead, his father dead, his brothers on the estate at Felicity, Dehuti [his sister] as a servant in Tara's house, and himself rapidly growing away from [his mother] Bipti...it seemed to him that he was really quite alone" (40). Mr Biswas's attempts to go beyond this sense of spiritual deprivation and geographical dislocation by looking for early signs that could reconcile him to his earth, and thus create meaning out of the engulfing void which confronts him, not only come to nought, but underline the solitariness of the quest to which he has committed himself:

...he saw nothing but oil derricks and grimy pumps.... His grandparents' house had also disappeared, and when huts of mud and grass are pulled down they leave no trace. His navel-string, buried on that inauspicious night...had turned to dust. The pond had been drained.... The stream where he had watched the

black fish had been dammed.... The world carried no witness to Mr Biswas's birth and early years. (41)

Faced with the terrifying prospect of living "unaccommodated" in the inhospitable and fragmented universe which has stripped him of his personal dimensions, his human necessity, Mr Biswas begins his rebellion.

Mr Biswas's gestures of defiance, in fact, begin at birth. "Six-fingered and born in the wrong way" at the "inauspicious hour" of midnight, Mr Biswas, as he is referred to throughout by the narrator, makes his appearance into the world with the customary aberrance which is going to characterize his actions for the rest of his life. That he is invested with the odd honorific even at the time of birth is suggestive of the novelist's tragicomic perception, his vision of both the futility and the inherent heroism of this man-child whose "nobler purpose...even in this limiting society" (182) is to transcend his own ridiculous human littleness to achieve a wholeness of being commensurate with his creative and imaginative dream.

At fifteen years of age, the young Mr Biswas is sent away to assume a discipleship with Pundit Jairam from whom he learns Hindi and the scriptures. Mr Biswas goes about his mode of worship and morning ablutions out of a sense of duty rather than any ingrained religious feeling. The mechanical offices, however, of decorating the shrine, passing the brass tray

and the lighted camphor, doling out consecrated milk, and the endless hours of chanting from little understood, prescribed Sanskrit verses soon enervate the young Mr Biswas. Culturally and geographically exiled from his home culture, Mr Biswas shows little understanding of and even less reverence for the Hindu religion in which he receives instructions. He sits "without religious fervour" (53) while performing the ceremonies, and after the faithful have departed, he rushes to the shrine to pillage "it for the coins that had been offered, hunting carefully everywhere, showing no respect for the burnt offerings or anything else" (51). The full measure, however, of his religious revolt is unconsciously reflected in his tossing of an handkerchief filled with his excreta at Jayaram's cherished oleander tree. The sacred oleander, desecrated thus, can never again be used at the *pūja*. This leads to the youth's immediate departure from Jairam's and takes him back to the world of his early days; the cluttered and grimy room, smelling of paint and turpentine, at the back trace of Pagotes.

Mr Biswas's job as a sign-painter lands him at Hanuman House, the abode of the Tulsis, and the representative in the novel of the fossilized culture of Trinidadian Hindu society. He is quickly bullied into marriage with Shama, a young Tulsi girl. His sole attraction in winning her hand, he discovers soon after, being, as it has always been in other times and other places, his Brahmin "badge of caste". The noisy, pious and hierarchical Tulsi world with its insistence on living by rituals represents to Mr Biswas a "worthless" Hinduism struggling to maintain the social patterns of its original

culture through a series of elaborate pretences. Mr Biswas sees in the imposing facade of the Tulsi fortress, with its thick, impenetrable walls, and especially in the forbidding figure of Mrs Tulsi, a decadence similar to the one he had experienced at the contradictory and therefore intrinsically incoherent world of Jairam's. In both, their embrace of him has been analogous to the colonial experience. By entering the Tulsi world, Mr Biswas discovers, he has sacrificed his liberty and his future, yet he is also seduced by the refuge and semblance of stability which such a sacrifice brings him. He wavers, angrily and at other times self-recriminatingly, between rebellion and acceptance.

Against this inherently unstable and chaotic environment, with its rigidly yet eclectically maintained value-system, Mr Biswas introduces his revolutionary ideas by way of caste and religious reform. His rebellion against the sterile and static Tulsi world is further reflected in his escape as a land overseer, and later, as a journalist and a social welfare worker, and in his own schemes and series of daydreams.

The vision of the house sustains Mr Biswas through his struggles against the menacing colonial void evoked brilliantly by the Tulsi milieu. Hemmed in by the press of quarrelsome couples, faceless Tulsi daughters, sons-in-law, noisy children, and the larger-than-life figures of Mrs Tulsi and her brother-in-law, Seth, Mr Biswas loses his psychic features to acquire the anonymity he both fears and detests. The cloistered, windowless, and shabby room in the

House which has been relegated to him and his wife for their use reflects the internal landscape of his mind; "[t]he world was too small, the Tulsis family too large. He felt trapped" (91). His thoughts centre on escape through rebellion. But although Mr Biswas does succeed in achieving a measure of independence, his entrapment is overwhelming. The symbol of the house by now becomes an obsession.

The image of the house, then, as it operates in the novel is used to define the geographical space that the displaced colonial man aspires after. Mr Biswas's odyssey takes him from one hut to another; from the crumbling, neglected hut at the back trace of Pagotes to Hanuman House at Arwacas, to the long, straggling settlement of mud huts in the Chase, to the end room of the barracks at Green Vale, to the abandoned house at Shorthills, and finally to his own house at Sikkim Street, Port of Spain. His life's journey is one that has seen the pain of failure and the lasting loneliness that comes from isolation and estrangement. But, it has been redeemed by sporadic successes:

But bigger than all was the house, his house.... How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it: to have died among the Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large, disintegrating and indifferent family; to have left Shama and the children among them, in one room; worse, to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the

earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated. (13-14)

Constantly moving, because being homeless he can in a sense "never arrive" (Theroux 77), Mr Biswas finally achieves his dream of responsibility; "now at the end he found himself in his own house, on his own half-lot of land, his own portion of the earth" (8). The nature of his achievement acquires added significance when contrasted with the gradual disintegration of the Tulsi world. Mrs Tulsi's sons, the "gods" of the establishment, become increasingly alienated by education and travel. Seth himself, once Tulsidom's vital centre, is driven from the household. It appears that Mr Biswas's achievement in attaining "status" as a true citizen of Trinidad through the creation of an autonomous, self-reliant ideal as symbolised by his house, gains in stature when juxtaposed against the break-up of the Tulsi world, a world which has at best only been imitative of its home culture; a world of rituals, devoid of inner cohesion.

In its symbolic state, Mr Biswas's search for a house that will be his own is the search for "a new state of mind" (282) that takes him on a journey from an experience of "nothingness" to an acceptance of the new world of Trinidad. Mr Biswas's homelessness, being a paradigm for his unanchored and uprooted identity, his achievement of a sense of place is real, not only metaphysical; Mr Biswas's acquisition of the house, with its rapidly growing laburnum tree and its blossoming garden of sweet-smelling flowers, is able to confirm

his "new" identity both in his mind and in the physical terrain. The concrete house at Port of Spain with its brick walls and roof of corrugated iron indicates in actual and symbolic terms a victory over the makeshift mud walls, and the low sooty thatches that have stood as a trenchant symbol of his former rootlessness and dereliction. From being a "nobody at all", Mr Biswas has attained human necessity, has become a man with a house to call his own. It is truly the doll's house made "real":

...[he] knew exactly what he wanted. He wanted, in the first place, a real house, made with real materials. He didn't want mud for walls, earth for floor, tree branches for rafters and grass for roof. (210)

No longer a visitor or a guest, he is now an inhabitant in his own house, no longer a nomad but a permanent dweller, with a plot of unshifting, secure ground under his feet.

It is perhaps appropriate to end with the novelist's own vindication of Mr Biswas's achievement which may challenge some of us to see the precariously built house with new eyes:

"The garden was blooming".
"And the house did not fall".

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GARLANDS AND WREATHS (from Li Po)
for Chong Yok Lin

by

Leonard Jeyam

1. Maidens Gathering Lillies

The singing maidens of Ye-Ki would form
infinite rows gathering lillies as they'd row
on a painted lake. And if you were to chance
upon them, a confused silence would suddenly
descend as they scattered themselves amongst
the thickets... then tittering, they'd laugh,
and would still be heard from miles away.

2 In the Place of Chao Yang

In your blue palace twirl the sweet young girls
with garlands and wreaths. They will revel
there till the first light of morning awakens
the drawn curtains of vestal silk.
But now the moon leans down peering
into the blossoms of the peach garden.

Come with me, my love! We shall go
and listen to the stir of wings
the bamboos are making with the wind.

3. In Your Father's Garden

There was a storm that night
in your father's garden.
I was cold; you were unaware.

Tonight, I see the flames of the forest,
where below, a memory ago,
I longed for you.

4 The Empty Room

A beautiful woman lived here once
in this room filled with flowers.
She is gone, that wondrous woman,
and her couch awaits her no more.

Three years, and her fragrance lingers still.
Three years and from grief
the leaves can only fall.

FEMINISM IN BARBARA HANRAHAN'S
THE FRANGIPANI GARDENS

By

Wong Ming Yook

The focus and goal of feminist ideology and fiction lie in the ultimate transformation of life for women, through the alteration of patriarchal norms in society and the revision of women's understanding of sexual roles and gender identity (Rosinsky 1). For many feminist groups, the transformation of life for women, both in a social, as well as personal context, forms their underlying vision of a utopian society where the equality and freedom of the individual assumes more rights than social conformity or control.¹ In *The Frangipani Gardens*, this focus and goal gain in sharpness and clarity as Hanrahan reconsiders the historical and social perspectives of her culture through the eyes of one of her central characters, Lou Mundy. *The Frangipani Gardens* explores the buried lives of individuals against a brittle though dazzling social backdrop. As an example of feminist fiction, it examines the difficult struggle of the individual towards freedom and independence through portraying the underground, subversive lives and thoughts of women, and using their surface personalities as worthwhile contrasts for their truer, unspoken selves. The presence of two opposite and irreconcilable selves -- surface and underground -- is a thematic concern well known in literature. The individual's struggle is usually described as a psychological journey

towards an integrated personal identity through compromise between the demands of the two personalities. But in Hanrahan's novel, the polarity suggested by the dual personalities of her characters emphasises the gap between the socially and historically received perceptions of the female gender (the surface self), and what the women perceive themselves to be (the underground self). As such, the movements they make towards wholeness exclude the possibility of compromise. Hanrahan's view is extreme in that she sees no alternative for her women characters except a renunciation of socially conditioned and received ideas, and a total revision of history involving the rejection of patriarchal tradition and the resuscitation of the forgotten culture and tradition of women. Transformation, for Lou Mundy as for the other women characters, occurs when they sacrifice the glittering golden cage (here seen as high society in Adelaide) for a less glamorous but certainly more authentic life.

Hanrahan's depiction of Adelaide high society as dazzling and deceptive carries the cynicism of her view of society and culture. It is in the heady atmosphere of the gay and liberated 1920's that Hanrahan pushes her point home: history and society do carry oppressive and repressive cultural notions which are anathema to women. She portrays Lou as a girl who aspires to a social success. Her mentor, Girlie O'Brien, is a socialite who grooms Lou in her own image. But as Lou discovers, in order to be independent, she must reject the incarcerating role Girlie, the repressed immature child-woman, has drawn out of her. In fact, Lou's transformation is effected when she acknowledges her own sexuality. Coming down

from the pedestal of being worshipped as a pure and sexless ideal liberates Lou because it is then that she assumes her real identity. Thus Lou's rites of passage in *The Frangipani Gardens* illustrate that the concern of the novel is not so much to reevaluate and revise the received ideas and traditions of life, but to reject these as anti-women, and to stress instead the necessity of reconstructing the female identity. This ideological reshaping and reclaiming of women from a thoroughly female point of view is essential to Hanrahan's vision of the transformation of life for women. *The Frangipani Gardens* then not only records the rites of passage of Lou Mundy from girl to woman, but also traces, in a more general sense, the representative rites of passage of the historical immature child-woman, repressed by patriarchal forms, into the liberated mature woman, who rejects these patriarchal attitudes and recreates, for herself, new myths and new fictions on which to base her life.

While the thematic line that Hanrahan takes is not new, what is convincing is her own uncompromising stand of the need for rejection as part of the process of reconstructing identity. What is also refreshing is Hanrahan's concentrating on the existence of a vital, though largely forgotten female tradition running parallel to the more dominant male one. Since the annals of world history as we know it record mainly male culture and myth, Hanrahan deliberately undermines this by her refusal to consider its contribution to be of any value to her characters' maturity. Neither this history nor myth has the ability to confer to new generations vision or revelation. The heritage implied is not life-giving, but rather deadly,

to both male and female. What Hanrahan suggests here is really the need to rest what is evidently an exhausted and outworn tradition and to consider the matriarchal alternative.

This critical view of male history is depicted in its male custodian, Boy O'Brien, who is emotionally crippled from his contact with history. Coming back from the war a hero, Boy discovers that Adelaide life is far removed from the reality of the trenches. Society is a brittle facade that boy must protect. Hanrahan's cutting description of this homecoming presents us with the irreconcilable gap between what boy witnessed in the war, and the sentimental version he delivers to the Australians:

Flags waved and there was bunting
and a big WELCOME HOME across the
street. Boy wore khaki and his
medals and cameras clicked,
reporters scribbled in their pads.
Boy's mouth opened and shut, it
mentioned pluck and gallant
comrades. Gents blew their noses
and ladies cried when it came to
the poetic bit about battlefields
covered with poppies, and a tiny
lark rising. It was pathetic....
Boy was a Sunday School hero with
a sickly grin ... (14)

Given this inhibiting and death-bringing tradition, Hanrahan makes it clear that there is no choice for her characters but to reject it if they are to assume some control over their destinies. This feminist desire for control over the past and future through instituting a

matriarchal system is made possible only with a convincing and viable alternative tradition. Hanrahan's preoccupation in *The Frangipani Gardens*, is to prove this point and to resurface this suppressed tradition and heritage. The true custodians of history are powerful women like Granma Eily, Boy and Girlie's grandmother, and Lizzie, the local herbalist, to name a few. If the patriarchal system is victimising and seen as deadly, the matriarchal tradition is nurturing and liberating. And just as the surface personalities of the characters are linked with the patriarchal, the underground personalities are connected to the matriarchal tradition. Feeling and intuition have often been seen as feminine rather than masculine qualities, and since it is these qualities which have been suppressed by the patriarchal tradition, they assume positions of great importance and value in Hanrahan's vision. Her view of the differences between male and female obviously inclines towards the essentialist more so than the androcentric view held by such theorists like Kristeva, for instance, who maintain that "woman can never be defined ... cannot, should not since the term is a social and not a natural construct ..." (quoted in Rosinsky 137). Hence, Hanrahan's female characters are developed within familiar parameters. Her consideration of essentialism assists in strengthening the case against men.² Women's nurturing and emotional heritage is shown to have long been subverted by the male conspiracy of emphasising only male knowledge and aspirations in world culture. However, worshipping the Mother Goddess is neither tame nor safe. The female tradition, while seen as typically nurturing and protecting on one hand, is also revealed to be destructive and

threatening on the other. The underground personalities, which carry the truth in themselves, are described in this novel as monstrous and evil. However, what they threaten are the social facades created by the characters, the "sentimental fug" which makes Boy into a pathetic "Sunday School hero with a sickly grin." Therefore, the female custodians of history are bizarre figures, constantly at variance with society and its mores, and in this way, constantly threatening the safety of that society. Granma Eily, for instance, thrives on what Boy calls "blight and misfortune" (6), which, to her, make up the truth:

And you didn't want to listen, but Granma made you. Her cracked voice held you - you were in the grip of death, back there with Eily. Wringing your hands and wailing bitterly, wandering the highroad, grasping at anything that promised sustenance.

Even if Boy stopped up his ears, even if he ran from the room, her voice could still find him. At night it soundlessly whispered, it made him see: the dry tongue, shrunk to half its size and brown in the centre; the thin bloodless lips, coated with sores ... discoloured sodden skin, putrid smell ... (7)

Her idea of history focuses on gory descriptions and personal accounts of her own suffering as a young girl in famine stricken Ireland. In contrast is Boy's rational view of history as

something final and finished, existing only in the distant past -- "all those dates which heralded all those countless endings -- was what he liked best" (5).

Boy's resorting to the rational in place of the more uncomfortable irrational and feeling self is a typical gesture of retreat and defeat. Asserting control through the mind becomes for him a way out of his fears: "Feeling made you vulnerable, so Boy gave it up" (5). Hanrahan exploits this fear of emotion in Boy to describe his development or his own particular rites of passage into experience. Boy's fears originate as sexual fears. His fall from innocence is initiated by the Serpent figure of the novel, Pearl, his father's assistant in the floral shop. Hanrahan's recreating the Eden scene (i.e. Boy is seduced by Pearl in the floral shop) with a woman in the role of the traditional Serpent deceiver connects the female tradition with not only the qualities of nurturing and protecting, but also, as Boy discovers, and as Lou herself will eventually acknowledge, with sexuality. In place of the traditional ideal of woman as a sexless figure, Hanrahan impresses her view of the sexuality of her characters. She sees the vitality and urgency of their sexual freedom as life-bearing, as compared with the life-denying desexed female of the earlier tradition. Her earthy females bear not only the tradition which nourishes humankind, but they also contain within the sexual definitions of their female gender the seeds of life.

Pearl, as the Serpent, brings carnal knowledge to Boy. However, Hanrahan's treatment of her sexual excesses and irregularities, while

it does emphasise female sexuality, is on the whole negative rather than positive. Pearl is a fallen woman herself, hiding her twisted nature behind a pious front:

Pearl was a riddle. She sang that she was the white flower of a blameless life, but her tongue liked to linger on smut. Her hush-hush voice was a generous voyeur, always willing to share the peep-show. (15)

In *The Frangipani Gardens*, her equal is Girlie O'Brien. In Hanrahan's scheme, it is women like Pearl and Girlie who betray their sex. Their conforming to society is an outward gesture which allows them freedom to assert their sexual power and dominance over men and women without the threat of exposure. Lou Mundy's mother, Ella, compared with them is in this sense the authentic figure who pays for her sexual honesty by being labelled a whore. If women are victimised by the prevalent system, then both Pearl and Girlie are representative pictures of these victims. In Girlie especially, Hanrahan defines the woman whose inner personality shares nothing in common with her outer self:

... Girlie didn't want tameness, sameness, safety. Inside her miniature body was an ogre, longing to get out ... Constantly, Girlie longed for other ages, when monsters of impiety were the norm.

It was the one she loved who'd stunted her most. Girlie had been

maimed early on. The reward of Papa's tyrant arms about her had set her off playing little girl for life. Yet all the time ... when a docile Girlie set on Papa's knee ... a stranger Girlie jeered inside her head and spat out the silent maledictions that cut at the sentimental fug ... it was always like that: Girlie was always two. (17-18)

The male myths which imprison Girlie and Pearl are responsible also for their corruption. Hanrahan's description of them both as decaying hot house flowers is apt. Pearl is the "stem of decaying flowers" (9) to Boy, and Girlie, to Lou Mundy is an exotic flower exuding a strong "sweetness that suggested decay" (91). The title of the novel, *The Frangipani Gardens*, has her in mind, for Girlie lives in The Frangipani Gardens, the metaphorical hothouse from which she reigns.

Girlie's role in the novel also corresponds to Pearl's as the figure of the Serpent deceiver. She comes closer in fact, to the actual archetypal deceiver. Her corrupting power extends beyond Lou to influence her young epileptic brother, Tom Mundy as well. But her seduction of Tom is not sexual. It is rather a seduction of the mind. From his strange epileptic world of visions and dreams, she draws him into her own web of the purely rational. However, Girlie's attitude towards the system she serves is ambivalent: she hates the system that supports her. Underneath the carefully constructed facade of the society hostess, Girlie shares a common hatred and resentment of

men with the other society females. Tom's discovery of the male voodoo doll illustrates the unspoken but intentioned malice of the repressed female for the domineering male:

But the clay man ... It had been made by someone in the Gully who was sick; a dabbler in esoterics -someone who'd started off pondering tea leaf patterns and gone on to easy lessons in dream interpretation and how to rule the stars. Mysticism was chic.... It was something to do with gipsy bangles and incense sticks.... And then you found you'd made a terrible mistake. One minute it was so thrilling: you were a sensitive, a child of the foreworld, sunk in a misty Gaelic dream; the next, you were in the grip of something elemental, malign. It was evil and it took you seriously ... and without meaning to, you'd turned into evil's quarry ... (85-86)

In her tarot card game with Boy, the same male-female hatred and struggle for dominance is enacted. In keeping with Hanrahan's view of the malign power of the twisted, repressed female, it is Girlie of course who holds the trump cards over Boy:

Girlie tuned the card over and a thunderbolt chopped off the top of the pyramid. And the maiden had her hand in the lion's mouth; the hanging man's hair touched earth.

It was only cards - only a game, but they played as if they took it seriously. Boy sucked his mouth in, he concentrated so hard that his face was mazed with lines; Girlie's cheeks were on fire as her hands revealed Enchantress and Martyr, but her voice was ice-cold. The Child of the Dawn sat in the drawing room, but really she was far away ... it was the drawing room, but really she was far away ... it was the drawing room - it was a land of perpetual snow ... there were ice-caverns, brittle glaciers, frozen seas. (70-71)

The implications of Girlie's trump cards, Enchantress and Martyr, are obvious. These are her weapons against men, the power to enchant and, even more insidious, the power of martyrdom, of apparent sacrifice and submission before the male. Girlie's pattern of asserting power over the male is expressed in the duality of her female character as both the goddess and the witch (on one hand, the traditional fount of male inspiration and morality, and on the other, the traditional fallen woman who, like the adulteress in *Proverbs*, leads men into perdition). But Girlie perpetuates her own fall as the price of power: it is the duality of the splintered self which assures her position.

Hanrahan's examination of female identity discusses power in a different sense. As I have tried to establish, reconstruction involves an acceptance and revelation of the unspoken aspects of the female self, the monster or beast

in woman. As we have seen, Hanrahan goes as far as to suggest that the "beast" is, in fact, the authentic female self which has been constantly denied expression by a system that views it as threatening and anti-social. Recreating the female identity by rejecting the system implies not only the acceptance of the "beast," but also for Hanrahan, rejecting the spurious outer self which has been conditioned and created by the dictates of this system.

The female desire for power and control is thus imbued with a noble strain: wrenching control from the male by authorising the monster's validity as the true self provides a whole new perspective on life. In uplifting the monster, Hanrahan argues that it is only evil or ugly in the eyes of the society it threatens. Its associations with passion and sexuality link it with creativity and the imagination. In the monster lies the female's power to give and bear life.

Artistic creation, for Hanrahan, belongs to the female part of the life-bestowing activity she engages in. It is the power which in the end enables Hanrahan's vision to come to pass, that is the reconstruction of the woman through the process of recreating and reinterpreting life. In fact, it is the female artist Doll, in *The Frangipani Gardens*, who finally emerges as the complete woman. Hanrahan's "sympathetic portraits of authentically creative women show artistic creation to be the most positive of human activities" (Brenda Walker 205). Similarly, "creative failure is evidence of personal limitation, destructive escapism and self-indulgence" (Walker 204).

Doll's name belies her true identity as the artist in the story. In her as in all the other female characters, there exists a surface and submerged personality; Doll as the creative artist metamorphoses from a meek "lady water-colourist" (33) in the day to a painter of "fantastic pictures at night" (153). These personae are clearly defined and demarcated; one is a purely social self with "good taste [as] a guiding spirit" (203), and the other, the "beast" of the night hours that Hanrahan chooses to call "woman."

The condemnation of patriarchy and its repressive norms are suggested through Doll's wilful creation of her surface self, the false front she puts up, at once to mock and appease the memory of her dead parents:

She heard their deadly voices speaking for her: Homely ... not a scrap of imagination ... doesn't feel a thing. And wincing, she screwed up the hateful red hair tighter, she stabbed the pins in with a queer sort of joy. She was a dutiful daughter, doing it for them: dressing so dully, painting so timid. She would show them the extent of her recklessness as she pretended away her life. (153)

Functioning as a constant intrusion and disruption of this cool, composed "Gully water-colourist" (153) image is the urgent prompting of her submerged inner self as it struggles for power and expression. Doll's belated psychological "coming of age", when it finally happens, occurs in summer, the season in which

her passionate nature assumes ascendancy over her frozen (wintertime) self:

... in summer Doll was always uneasy, for summer was always a cheat. You felt drowsy, bewitched by the heat; you felt queer, somehow excited, as the shivers of heat teased you; you felt anything might happen ... The light ... grew brighter, the sky arched higher, till, just when you thought it safely far away, the blueness swooped, it fell upon you, and the sky was an upside-down teacup and you were caught inside - you hit at the shiny blue porcelain hardness, but you couldn't escape ... (154)

The language of the narrative, in describing Doll's reaction towards the summer heat, is similar to the language used in describing Doll's feelings when she acts out her nighttime self. In summer, the drowsiness and half-conscious state she experiences suggests the influence of the irrational, emotional and unconscious submerged self. Under the sway of her nighttime personality, she feels like a "sleepwalker", painting in her dreams (153). Needless to say, the stifling heat of the Australian weather corresponds to Doll's own psychological climate. The exaggerated depiction of the oppressive heat, and the confined feeling of the characters trapped within their houses to escape the summer heat, further illustrate the threat of the inner unvoiced self to the surface self: "Housebound, the summer was a thick cocoon and you were lost

in it; it wrapped you in mummy bandages, you would never get out" (59). by implying that Doll, and others like her, cannot escape their destinies, Hanrahan makes clear to us the inevitability of social and philosophical changes which will overtake the current trend.

Pushing back the social and historical boundaries which have defined and confined women for so long, Hanrahan allows us to see that the male system is founded on pretense and lies. The figure which emerges after Miss Doll Strawbridge, "Gully water-colourist, meek and mild" (153), disappears, is that of a wild and exaggerated "goddess with confetti-dot freckles and bonfire hair" (153). But Hanrahan's feminist alternative of this exaggerated, larger than life female figure as powerful and rich is certainly more acceptable and desirable than the colourless Miss Strawbridge.

The power to reconstruct life which lies in the hands of the artist liberates the characters to fulfill their true destinies. Doll, who is the feminist goddess and artist, is bestowed with the power to provide alternative endings for the other characters through her art. Her "fantastic pictures" are revelatory renditions of her artistic vision of the futures of the other characters. In effect, Doll functions as the prophetess in the story, because she records the true natures of the other characters as well as their destinies in paint. Through her art, new configurations for life are created for the other characters as the creative process breaks up and recreates definitions for their lives. To quote Brenda Walker again, "Hanrahan's novels celebrate human artifice as potentially life-enhancing, possessed of a mysteriously

efficacious power to heal the divided psyche and avert disaster in the external world" (204).

Possessed with the power to recreate and alter lives in fruitful and positive ways, Doll's ultimate function is to play Messiah to Girlie and Pearl's Devil, to offer, through the power of her art, salvation for the other characters. Her many related roles as goddess, prophetess, and messiah, allow her to emerge as the true authority figure in *The Frangipani Gardens*, the character on whom the responsibility of renaming the woman, of reconstructing their lives from a new perspective, actually rests.

So far, I have considered mainly the female giving voice to her own heritage and tradition as something apart from the tradition of men. But Hanrahan's vision of the matriarchal tradition replacing the patriarchal does not exclude the reconstruction or transformation of the male character. In fact, Hanrahan tries to show the attractiveness of the former to the men in the novel as well. In *The Frangipani Gardens*, she portrays several male characters who are heirs of a female tradition rather than a male one. But typically, these male characters are outcasts of their own society. By allying themselves with the female, they become disinherited and disowned, and are identified with the female instead in their isolation and alienation from the world. Charlie Roche, Lizzie's heir, becomes caricatured by the Gully folk into a kind of local bogeyman called Cockroach. His comment to Tom, his own heir, that "proper people were deadly" (96), refers to this humiliating indignity he suffers at being reduced to a

fantasy figure from a child's nightmare. Charlie's ignominious end points out the impossibility of his ever belonging to Fern Gully:

He was an old stranger, blurred
by darkness, trudging up the lane.
He stalked on, a huddled shadow
man; his shambling footfalls died
away.... Night took him - or that
clump of trees, that bend in the
lane.

And where was he going, what
could become of him? Would he
trudge on forever, an old man from
myth, bound for those lost cities
that were part of his past ...?
And would he find peace at last,
had he found it already - slumped
in tangled grass, sunk away
beneath a drift of rusty leaves?
(214)

It is in Charlie's end that we see the impossibility of compromise. Charlie, or Cockroach, as a female representative, assumes for us the form of the monster rejected by society; and in as far as the typical conservative society is concerned, he can never become a legitimate representative of the human psyche.

The alienated figure of Charlie Roche (and to an extent, Tom) is Hanrahan's reminder to the Gully folk of the existence of another side to the life they have chosen. But by doing so, she perpetuates the gap between male and female, and augments the isolation and alienation of her

positive female (and male) characters. But perhaps what is more important is that Charlie maintains his integrity by not assuming a social veneer or gloss; Doll towards the end still remains Miss Strawbridge, but is now significantly described in words closer to her "confetti-dot goddess with bonfire hair" persona than the muted and subdued old maid of Sorrento.

Hanrahan's conclusion reiterates her early argument that compromise is undesirable and impossible for the female to accept, since it adds to the danger of the female psyche being totally destroyed by the dominant male one. If indeed the feminist struggle is to lead to the transformation of life for women in a Utopia governed by the principles of freedom and equality, the only solution, as Hanrahan well knows, lies in a rejection of what a feminist critic, Baruch, has called the "dystopian threat - the massive centralised state" which encourages hierarchies and which uses "technology to control and pervert rather than to liberate" (xiv); in other words, patriarchy. In *The Frangipani Gardens*, there is no resolution leading to reintegration with society for the characters. The picture which finally emerges is that of two parallel worlds, existing in uneasy juxtaposition.

NOTES

¹See Elaine Hoffman Baruch's Introduction to *Women in Search of Utopia: Mavericks and Mythmakers* (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), for her feminist definition and consideration of Utopia.

²See Natalie Rosinsky's "Metamorphosis: The Shaping of Female Identity" in her book, *Feminist Futures: Contemporary Women's Speculative Fiction* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press) for a fuller discussion of androgyny and essentialism.

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THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP:
INITIALLY A NOVEL ABOUT SEX

by

E. N. Dorall

The contention of this article is that *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41) begins as one kind of novel, new and interesting, for Dickens as well as for nineteenth-century English fiction, but soon changes into another, juxtaposing pathos and comedy within an alternating picaresque and elaborately plotted narrative in the familiar manner of *Oliver Twist* (1837-38) and *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39). Critics have always been aware that it is Dickens's most haphazard novel, originally a "little tale" intended to take up only a few numbers of his new miscellany *Master Humphrey's Clock*, and then hastily expanded to boost sagging sales (Forster 123). He was a third of the way through when he decided to make Nell die (*Letters*, 2, 125n.), and he also altered his conception of other characters in the course of writing. Kit Nubbles, Malcolm Andrews observes, changes from "a harmless semi-idiot" to "an earnest responsible young man" (14), while, for Sylvere Monod, Dick Swiveller's "psychological metamorphosis," from "idler" to "chivalrous champion," is "certainly not very artfully contrived.... No evolution has been convincingly shown" (180). Yet many critics, including the ones just quoted, claim for the novel, despite its wayward and uncertain characterization, an ultimately consistent purpose; for them Dickens was an instinctive

artist, writing better than he knew. If he decided to kill Nell at a later stage, he had nevertheless oriented his novel in death from the beginning, and this argument is impressively sustained by abundant textual quotation (see, particularly, Marcus 145-51). "[F]rom the very first chapter," A.E. Dyson asserts, "a truly organic growth seemed to flower" (62). The "organic growth" claimed is clearly one of theme, or rather themes, which are present throughout the novel: in addition to a celebration of death we have the contrast between innocence and evil, rural England and London, light and darkness, beauty and ugliness, and dream and reality, to select at random some of the obvious ones. But Gabriel Pearson, in one of the two finest critiques of the novel (the other is Steven Marcus's), makes a valid point when he says that the early separation of Nell and Quilp "accounts for the sensational reverse in what has been valued in the novel. Certainly, it affects its whole structure" (85). This he attributes to "the novel's forced expansion out of a short story" (78), but, though he also discusses the resultant structural problems in the later part of the novel, as do many other critics, he is not concerned with the structure, and only briefly with the nature, of what I will call the original story Dickens set out to write. He does not stress the point that *The Old Curiosity Shop* is, in reality, two very different novels. And that Dickens had other reasons for abandoning the first.

His artistic intentions at the outset of *The Old Curiosity Shop* are implied in the programme for *Master Humphrey's Clock*. It was to be a weekly magazine, in which he proposed

to introduce a little club or knot of characters and to carry their personal histories and proceedings through the work; to introduce fresh characters constantly; to reintroduce Mr. Pickwick and Sam Weller ...; to write amusing essays on the various foibles of the day as they arise; to take advantage of all passing events; and to vary the form of the papers by throwing them into sketches, essays, tales, adventures, letters from imaginary correspondents and so forth, so as to diversify the contents as much as possible. (Forster 117-18)

We notice first that Dickens was not interested in writing another long novel with an involved plot and characters requiring development. Many of the first readers of *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* would have been grateful for this decision; the plot and plot characters are the great weaknesses of these novels. Dickens's true strength, abundantly demonstrated in *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37) and in most of the non-plot scenes of the other novels, is for the short, often self-contained episode in which a comic character exhibits himself fully. His is primarily a comedy of people speaking unforgettably but unchangingly, and it requires little space to make its full impact. How little, critics are amazed to discover when they discuss the early novels. The notorious Dodger, for instance, appears in a handful of scenes; the equally celebrated Dotheboys Hall fills only three full chapters and parts of two more (unless we also count the chapter in which it is

dissolved). Abandoning a long narrative for a great variety of sketches, Dickens must have felt he was fully liberating his true genius. He could now write on any subject, create as many characters as he pleased, both serious and comic, and dismiss them at will.

The little we have of the intended *Master Humphrey's Clock* offers two groups of performers, the ones who assemble round the clock to read manuscripts and the ones who appear in the tales. The former are the serious Master Humphrey and his friends and the comic Mr. Pickwick, Sam and Tony Weller; they are brought together and left to speak for themselves. The protagonists of each tale are a pair of contrasting characters set against each other, and the story usually dramatizes this opposition. In the first manuscript the proud, self-made Lord Mayor rejects the poor friend of his youth, in Magog's tale the faithful Hugh Graham suffers for the sinful Alice Bowyer, the next story has an uncle haunted by the nephew he has murdered, and finally, in Mr. Pickwick's tale, we feel the full cruelty of the fat witch-hunter when it is set against the courageous humane conduct of his sceptic nephew. Each story has a theme - respectively, the ingratitude of the wealthy, the destructive power of love, the murderer's obsessive urge to confess his crime, and the horrors of superstition. When he began writing the tale which became *The Old Curiosity Shop* Dickens intended it to be longer and more complex than the others, but he gave it the same structure. Contrasting characters are opposed to each other in situations designed to exhibit them fully. And, again, from this conflict emerges a theme.

The tale begins with the character who inspired it, Little Nell, the child "fresh from God," whom Master Humphrey finds lost in London one night and escorts home to her grandfather's curiosity shop. In view of all that has been said against her by late Victorian and twentieth-century critics, it is pertinent to stress that, in the opening chapters (in other words, in the original tale), she is presented only in speech and action. And there is comparatively little of either. She is usually in the background while her grandfather and others take centre stage, but otherwise she behaves normally enough, laughing heartily at the clownish Kit, quietly busy at her needlework, fearful of Quilp and at the same time amused by his uncouth appearance. There is particularly one moment, as she sits up waiting for her grandfather's return and imagines he has died (ch. 9), when Dickens reveals his ability to enter totally into the mind of a child, which he had already demonstrated in *Oliver Twist*, and would do so again and again in his later novels. The single moment of sentimentality in these early chapters, Master Humphrey's imagined description of Nell in bed, "alone, unwatched, uncared for (save by angels) [s]o very young, so spiritual, so slight and fairy-like a creature" (ch. 1), was added for the 1841 book edition of the novel and therefore written after the serial had ended (Angus Easson's note in the Penguin English Library edition of the novel, p. 682). There is no trace yet of the strained "blank-verse" prose which, later in the novel, tells us how we should feel about Nell, yet fails to make her credible to us. But already, without any recourse to sentimental commentary, Dickens has told us that, although nearly fourteen years old, Nell is still a child, pure

and innocent, though capable of arousing sexual desire in others. And, knowing this, we realize at once that she is yet another fictional incarnation of Dickens's beloved and recently deceased sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth. With Nell, far more than with Rose Maylie and Alice, the youngest sister in *Nicholas Nickleby's* tale of "The Five Sisters of York," Dickens attempted to come to terms with his feelings about Mary or, as Marcus so aptly puts it, "with the idea of purity and seemed determined to reassure himself about something he was starting to doubt; that the child of grace was still an actuality and not a phantom from his memories of youth" (151). This information is of more than biographical interest. It is the clue to understanding the first of the two novels which make up *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Dickens was unhealthily attracted to his sister-in-law and desolated by her death in the full bloom of girlhood. Again and again in his letters he extolled her purity. Concomitant with a declared fascination with virginity, good psychology tells us, is a secret desire to defile it. From this dualism comes the theme of "the little child-story" which was originally to be only "a few chapters" long (Forster 123, 122). Since Mary Hogarth died chaste, the ideal child Nell would be shown, ever a virgin, triumphant against attempts to violate her.

And so the symbol of purity of necessity "begets" her antithesis, "an elderly man of remarkably hard features and forbidding aspect, and so low in stature as to be quite a dwarf, though his head and face were large enough for the body of a giant"; he has restless, cunning eyes, an ill-shaven face, a ghastly smile which reveals "discoloured fangs ... and gave him the

aspect of a panting dog," while "his complexion was one of that kind which never looks clean or wholesome" (ch. 3). From the first, Quilp is a formidable figure, but, in view of all that he has come to mean for so many critics (the personification of evil would not be too strong a term), it is important to note that nowhere in the first twelve chapters (that is, until Nell and her grandfather leave London) is he ever physically violent to women. We have seen that Nell is even amused by him, Mrs. Jiniwin, his mother-in-law, answers him back, and Mrs. Quilp, encouraged by a number of wives to resist her husband, actually smiles as she defends him. It is this defence, which surely surprises every reader, that tells us how we should view Quilp initially:

"I know that if I was to die tomorrow, Quilp could marry anybody he pleased.... I say again that I know - that I am sure - Quilp has such a way with him when he likes, that the best-looking woman here couldn't refuse him if I was dead, and she was free, and he chose to make love to her." (ch. 4)

The anger of her listeners, particularly at a widow in their midst, who suggests that she would be Quilp's first choice, indicates that Mrs. Quilp is right. The Quilp of the opening chapters is solely a sexual phenomenon. When he first appears, he has only one remark about his wife's love and fear of him, but in the next chapter, which is devoted to presenting his personality, we have at the outset his home described as a "bower" and Mrs. Quilp "[pining]

the absence of her lord" (ch. 4). After her remarks, just quoted, to the neighbouring wives, there is an even more revealing moment, when the couple are alone. Settling in his chair with his cigars, "his large head and face squeezed up against the back, and his little legs planted on the table," Quilp informs his wife: "'I feel in a smoking humour, and shall probably blaze away all night. But sit where you are, if you please, in case I want you.'" Mrs. Quilp meekly complies. "The sun went down and the stars peeped out, ... the room became perfectly dark and the end of the cigar a deep fiery red, but still Mr. Quilp went on smoking and drinking in the same position...." All night long "he kept his cigar alight, and kindled every fresh one from the ashes of that which was nearly consumed" (ch. 5). Every adult will surely understand what is really happening without needing Pearson's comment that it "is the closest we get to downright copulation in early-Victorian fiction" (84). In the 1841 book edition Dickens added a page just before this scene, in which

Mr. Quilp planted his two hands on his knees, and straddling his legs out very wide apart, stooped slowly down, and down, and down, until, by screwing his head very much on one side, he came between his wife's eyes and the floor....

"Am I nice to look at? Should I be the handsomest creature in the world if I had but whiskers? Am I quite a lady's man as it is?"

It does not take too much savoir faire to recognize in both scenes a covert description of sexual stimulation followed by intercourse. In which case this exchange between Quilp and Mrs. Jiniwin, in the next chapter, becomes doubly comic:

"Why, Betsy," said the old woman, "you haven't been a - you don't mean to say you've been a -"

"Sitting up all night?" said Quilp, supplying the conclusion of the sentence. "Yes she has!"

"All night!" cried Mrs. Jiniwin.

"Aye, all night.... Who says man and wife are bad company? Ha! Ha! The time has flown."

"You're a brute!" exclaimed Mrs. Jiniwin. (ch. 5)

A page later, catching sight of his mother-in-law shaking her fist at him behind his back, Quilp displays to her "a horribly grotesque and distorted face with the tongue lolling out [we must appreciate clearly what this resembles].... Slight and ridiculous as the incident was, it made him appear such a little fiend, and withal such a keen and knowing one, that the old woman felt too much afraid of him to utter a single word." At his office, later in the chapter, he hammers his assistant, the boy Tom Scott, in a sparring match, the first of their many tussles. We are reminded of Fagin rapping his "scholars" on the head and shoulders, and Bill Sikes

regularly battering Nancy, obvious sexual metaphors there as here, even without Dickens telling us that "between this boy and the dwarf there existed a strange kind of mutual liking. How born or bred ... is not to the purpose. Quilp would certainly suffer nobody to contradict him but the boy, and the boy would assuredly not have submitted to be so knocked about by anybody but Quilp...." This sexual attraction is unnecessarily emphasized by the repeated descriptions of Tom Scott presenting himself before Quilp standing on his hands with his legs kicking in the air, and even smoking "a great pipe" with the same stamina as his master (ch. 11). Equally unfortunate too is the employment of another metaphor, appetite, for Quilp's comprehensive sexual tastes:

he ate hard eggs, shell and all, devoured gigantic prawns with heads and tails on, chewed tobacco and water-cresses at the same time and with extraordinary greediness, drank boiling tea without winking, bit his fork and spoon till they bent again.... (ch. 5)

Against Nell, purity incarnate, we have then her antithesis, Quilp, sexuality incarnate. "But he is more than her antithesis," argues Marcus, "he is her other half; and in this poetic disjunction of a single character into antagonistic parts, Dickens has descended again toward the deepest regions of his being" (151). Again the biographical informs the narrative pattern. Quilp harassing Mrs. Quilp is Dickens himself, another short, sweaty, overenergetic husband keeping the feeble Catherine Dickens busy in the background with baby after baby.

And we should not be surprised that Quilp lusts after Nell. It is the duty of art, after all, to tell the truth about life.

The real action of the novel begins with Quilp's first advance to Nell, a frank proposal of marriage, to be effected on the present Mrs. Quilp's death, in four or five years time, when Nell will then be "the proper age" for him (ch. 6). It is a short scene, but already the ethereal child Master Humphrey described in the first chapter is seen by Quilp as a sexually alluring "cherry-cheeked, red-lipped wife." The desecration is completed when he later describes her to the grandfather as "[s]uch a fresh, blooming, modest little bud ... such a chubby, rosy, cosy, little Nell! ... She's so ... so small, so compact, so beautifully modelled, so fair, with such blue veins and such a transparent skin, and such little feet, and such winning ways ..." (ch. 9). Quilp's second advance, when he moves into the curiosity shop to keep an eye on the bankrupt old man, is to take possession of Nell's bedroom, particularly her bed: "Quite a bower, You're sure you're not going to use it ... Nelly?... The bedstead is much about my size. I think I shall make it my little room" (ch. 11). There can be no doubt what he intends to do in it:

the dwarf walked in to try the effect, which he did by throwing himself on his back upon the bed with his pipe in his mouth, and then kicking up his legs and smoking violently.... Mr. Quilp ... smoked his pipe out.

With the sick grandfather in Quilp's clutches and Nell virtually his prisoner, we can expect further stages of seduction. But, in one of the great voltes-faces in literature, the old man recovers and escapes from the house with Nell. There is just one last suggestive moment, when Nell, stealing into her bedroom to take the front door key,

stood for a few moments quite transfixed with terror at the sight of Mr. Quilp, who was hanging so far out of bed that he almost seemed to be standing on his head, and who ... was gasping and growling with his mouth wide open, and the whites (or rather the dirty yellows) of his eyes distinctly visible. (ch. 12)

If we are alert to what Nell is actually looking at, then, with her, we will see Quilp for what he has been essentially throughout these early chapters, "the thing" itself, a massive, quivering phallus. She sees, understands, and flees.

In this most schematized of the *Master Humphrey's Clock* tales, both protagonists are provided with attendants, far nearer the human norm than themselves, to aid them in their struggle. True, Richard Swiveller begins as the friend and helper of Nell's delinquent brother and only comes under Quilp's influence after Nell and her grandfather have left London, but his role from the first is to oppose Nell; by chapter 7 he has been persuaded to woo her for her supposed wealth, which is to be split with her brother. Since he too is universally

admired for qualities which he does not possess at the start, it is important to remember that he is initially "a figure conspicuous for its dirty smartness," with "wiry hair, dull eyes, and sallow face," whose "attire was ... in a state of disorder" and whose "personal advantages" include "a strong savour of tobacco-smoke and a prevailing greasiness of appearance" (ch. 2). "[V]anity, interest, poverty, and every spendthrift consideration," together with "the habitual carelessness of his disposition" and "the complete ascendancy which his friend had ... over him" contribute to his agreeing to woo Nell; he is "indeed nothing but his [friend's] thoughtless light-headed tool" (ch. 7). In the illustrations he looks very like Disney's delinquent Lampwick in *Pinocchio*. He cheats on a small scale, is often drunk, coolly contrives the breakup with his girlfriend Sophy Wackles, and takes Nell's love for granted: "'a young and lovely girl is growing into a woman expressly on my account, and is now saving up for me'" (ch. 8). But this is not, of course, the whole of Dick Swiveller. As even the single sentence just quoted indicates, he is gifted with an extraordinary comic genius, which is demonstrated throughout the novel both in speech and action, in both outdistancing his most similar predecessor, Alfred Jingle, whose only asset is a verbal tic. He is a shady customer we delight to listen to. Everyone remembers the increasing number of London roads closed to him while the shops are open because he has not paid for articles bought in them. No one who has read chapter 8 (the best in the book) will forget his dancing feats (is he "Swiveller" because he swivels/spins so spectacularly on the dance floor?), and his confrontation of his rival, the market-gardener Cheggs, whom he

surveys in slow motion from toes to eyes before answering. With him Dickens attains a new summit in comic characterization, towards which Jingle, Mantalini, and the Kenwigs family had been earlier heights, non-heroic, non-moral characters from his own background of shabby gentility made entertaining, even (in the case of the Kenwigses) sympathetic, while their selfish motives are fully exposed. We enjoy their company, but can we really like them? With the original Swiveller the "smartness" is always "dirty," the "vanity, interest, poverty," and spendthrift considerations ever present. He is a real, albeit a comic, menace to Nell.

With the second attendant, Nell's friend Kit Nubbles, Dickens had trouble from the first. The decision to present him as an Idiot Boy ("the comedy of the child's life"), with appropriate features: "an uncommonly wide mouth, very red cheeks, a turned-up nose, and certainly the most comical expression of face" (ch. 1), was not a happy one. Dickens could do nothing with the character beyond making him roar and entertain Nell. When he takes us to Kit's home (in chapter 10), though the rest of the family resemble him physically, he is already more intelligent and adult. But Kit nevertheless manages in both roles to fulfil his function as Nell's knight-errant in the novel's scheme. He wrestles with Quilp's champion Tom Scott to sustain his claim that Scott's master is "'an uglier dwarf than can be seen anywheres for a penny'" (ch. 6), thus also antagonizing Quilp, fights Scott again to prevent Nell's bird from being killed, resists all Dick Swiveller's attempts to pump him as to Nell's whereabouts, and even threatens to thrash Quilp. But by then *The Old Curiosity Shop* has become another kind

of novel, in which Kit himself is playing a different role.

Dickens's original scheme was bound to break down. It was too brave for its time--indeed, what could be braver, in the fourth year of Victoria's reign, than a novel about a sex fiend and a greasy drifter plotting to bed a child-like virgin, which its author intended to be read in every respectable English home? Already the Quilp scenes were embarrassing by their thinly veiled erotic content. To progress further was to become more explicit and to risk offending his public. And Dickens had made another discovery: while comedy can intensify genuine tragedy (as in *Troilus and Cressida*, the Porter's scene in *Macbeth*, and the best plays of Chekhov and O'Casey), when it intrudes into any serious but insincere writing, it deflates it entirely. One can imagine Shakespeare's bewilderment at the battle of Shrewsbury when the cynical comic prose of the cowardly delinquent Falstaff began exposing the inflated blank-verse pretensions of Hotspur and the royal Henrys; he did not change the course of his tetralogy (could not, since it was history), but he had to change its true meaning, from that very moment. Dickens too must have realized that the gleeful lechery of Quilp was artistically more impressive, and therefore more real, than Nell's fragile purity. Not that there is anything wrong with Nell in the first chapters; she is a good girl adequately described. But she is not one of the great good girls of literature, as Cordelia, Marina, Perdita, and Miranda are, whom no ridicule can hurt. Against Quilp, who is one of literature's great monsters, Nell has no chance. Indeed, purity is almost impossible to personify

credibly; only the supreme artist at the height of his powers can do it. Dickens could not, and Dostoyevsky avoided the pitfall by making the Nellie of his early novel *The Insulted and Injured* (obviously an imitation of Dickens's heroine) part child, part adolescent, alternately gay and moody; she is, consequently, as real, but also as flawed, as the other characters. In the first chapters of *The Old Curiosity Shop* Quilp's dynamic comedy punctures Nell's mild pathos. And then Dickens knew he must never subject her to Dick Swiveller's devastating comic criticism. If his original celebration of Mary Hogarth's chastity was at all to survive, she must be separated at once from both her suitors. So Nell and her grandfather escape from London, Quilp's courtship is interrupted forever, Dick Swiveller's never begins, and Dickens had to create for them a new and safer novel if he was to continue his serial.

He took the easiest way out, returning to the tried and proved framework of the popular *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. Nell, like Oliver and Nicholas, goes travelling to realize her full potential; Quilp, Swiveller, and Kit are each the hero of a narrative mode contrasting with the pathos of the central picaresque. And, as in the earlier novels, Dickens fabricated a clumsy, elaborate plot, involving a Single Gentleman and an old Bachelor. Most importantly, to accommodate them to their new roles, he also radically altered the character of his three male protagonists.

Quilp at once loses his sexuality, or rather it is replaced by Dickens's usual metaphor for sex, a gratuitous violence--

pinches for Mrs. Quilp, bumps and blows for Sampson Brass, kicks and raps for Tom Scott, and a vicarious thrashing of Kit through a hideous ship's figurehead considered by Quilp to be his likeness. Dickens even makes him leave Mrs. Quilp and live as a bachelor. He also loses some of his strength. A better fighter than Tom Scott, who is Kit's equal in combat, he is strangely afraid of Kit and is humiliatingly outboxed by Dick Swiveller. To compensate for these failures, his behaviour is often inventively unnatural -- he rolls on the ground in delight when his schemes are succeeding, taunts and challenges a fierce but chained dog, hangs over the roof of a racing coach to make faces at Mrs. Nubbles inside, and drinks boiling, fiery liquors. Above all, he seems to be ubiquitous, suddenly appearing before Nell at midnight in a town miles away from London, sitting meekly in a pew in Mrs. Nubbles's chapel, and frequenting the same inn as she and the Single Gentleman. The first instance, though it is meant to remind us of Fagin's and Monks's appearance at Oliver's cottage window, has little of the latter's nightmare effect; Quilp does not see Nell and passes on, she is in no danger from him. He does have one superb moment in "the second novel," his "resurrection" before the family and friends who are happily mourning his presumed death after a long disappearance. But, for all the critical attention and admiration he has received, the second Mr. Quilp is only another Rumpelstiltskin, admittedly more entertaining but just as harmless as the original dwarf, compared to the earlier fascinating, disturbing wooer of Nell. Like Fagin and Squeers in the latter part of their novels, he becomes a mere villain in a plot, but his intrigue against Kit

is sneaky and silly, unworthy of him, indeed of any self-respecting villain, and his death by drowning when it fails is a sadistic piece of writing -- the only interesting thing about it is the thought that through Quilp Dickens was killing, with obvious zest, the sinful "old man" within himself, who had dared to lust after the holy virgin Mary.

Dick Swiveller's change is comparatively gracious. His worst trait is dropped immediately; we hear no more of purchases not paid for. He is drunk once, on a particularly potent brew of Quilp's, but it only makes him more amusing than usual. When he appears in the dragon's den (Sampson Brass's office) he is already a comic urban hero, who soon charms the monster (Sally Brass) and turns her Cinderella daughter into a princess, or rather, a Marchioness. In gratitude the latter nurses him back to health through a dangerous illness, whereupon, coming into his kingdom (a small inheritance), he educates and marries her. His also helping Kit in his adversity is another indication of how far the plot of the second novel has strayed from the pattern of the first, where the two were opposed to each other. Critical hearts (and heads too, I fear) have gone soft over the Marchioness. But she seems to have been concocted rather than created--take a dash of father Quilp (her smallness) and a sprinkling of mother Sally (her sharpness), and drown them in lashings of good nature (gratis from Dickens), and you have a pretty odd cocktail of a female. I prefer the pure vintage of Swiveller, with whom Dickens never falters. The voice and antics are the same in both novels; only, in the second, the character has been cleaned up into a hero. But the greasy,

anti-heroic drifter of the first novel is the more interesting and promising personality.

Kit Nubbles need not detain us long. Most critics have rightly panned him. He continues unsatisfactory both as Idiot Boy and hero of a pastoral romance. In the second novel he works for the Garland family, three of Dickens's wearisome good people who are rich enough to have nothing better to do than be benevolent to their servants and their servants' friends. Their pony and their maid both fall for Kit; he marries the maid, of course, when he finally realizes she has been making eyes at him. A pity he could not marry the pony, with whom he has a far more amusing time. Kit also becomes the helpless victim of Quilp's plot and has to be rescued by just about all the good people in the novel. In one way, however, his devotion to Nell, he is consistent through both novels. But he can do little to help her, apart from saving the life of her caged bird. Yet Dickens manages to get at least two lively sketches, in his Boz manner, out of this least satisfactory part of his second novel -- the night at Astley's circus and the exposure of the canting fraternity of Little Bethel, one of his lifetime aversions, attacked again and again in his novels.

Nell alone of the four main characters matures from one novel to the next. Having freed her from the clutches of Quilp, Dickens soon realized that the only way to keep her virginity intact in a predatory world was to make her leave it still a child, as Mary Hogarth had done. And so Nell's journey through rural and industrial England becomes a pilgrimage towards the discovery, acceptance, and celebration of death. Nell moves through a

surrealist landscape where the grotesque figures of the curiosity shop, which in the first novel had been embodied entirely in Quilp, are now redistributed among the Punch and Judy figures of Codlin and Short, the dwarfs and giants of Mr. Vuffin, Mrs. Jarley's waxworks, the boisterous bargemen, the steel workers before the undying factory fire, and the maddened, looting strikers. The grandfather's gambling mania, at first the means by which Quilp had taken possession of the shop, is now a danger to Nell in its own right, partially replacing Quilp's sexual menace. This too is momentarily echoed when the lady in the handsome carriage (obviously a kept woman) warns Nell away from the races with a trembling hand. Through these adventures (the most impressive part of the second novel) Nell's purity is in no danger of being undermined artistically; the hideous figures in her way never threaten but are merely set beside her, for the sake of contrast. Dostoyevsky was not so clever after all; his Nellie awakening to sexual love is a more psychologically real but also a less memorable character. While he learnt early enough, from Balzac mainly, how to create impressive villains, by giving them a monomania and an inspired tongue to describe it (Prince Valkovsky in *The Insulted and Injured* is the first), it was only much later that he succeeded with the same techniques in creating two great good characters, Prince Myshkin and Alyosha Karamazov. Admittedly, there he surpassed Dickens. But Nell's quiet goodness shines effectively enough through the darkness of materialist England, where the kindness of a poor schoolmaster and a Mrs. Jarley are too infrequently met. Only in the increasing references to death climaxing in the undisguised

threnody in the final village scenes do we hear the strained lyrical prose so offensive to critics. Even here, however, its saccharine pathos is modified by the different tones of the other episodes featuring Quilp, Swiveller, and Kit; the notorious death scene should be viewed in perspective.

Much of the invention in these episodes is below Dickens's usual level, and there can be no defence of the plot which connects the grandfather and the Garlands to the Single Gentleman and the Bachelor, respectively. But in its structure at least this second novel is an advance on *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. The third time round Dickens knew better what he was doing. Nell's progress towards death is clearly paralleled by Quilp's. She is spirit without flesh, an ethereal being forced out of a world too cruel for her to inhabit; he is flesh without spirit, mindless matter driven to engage in a brutal comedy of insult and battery till it is itself battered to extinction in the waters of the Thames. His "Wilderness" may well be a parody of "Nell's prettified country" (Kincaid 98), and "[h]is 'resurrection' scene almost [a parody of] Nell's apotheosis" (Pearson 81). Away from her, however, his evil can only counterpoint, not undermine, her purity. In the gap created by their separation, Kit, the spirit of goodwill, marries Barbara, presented always as a delicious piece of flesh, and restores life and happiness to a countryside desolated by Nell's and the other deaths in her story; in literary terms, his comic complements her elegiac pastoral. In the city the spirit of comedy, Swiveller, "cooks" a scraggy, dirty bit of flesh into an educated and (wonder of wonders!) "good-looking"

female (ch. the Last), and then marries her, thus replacing her father's destructive comic energy with their combined good humour. His "resurrection" from a sickbed, far more than Quilp's, parallels Nell's apotheosis; while she awakes in heaven, transformed from child to angel, he awakes reformed, from aimless entertainer to responsible guardian of the Marchioness, worthy now of receiving his inheritance. Since he is changed too from bachelor to prospective husband, this "resurrection" also offsets Quilp's, which changes him from a husband to a bachelor. The card games which ruined Nell's grandfather and clouded her relations with him are now the means by which Dick gets to know his future wife, and become a symbol of their happy married life, since "they played many hundred thousand games ... together" (ch. the Last). These patterns may seem fortuitous rather than organic, but they are meaningful nonetheless, and they tell us that *The Old Curiosity Shop* is as much a novel about life as it is about death. More so, in fact. After all the tearjerking histrionics of Nell's death, Dickens, in the novel's two final paragraphs, has a shock for us; there comes a time when Kit cannot for the life of him remember exactly where the curiosity shop stood (it has been demolished to make way for a new road). "[S]o do things pass away, like a tale that is told!" Dickens concludes. Perhaps the dead Nell, still alive in the memory of her faithful friend, will begin to die there too.

At its best, the second of the novels which comprise *The Old Curiosity Shop* is a more accomplished reworking of familiar materials and patterns. Nell and Quilp, it is clear, are a definitive version of what had been tentatively

explored in *SMike* and *Ralph Nickleby*, and in *Rose Maylie* (who should have died) and both *Fagin* and *Sikes*. But in the first novel (chapters 1 to 12) Dickens attempted something new and brave. Essentially a subversive writer, arguably the first anti-Victorian, he dared to dramatize the conflict in his personality between a veneration for purity and a passion for defiling it, to write, in fact, in imagery which barely veils his intentions, the first Victorian sex novel. But its structure and his nerve failed him. He abandoned it, diluted his characters, and placed them in a more structurally and thematically acceptable novel, with which he scored his greatest success. He followed this with the novel he had planned to write five years earlier but had put off for various reasons, the well-plotted *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) in the manner of Scott, adapted to his own purposes. In 1843, at the height of his confidence in his creative powers, he began publishing *Martin Chuzzlewit*, a work nearly as brave as the original *Old Curiosity Shop*, in which he purposed no less than a Jonsonian comedy of epic proportions on the vices of the Victorian home, particularly hypocrisy. This time it was his public who obliged him to partially alter his plan; once again he sent his hero travelling and excised a few characters to accommodate his new adventures. Henceforth Dickens's novels were all based on plot, supplemented by episodes in various modes. His themes were the public topics of social criticism, like the evils of speculation, big business, the Chancery courts, industrialization, and an inefficient bureaucracy, and private but unembarrassing ones, like pride, ingratitude, and snobbery. He was able too to deal discreetly with more

personal concerns, particularly the problems of a marriage of incompatible partners, which reflected his own estrangement from Catherine Dickens. He became the type of the Victorian novelist, that is, among other achievements, a master of the art of suggesting unpleasant truths beneath an entertaining, apparently wholesome, surface. This is hardly the way, of course, to describe what for most critics is Dickens's major fiction. The later novels contain some of the finest things in English literature. And at the very end, in the gentleman Eugene Wrayburn's marriage to the dockside girl Lizzie Hexam, and in the double life of choirmaster and murderer John Jasper, we have Dickens again saying pretty directly some very offensive things about Victorian society. But it is nonetheless true that he was most courageous, most direct, most un-Victorian, in the two works of his first maturity, the fragment of the original *Old Curiosity Shop* and the flawed but gigantic Humours comedy that is *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The time will surely come when, seeing the Victorian age in toto and not, as they still do, in unrelated fragments, more and more critics will respect the true tale of Little Nell and recognize *Martin Chuzzlewit* not only as Dickens's supreme contribution to literature but as the single work which says most about the deepest evils of its time.

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH IN MALAYSIA:
A BRIEF HISTORY.*

by

R. Bhathal

Malaysia, formed in 1963, comprised the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak. Singapore, the centre of trade and industry, was predominantly Chinese-populated and became a separate nation in 1965.

The concern in both countries was to create a national image or self that all the races could identify with. It was hoped that with the use of a common language would evolve a common identity. The question was which language to choose as the national language. Malay had been the lingua franca of Malaya and Singapore before the coming of the British. The immigrant races spoke their mother tongue but used Bazaar Malay in inter-racial communication. The English language assumed its dominant status during the British Administration. It was the language of the ruling class, the Christian religion and the administration.

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

The British ruled over both a small urban and a large rural population. Education was structured to suit the needs of these two groups. In the urban schools, Standard British English was taught and was the medium of instruction. Some of these schools were established and maintained by the government with the intention of producing recruits for its clerical service. However, a large number of these schools were founded by Christian missions and supported from public donations. Many of the pupils who attended these schools initially were the non-Malay population who lived in the urban centres. Among the first urban Malays to attend these schools were those of part Arab descent and the Jawi Peranakan. Located only in urban areas, these schools charged fees and were therefore "inaccessible to all but the wealthier section of the urban population and to practically all of the rural population in the Malay States."¹

Vernacular schools were also developed under the British Administration. The Chinese, coming from a society which placed high value on literary education, established their own schools and supported them from their own funds, since the government did not provide any financial support. Those who graduated from these schools felt frustrated in their search for jobs. Neither the government service nor the European firms had any intention of employing youths whose knowledge of English was at best rudimentary. Thus, many middle-class Chinese, especially the Straits Chinese, preferred to send their children to English-medium schools. The Tamil vernacular schools were found primarily on rubber estates, where owners were required by law to provide primary

education to the children of their labourers. There was no secondary education in Tamil or in any other Indian language. This meant that the Tamils were equally frustrated in their attempts to improve their socio-economic status.

The rural Malays fared no better. English was considered by the British Administration as a language to be taught only to the elite. The Malay College at Kuala Kangsar where English was the medium of instruction was established for, and limited its enrolment to, the Malay aristocracy. It aimed at grooming the students to be future administrators of the country. The teaching of English to people whose main occupations were paddy-planting and fishing was felt to be a mere waste of time and effort. Instead, the traditional system of Koran schools was expanded and reorganized. Farmers remained firmly opposed to sending their daughters to school for social and religious reasons. But by 1920, the attitude towards education started to change and rural Malays began sending their children to schools where primary education was in the Malay language. From there only a handful of boys progressed to secondary schools where the medium of instruction was English. These boys spent two years learning English in special classes before they could join the main stream of English education.

English spread rapidly during the first half of the twentieth century due to an increase in government services, the expansion and development of commerce and communication systems, the increase in educational facilities and the influx of English language films.²

From 1916 the diploma of the King Edward VII College of Medicine in Singapore was recognized as a full medical qualification. The Raffles College in Singapore, founded in 1928, offered courses leading to a diploma. Students had to go overseas to either Hong Kong or Britain to convert their diplomas to degrees. In 1949, both institutions merged to form the University of Malaya in Singapore. This led to the growth of a local English-educated elite, often with tertiary British education. The Sultan Idris Training College at Tanjung Malim was established in 1922, and in 1924, the Malay Translation Bureau was attached to the College. The Bureau was responsible for producing textbooks and other reading material for the growing number of Malay schools. The establishment of the Language and Literature Agency (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka) in 1956 helped revive the efforts of the Translation Bureau. Apart from producing textbooks in Malay, it was to devise new technical terms in Malay and promote wider use of the language.

The Report of the Education Committee in 1946, under the chairmanship of Datuk Abdul Razak, aimed at bringing the children of different races together under a national education system in which the national language would be the medium of instruction, while preserving the languages of other communities living in the country. Under the Constitution promulgated in 1957, Malay was to be the sole official language after a transitional period of ten years, while English became the second language.

The gradual change-over to Malay enabled literature in English to be written in the 1950s at the University of Singapore, the hub of literary activity. Writers of this period attempted to create synthetically a Malayan idiom called "Engmalchin" using words from Malay, Chinese and English. The attempt failed but it provided the impetus to continue writing. The Malay writers of the same period formed a group called Angkatan Sasterawan or Asas 50 and developed the concept of 'Art for Society's Sake.' The creation of two universities in 1962, the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur and the University of Singapore in Singapore, and the subsequent separation of Singapore from Malaysia have led to two separate educational policies being pursued.

Malaysia's choice of Malay as the national language was variously motivated. English was spoken fairly widely but only among the educated. Bazaar Malay was still being used where one or more of the speakers did not understand English. A great percentage of the population did not speak English at all. The more educated members of the immigrant races identified more closely with the English language. During the British Administration, it was English that was the passport to higher economic status, and since they had come to Malaya to better their lot, they spoke it well. Secondly, away from their countries of origin, they felt cut off from the source of their own native tongues. Knowledge of their own languages became more or less static and confined to home situations forcing them to use another language to express themselves outside the home. This was not so in the case of the Malays whose language is native to this region.

They have no "sentimental attachment" to English.⁹ To the rural population, English was the language of the British Administration--the language of the colonial ruler. It was a foreign tongue, and having been given very little opportunity to study it, they felt little drawn towards it. It was only natural to them that Malay be chosen as the national language.

The riots of May 1969 caused the government to accelerate the changeover from English to Malay. It was felt that the division among the people was caused by the prolonged use of two languages which effectively disunited the nation. The Ministry of Education announced that from 1970, all education from Primary One would be in the national language, so that by 1982, the entire education system would be converted. The National University of Malaysia (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia) was established where all courses offered would be in the national language. The University of Malaya and the Science University of Malaysia in Penang (Universiti Sains Malaysia) started to convert their courses to the national language.

Today, English is a compulsory subject in all schools and universities. In schools, the pupil's own language is optional. The status of English has changed, with Malay now the language of government and administration, and the language necessary for economic advancement. It has become as important as English was during the colonial era.

The subsequent decline in the standard of English is exacerbated by the multi-lingual situation in the country. The variations in dialectical forms have led to the breakdown of

Standard English as more Malaysians are exposed to English, primarily American English, through the mass media. Thus, one is inclined to agree with the statement that "the written standard set by literary use is being overwhelmed by spoken norms derived from the TV set and the new mercantilism."⁴ This has led to a wider use of broken English as compared to the limited use of good English not too long ago.

The rejuvenated awareness of English as an essential medium of communication among nations has led to proficiency in the language becoming a much coveted skill. Applicants to universities where English is the medium of instruction must take a recognized English test to demonstrate their competency in the language.⁵ This has led to the burgeoning of privately-run language centres as parents vie with each other to ensure that their children acquire the required level of proficiency in English.

The rapid expansion of English language departments at local universities is partly the result of the deteriorating standard of English. A course in Remedial English is the rule rather than the exception. Two universities now offer the Teaching of English as a Second Language programme (TESL) for aspiring teachers. Whether these attempts to remedy the situation will be successful remains to be seen.

In Singapore, the reverse has taken place. Constitutionally, it has four official languages -- Malay, English, Mandarin and Tamil -- with Malay as the official national language, but in effect, English as regards use is the *de facto* national language. With its largely Chinese

population, Mandarin is almost as important. Tamil and Malay are hardly ever used. The study of a second language is also compulsory, and the government policy is that all students must be bilingual -- in English and, to prevent deculturalization, in an Asian language. The two universities, the University of Singapore and the Nanyang University (where Mandarin was the medium of instruction) have been combined to form the National University of Singapore. The government is also taking steps to ensure that all Chinese speak Mandarin and not their own 'dialects,' in an attempt to create a more united population.

It is possible that in time the different language policies pursued by the two countries will lead to differences in the use of English in terms of frequency and skill.

NOTES

¹John Platt and Heidi Weber, *English in Singapore and Malaysia, Status: Features: Functions* (Kuala Lumpur, 1980), p. 7.

²Platt and Weber, p. 27.

³Platt and Weber, p. 154.

⁴Lloyd Fernando, *Cultures in Conflict: Essays on Literature and the English Language in South East Asia* (Singapore, 1986), p. 206.

⁵For example, the *Test of English as a Foreign Language* (TOEFL), Educational Testing Service, Princeton, New Jersey, USA.

READING YEO: A CONSIDERATION OF
A PART OF THREE: POEMS 1966-1988

by

Wong Ming Yook

Robert Yeo places a great deal of importance on the fact that his travels (and his poems) find their beginning and end in Singapore. From here, he moves out to England, America, China, Australia, Vietnam and Thailand, but cannot rest until he feels the comfortable tarmac of Singapore under his feet again. His travels and his travel poems enforce and clarify his sense of home and belonging, leaving the reader always certain of the poet's Singaporeanness. This travel motif, around which the poems revolve, provides us with a fitting description of this collection as that of both a physical as well as metaphorical journey which the poet-traveller takes into awareness and identity.

This is the one striking feature in *A Part of Three*. No matter how far the poet may travel, and no matter how alien and varied the cultural landscape in which he may find himself, the one perhaps comforting thought is the poet's continuing and growing sureness of where he belongs. This then, is a tribute to Singapore: the world-snapshots we find in these poems are concentrated metaphors of the poet's passion for his country. The physical journey, stretching from one corner of the globe to another, thus describes the other more crucial internal journal of the poet's growing consciousness as a

Singaporean. The Garden City is more than a geographical setting. It is a certain perspective that the poet carries with him as he travels; an attitude continually refined and articulated in his poet's mind which gives him definition.

At the risk of sounding overly patriotic, Yeo has, in his poems, allowed a look at an individual's perception of nationality, but it is a perception which suggests an awareness of a personal loyalty to a place that goes beyond physical geography. So, while he places Singapore clearly as a physical location, his intention is to suggest that his affection for his home is an affection for its spirit. The cultural snippets provided of the Garden City ('Home, I suppose'; 'Singapore'; 'Elegy for Changi Beach' etc.), therefore, grant a glimpse into the intimacy between poet and country.

Divided into three distinct parts, this collection begins with the first cycle of poems, focusing on Singapore as Yeo's point of departure and his eventual destination: 'Singapore. USA. China. Australia. Singapore'. This is so also for the other two parts: 'Singapore. Thailand. Singapore.' and 'Singapore. London. Singapore.' The poet's restless migrations across the world are in fact journeys not away from, but towards his homeland, the one unmoving point in his changing landscape. Despite his restlessness, Yeo realises he is destined to be Singaporean, and that his ironic humour about the spick and span plastic look of Singapore belies a real pride in being Singaporean: 'Besides, I expect you know too/(damn you) what I feel about you/is what everybody feels about you/when they are away

from you... "It's good to be a Singaporean." ('Almost Home', p. 43). The poet's articulation of his love for his homeland is real and generous, as he includes in his poems confessions of his comic despair at its faults. But this is done good-naturedly, with a fond indulgence and humorous acceptance that even these are part of a cherished land ('Raffles Shakes His Head'; 'Home, I Suppose'; 'A Lot of Cheek'; 'Singapore').

The journey that Yeo takes (from Singapore to Singapore) is, however, not an easy one. Identification (as a Singaporean) and the journey into self-awareness for him is made possible only through a difficult coming to terms with the fact that he is unlike the strangers he meets in strange lands. This process of negative identification, when the poet confronts his difference, becomes the basis for his finally concluding that 'It's good to be Singaporean' ('Almost Home', p. 43). Loneliness, and the sense of standing on the sidelines, makes him yearn for home: 'In the compound of my neighbour/despite invitations to the same house/I am more of a stranger/now than I ever was' ('In Between', p. 42). Being lonely, as he realises, is certainly no 'alternative to living in Singapore' ('Bangkok', p. 41). In the end, these travels merely evoke the poet's restlessness for his homeland, and are 'futile clicks' against the hot and humid reality of Singapore ('Slides', p. 49). Scenic cities captured on slides - 'how thin transparencies in the tropics' ('Slides', p. 49) - only emphasise the peculiar attractiveness of home. Thus this sense of homesickness and loss, this 'poverty/a sort of hunger' which 'gnaws at both rich and poor', serves the poet's purposes

in describing his identity which, he realises more and more, is inseparable from his nationality ('In Between', p. 42).

Ee Tiang Hong, in his Foreword to *And Napalm Does Not Help* mentions that Yeo's poems provide 'an absorbing study on how the poet assimilates and accomodates [sic] his culture' (xii). This applies equally well to *A Part of Three*, in which the travel motif is used in the poet's exploration of his cultural identity and his nationality. Yeo has adopted an interesting cyclical form to his arrangement of his poems, and this is, as I have considered, to emphasise the idea of there being, in the world, no place like home.

However, while this technical experiment is interesting in itself, and certainly Yeo's manipulation of the travel motif has its strong points, the question has to be asked: why poetry? Poetry may be a love that endures, as the writer says in his Preface to *A Part of Three*, but what comes to light as one reads Yeo is that his forte is in prose. The journalistic accounts and style employed in *A Part of Three* suggest this, and his earlier success in *The Adventures of Holden Heng* leaves us with no doubt that he is more novelist than poet. Yeo needs the prose medium to develop his expansive style, his clever wit and his eye for humorous turns. But what holds possibilities in prose does not always hold up in poetry. 'Raffles Shakes His Head' is an instance of this. It is typically Yeo in its sense of irony and humour. But the poem itself leaves much to be desired. In any case, it reads too much like prose.

How, then, does one rate this collection in terms of achievement? It is an ambitious project that Yeo has embarked on. His personal sense of responsibility, his social conscience, his particular brand of ironic humour are all there. And in one or two poems, the real concentration and compression of metaphor are happily balanced with an equally well-managed style. I can think of two I like: 'Living' and 'Waiting for Spring'. But even taking into account that Yeo's aim is to 'find an audience ... willing to support poetry' by using, in this collection, local English 'spoken and written here in Singapore' (*And Napalm Does Not Help*, xiv), *A Part of Three* points out the superiority of the prose writer in Robert Yeo.

Review

by

Carol Leon

Goh Sin Tub. Ghosts of Singapore! Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1990. vi + 138pp.

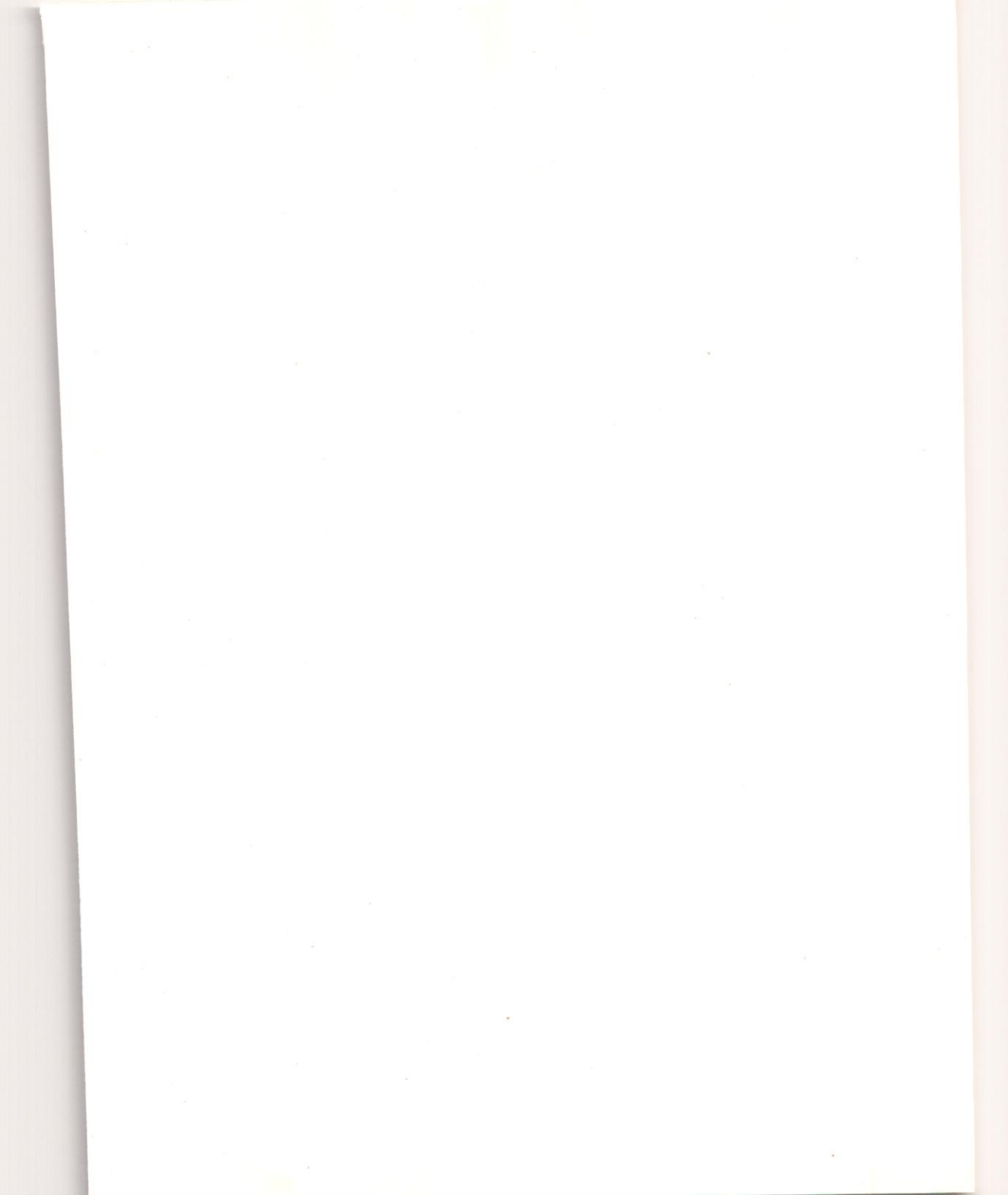
"Who can resist good, scary ghost stories? What's more, ghost stories set in our very own surroundings!" So states the unfortunate blurb of Goh Sin Tub's latest publication, a collection of stories entitled Ghosts of Singapore! However, the promise of an authentic Singaporean locale as backdrop for an exploration of the supernatural did stir my curiosity, especially since there are few collections of ghost stories by Singaporean or for that matter, Malaysian writers. In one sense, Goh fulfills this promise. His stories possess a vivid sense of place. The frequent mention of road names, popular sites, landmarks, and the well-known HDB flats evokes a concrete, typically Singaporean setting. As the ghostly apparitions appear to a diverse group of people engaged in everyday activities, the rhythm of life in cosmopolitan Singapore is also captured. Goh does not resort to folklore or tradition or attempt to evoke a sense of the past in his tales. His stories have a thoroughly modern context.

Unfortunately, the story lines of these tales are tediously predictable. In "The Haji's Pontianak" it is clearly evident from the start that the willowy, nubile woman at the graveyard whom Haji Omar offers a lift to late one night is a pontianak. Hence the writer's gradual and laboured revelation of the identity of the young woman is unnecessary. The elements of suspense and fear usually associated with the horror tale are also missing in "Katong Poltergeist." It comes as no surprise to the reader that the ghost plaguing the D' Silvas have some connection with the presence of Mr. Goh. The old man of little known origins is always present when the poltergeist is wreaking havoc on the household. His absence spells a period of calm and peace for the family. "Pontianak 2--the Malcolm Rd Manifestation" is boringly repetitious and "Ghost Cat from Boat Quay," rambling. Perhaps the most creatively imaginative tale in the collection is "The Haunting at MacRitchie." The nightmare starts with the protagonist thinking that he has seen ghosts, only to finally realise that he himself is the spirit, and the ghosts are actually human beings. The ending is not only novel but also provokes an interesting thought. Just as man is uncertain and often fearful of the unknown, the earthly world may seem equally strange to him once he enters another realm.

In his excursion into supernatural fiction, the writer attempts to wed humour and horror. It is a brave undertaking but, unhappily, not always successful. Humour proves to be the dominant partner in this uneven relationship. The book is peopled by a large range of characters. Some of them are genuinely

hilarious--the crass and crude Nick Tan in "Satan at HDB" and the joggers with their funny but strikingly familiar antics in "The Haunting at MacRitchie." Goh's characters, however, undergo little development and hardly any psychological probing. Most of them are uninspiring and deserve their fate. Lucy, for instance, despite the numerous warnings by the alien, wilfully refuses to acknowledge the wicked intent of her boyfriend, Nick Tan. Though little Kim in "Forlorn at Farrer" is unjustly penalised for her brother's death and feels unloved by her family, she fails to win our sympathy. The depth and urgency of her dilemma just does not come through.

Goh's stories do not scare at all, and it is the large doses of fun in Ghosts of Singapore! that are their redeeming quality. This lively humour is especially apparent in the stories where the author takes centre stage: "The Haunting at MacRitchie" and "The Ghost of ST--by himself." Extremely alert in these two narratives, he mocks local customs and habits and takes great delight in poking fun at himself as well. The reader cannot help but laugh along with him.



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