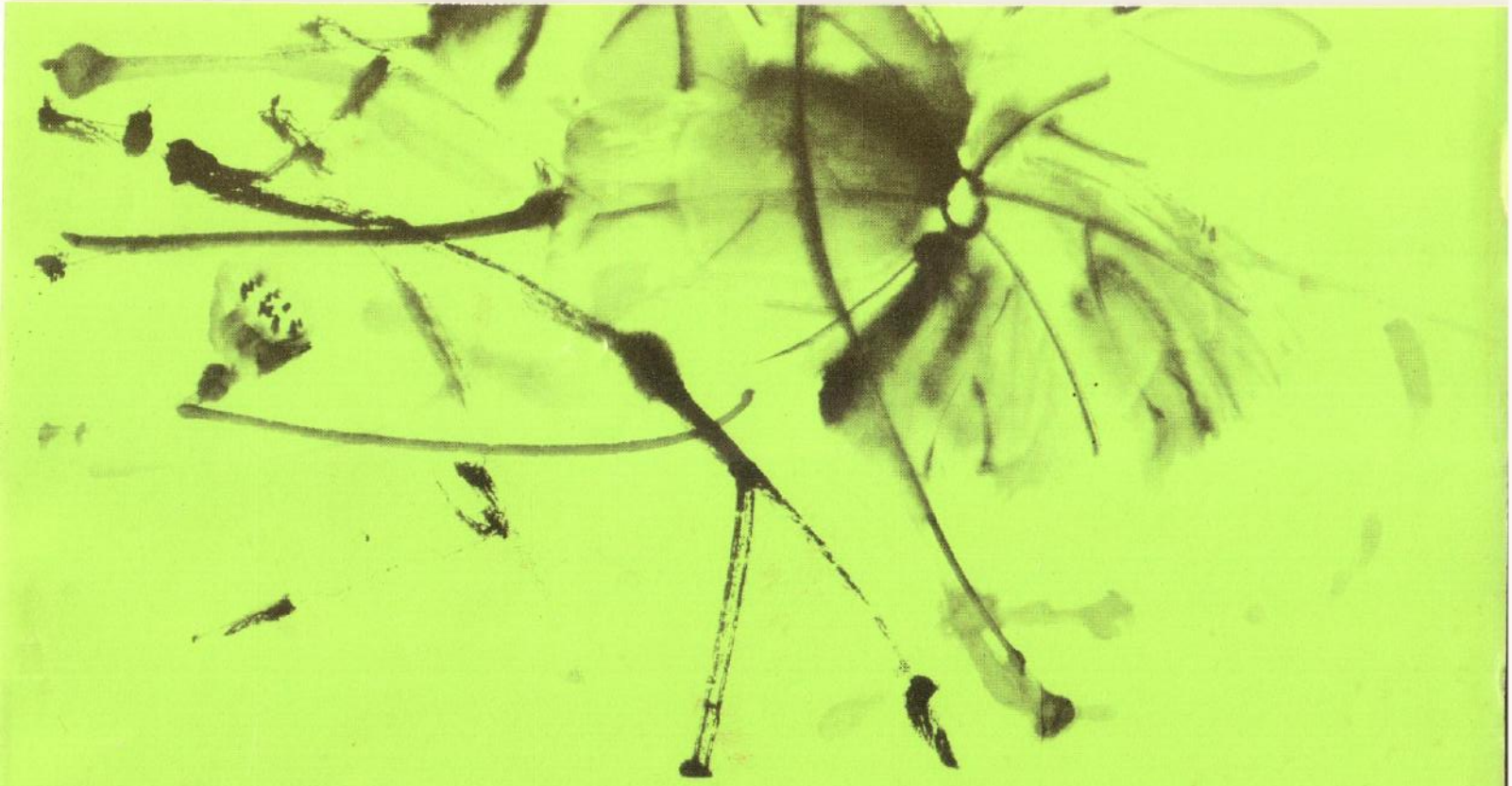

SARE

No. 10 June 1985 PP 161/3/85
southeast asian review of english

MACLALS
SOUTHEAST ASIAN REVIEW OF ENGLISH

No.10 June 1985

Department of English
University of Malaya
Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia

Southeast Asian Review of English is published twice a year in June and December. Contributions are welcome: articles, reviews, review articles, essay reviews, checklists relating to Commonwealth or Third World literatures in English, poems, stories and other creative work, English translations of poems and stories written in any of the Southeast Asian languages (submitted together with the originals), English-language studies, and commentary on the cultural and intellectual aspects of the Southeast Asian world. Manuscripts should be typed, double-spaced on quarto paper. These should follow the MLA Style Sheet. Great care will be taken with manuscripts submitted. The Editorial Board cannot undertake to return any manuscript unless accompanied by a self-addressed envelope and return postage.

Single copy: Local M5.00, abroad US$4.00
Subscription: M$8.00 local, US$6.00 abroad
Institution: M$15.00 local, US$10.00 abroad

Cover: "The Lotus" by Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri

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MALA

by

K.S. Maniam

When Malati left school she came into full encounter with her family. Having dreamed and drifted through her education, she came to roost in her home. The neighbour woman soon branded her lazy and called her 'Mala', an abbreviation of the word 'malas'. The neighbour repeated it with the relish of an insult the more she saw the girl idle and happy. She was stuck with the name when her family began calling her Mala. There was an ugly sound to it whenever they were angry with her.

That was often enough. For some reason they felt offended if Mala hummed a tune in the bathroom or sat in the doorway reading a magazine. The father was a thin, tall man who only straightened from his stoop to deliver some unctuous reprimand. His colleagues at work never knew this side of him for he was always smiling. Mala's mother clattered through her housework with a solemnity that made desecration of a temple seem like prayer. Her two brothers, constantly running errands for their stout mother, looked at Mala with a sense of achievement.

Parental love pursued a twisted path here; it was expressed through a terrifying ritual of silence. Her indifference grated on their self-gratifying sense of diligence. The boys spent their afternoons desultorily digging at an unyielding plot of ground. Mala watching them, noticed how the handle of the *changkul* flew away from them. There was a dull thud as the *changkul* hit the ground. Their bodies were covered with a lacklustre glow. Mala's father clucked at his chickens; they squabbled restlessly, refusing to be housed for the night. Mala's mother, looking on, gave some silverware a shine where none was necessary.

The punishment began the day they learned that she had failed her final school examination. There was no show of anger, or of disappointment. They withdrew into a silence that froze her movements and her spirit. No talk passed between them. If they saw her they turned their heads away. Meals were swallowed in utter silence, beds made in rustling quiet. Outside the house they resumed interrupted conversations with their neighbours as if nothing had happened.

"Have I done something wrong?" she asked unable to bear the cemetery quietness in the house.

They only placed their fingers on their lips and rolled their eyes in the direction of the family niche. Here resided not only pictures of gods and goddesses, but also photographs of a pantheon of dead relatives. Even on ordinary days the sight of these photographs revolted her. Now they produced a darkness in her mind. Not a day passed without their genuflecting before the staring, vacant eyes. Week-old, withered garlands bordered the picture frames of these departed men and women. Mala had never helped the family string the flowers.

Mala began her own rituals. Getting up before the others did, she took a cold bath and went out into the unfenced compound. The dawn air hit her then, causing a warm shiver through a body that had just risen from sleep. The skin on her face seemed to peel away and reveal a new self to her. She stood under the mango tree and watched the sun rise over the hills. As the land emerged from darkness and mist she felt herself torn up and rushed towards the brightening clumps of trees and hill slopes. Perhaps to replace the singing silence of the family there rose, beyond, a resonant clamour. She turned abruptly -- a door had slammed inside -- towards the house.

That morning she sat in the doorway, her eyes blinking at the mystery the trees were losing. The leaves slowly turned a flat green as voices from the neighbouring

houses reached her in monotonous waves. A breeze stirred the loose skirt she wore. She felt a gentle slap of coolness on her calves and thighs. Her mother came out with a bucket of washing, her lips twisted in perpetual scorn. The neighbour woman appeared at the door and whooped with delight.

"Ah, showing your legs to the world, Mala!" she screamed with irresistable pleasure.

Mala rose and went into her room.

The silence deepened. Her brothers sat in the cubicle-like living room afraid of making the slightest movement. Mala's mother was a squatting, impassive statue on the kitchen floor. A scrappy, cold lunch, garnished by the intolerable gloom of the house, had been eaten. The afternoon passed and brought Mala's father back from his work. Her parents had a whispered conversation under a tree outside the house. The boys sat on, knees held together, biting their nails.

Mala's mother stomped back, thrust the door of the room open and tore off Mala's clothes. She wrapped a white sari in suffocating folds round Mala's well-fleshed body. As she was dragged to the bathroom, she saw her brothers cleaning the tray and lamps at the family niche. Inside the bathroom her mother poured pail after pail of water over her loosened hair. The water came so fast, the woman held her so tightly, Mala could not breathe. But her mother didn't stop. She grunted and bent and slammed the water against Mala's hair, eyes, face, breasts and legs until the girl was thoroughly numb. She had been reduced to a nerveless, confused girl when her mother pulled her back to the niche. A lamp had been lighted. Mala's mother pushed her down before the colony of deceased. Her father placed his hand on her head so that she would remain on her knees. Her mother branded her forehead with a streak of the holy ash.

At last, when he was tired, Mala's father removed his hand. Mala moved in a daze to her room. The sari, having wrung the heat off her body, had almost dried. Mala changed and sat on the bed. Her immersion in the punishing waters had ended the silence. There was an unnatural gaiety as the family laughed at the talk of the father. A chicken was slaughtered, a feast prepared to which Mala's father invited her with some cajolery. She remained in her room.

A fury broke upon her in the night. The snores of the well-fed and contented roused a rebellious anger within her. She wanted to get out but the thought of bodies in various postures of sleep confined her to the bed. In her restlessness she tossed and turned and then lay rigid waiting for the dawn. At the first cockerel's crow she stumbled towards the bathroom. She stood there, unclothed, letting the chill prick her body. Then she splashed water on herself and soaped and rubbed her body so that the blood flowed again. And she recalled the red-tinged sky of the previous dawn opening upon a landscape, miraculous and fresh. She went out into the compound and let her warm breath thaw the dew and mist around her face.

"Mad Mala," the neighbour woman said. "Standing like a ghost under the mango tree!"

The word spread. "She rubs her bad blood on her body! Stands naked in the mist!" The squat and ugly neighbour woman returned from the town, where she was believed and made its spokeswoman. The town gathered about her as if she carried, in the marketing bag on her arm, colourful bundles of mysteries. She did possess strange powers and ways of knowing, sometimes accompanied by prophetic breath.

"Mangoes are ripening," she said, referring to Mala's breasts. "Keep them covered with sacking. Hands may reach out."

The warning was not heeded. Mala walked up to her friend's house beyond the bridge. She had felt stifled,

closeted in her room. For an hour or so Susi, her friend, talked of Kuala Lumpur. Her brother, who had a small business there, had told her of the freedom, lights and wealth of the city.

"Nobody knows you there," Susi said. "Here everyone knows the colour of our shit!"

The ugliness of Susi's words didn't jolt Mala out of the trance into which she had fallen. Had she not herself escaped, for a brief spell, from the daily torment, imprisonment, boredom and slow dying? She returned home late to face a mother contorted by wrath.

"I'll burn your legs!" she screamed. "Who ever heard of a young girl wandering wherever her feelings take her? Haven't you brought the family enough shame?"

"Tame the goat or the rams will bristle," the neighbour woman called sagely.

There was a whispered consultation that night between Mala's parents. A priest came to the house, when it had been washed and sprinkled with saffron water to purify it. He sat in the living room and chanted until it was assumed that evil spirits had been cast away. Then he rose to go saying, "The dead came freely into the house." He accepted a few dollars on a *sireh* leaf and departed, mumbling, "Friday would be an auspicious day."

Preparations were begun on Thursday itself. Flowers were gathered from bush-like plants in the compound, strung together and left overnight to be moistened by the dew. The two boys wiped the picture frames free of cobwebs and dust the following morning. Highly honoured among the deceased was Mala's great-grandfather. Her father often recounted the story of his life dwelling on his hunter's activities.

"He was a wild man when he was young," Mala's father said. "Many women threw him glances until your mother's

mother showed him the good life."

"Tell us about how he went into the jungle," one of Mala's brothers said.

"He disappeared for two or three nights. When he came back he carried the best wild boar meat slung on a pole across his shoulder."

"No one helped him?" the other boy said.

"There was no need," Mala's father said. "He could carry two wild boars on his thighs, unaided."

"He was never frightened of the tigers and elephants he saw out there," Mala's mother said.

"Not one word about jungles or wild boars after his marriage," Mala's father said. "He could change at the blink of the eye."

"But he never did," Mala said. "He died of the wasting disease, you told us."

"Pull your tongue out!" Mala's mother said. "That was God's great test of patience. And your great-grandfather went like a warrior to him."

The great-grandfather's virtues were extolled again that evening. The vegetarian meal they had had in the afternoon made them particularly receptive. Laughter had been banished for the whole day. Mala's father slaughtered three toughened cockerels that evening with sacrificial zeal. The boys caught the blood, the woman plucked the feathers and the man chopped the meat into chunky pieces. Mala had been told to remain in her room, closeted with holy thoughts.

The cooking nearing its completion, the boys took their baths -- short spurts of water thrown over their

bodies. The parents drenched themselves in the clean, white garments they wore for the purification. Mala was made to stand in a white *sarung* knotted at her breast while her mother repeated her actions of punishment. Mala's initiation into the world of the dead had been made.

Mala waited in her wet *sarung* watching her mother lay out the feast for the dead: large scoops of rice, drumsticks, vegetables, chicken curry, a bottle of stout (open), cigars (for the deceased ladies) and cigarettes (for the dead men and striplings). The boys made the gestures first, bringing the camphor tray and incense brazier thrice round the closet of the dead. Mala's mother followed. She rubbed the holy ash at the base of her throat and struck her forehead until tears started. Mala's father made the full obeisance before the pantheon of the good, undistracted life, now dead. He took a garland that had been lying on a tray in the middle of the niche. He put it round Mala's neck and thrust her forward. She performed the ritual with brief gestures. The father then led them in favour-asking from the dead.

"May you grant us sobriety," he called to the ancestors.

The other repeated the words solemnly, Mala with distaste.

"May you grant us the strength not to take the crooked path."

"May you grant us the swiftness with which to stop the blood rising in anger, lust and bestiality."

"May you grant us patience."

"May you grant us long life."

"May you grant that this girl, now your daughter too, does not shorten that life."

They took turns to place *kumkum* and oil and holy ash on the parting of Mala's hair. She was led to her room where she barely succeeded in keeping down the bile that rose to her mouth. For the whole of that week she hardly left her room, the depression she suffered persuading her that she really belonged to the dead. One evening she escaped to Susi's house, listened to Sanker who had come on a holidy from Kuala Lumpur, and returned home expecting a fury.

"O! O! The mangoes want to fall into some man's hands!" the neighbour woman remarked loudly.

She had laughed over their method of 'taming' her. Mala's father reported that he heard the town laughing at him the minute he turned his back.

"Better put an end to it all," Mala's mother told him with a certain look in her eyes.

A different kind of word passed around this time. The neighbour woman may have been at the peak of her career for no men came flocking to Mala's house. It had been re-curtained, redecorated, refurnished and in some other ways, restored. A fresh string of mango leaves hung over the front doorway.

Weeks passed. The mango leaves had curled and turned brown when a man, accompanied by his son, called at the house. Mala's father hurriedly put on a shirt and ushered them in.

"Is there anyone else coming?" Mala's mother asked, noticing the absence of women.

The man looked around him unhurriedly and shook his head.

"Aren't we enough?" he said.

His son clothed in tight pants, a broad belt and tapering-collar shirt, examined the various articles in the room. He paused a long while at the collection of tapes, scratched his head as he read the titles and then turned with a puzzled expression on his face, to Mala's father.

"No modern songs?" he asked.

"We don't sell records here," Mala's father said.

The young man sat down and laughed. The proceedings were conducted to the accompaniment of his laughter.

"As you can see, my son is educated," the older man said. "Good music makes him go mad. Now what about your daughter?"

"She has been to school," Mala's father said.

"Come, come. Even a donkey can be led by the neck to school," the man said. "Let's go to other things. Jewellery?"

"I can only afford a chain," Mala's father said.

"A mare with jingling bells!" the man said, rising to go. "I was foolish to come after hearing so much about your girl."

The next suitor came alone. From the minute he stepped into the house he would not sit down. His face was pockmarked, his eyes red and his hair bristled like the back of an unruly bull.

"I'm a widower," he said. "I've three children, I've a lot of money. The children need a mother and I want a woman. I know all about your girl. She needs someone like me to tame her."

"Go and join a circus!" Mala's father shouted, thinking of the whole town turned out to see his daughter

a mother of three children on the marriage day itself.

Mala heard the negotiations and, humiliated, thought of suicide. The eyes of the ancestors seemed to stare at her. She saw herself pinned between glass and wood, withered flowers garlanding her memory -- a monument to sacrifice for the good name of the family. In that cold, hazy hour between night and morning, she let herself be peeled and revealed. She lived again, fiercely, stubbornly, in the light that spread over the country, knowing instinctively that there could be no greater darkness than despair.

"I'm going out," she said firmly when she left that evening to visit Susi.

"Don't you know about the auspicious period you've entered?" her mother asked.

You can auction me off on the name I've got from this town," Mala said.

Susi was in a thoughtful mood. She laid aside a letter from her brother.

"Sanker is thinking of marriage," she said. "He has asked me to look for a girl."

"There must be plenty of girls in Kuala Lumpur," Mala said.

"He wants to marry in the old way," Susi said, and smiled. "I hear your parents are looking for a bridegroom."

Mala laughed, but looked down shyly.

"I can't even think of it," she said. "My people are proud. They are known for their correctness in this town. I can't leave the house except with the name my father finds for me."

"My brother isn't in a hurry," Susi said. "Think about it. He can give you a good life."

There was a certain breeziness about Sanker that she liked. She had only seen him briefly, but his confidence and sense of responsibility were conspicuous. She put her thoughts away as she approached her house. Her mother stood talking with the neighbour woman and barely gave her a glance.

Then, Vasu, a relative of Mala's father arrived accompanied by a group of people crammed into two cars. It was an impressive show and even the neighbour woman was silenced. Perhaps she had met her match in Vasu. He had a reputation for lying, scrounging off on liquor, exaggerating; he possessed a sense of drama and a son, of marriagable age, born out of wedlock. He got down from the car, smiling, and waited for the others to bring up the rear of the procession to Mala's house.

Several women carried trays of fruits, sweets and clothes. Vasu inquired for Mala's father in a formal manner.

"We've come with the plenty of the season," he announced when Mala's father appeared and gestured them in.

The usual questions were asked and then Vasu jumped up as if possessed by a strange spirit.

"Don't you really know me?" he asked. "I'm the man you spat at. At that old man's funeral. What did I know about drumming?"

"I've forgotten all that," Mala's father said.

"Correctness!" the man hissed. "Each man lives differently. He has his feelings. You threw water on that fire. What's happening to your correctness? This!"

The man spat on the trays he had brought as gifts. The sweat, the various perfumes the women wore, and the

man's raucous breath spiced the close air in the living room with some kind of rottenness.

Mala appeared in the silence that fell over the gathering. She held a travelling bag and her eyes were red.

"I'm taking the shame out of this house!" she said and pushed past them.

She walked quickly towards the bridge.

II

The marriage, unattended by any fanfare, was performed at a registry office. Mala's father gave his unwilling approval. No one else was present at the official occasion. As they travelled down to Kuala Lumpur, in a second-hand car Sanker had recently acquired, Mala looked at the country flashing past her. All her mornings, after those baths, she thought, had not been useless. She was coming into her own at last. She couldn't suppress a sense of triumph.

They came to a busy row of shops, above which were flats. Sanker had rented part of a flat. He had slept until then in his one-room office, beneath, as a requirement of the businessman making his first million. The dust, the noise and the traffic assailed her even as she mounted the steps, behind Sanker, to the rooms upstairs. They had to share the hall and the kitchen with a woman and her child. Only the bedroom provided some space for a marriage to breathe, grow and acquire some purpose.

"Lucy," the Chinese woman said, coming out of the kitchen to meet them. "My son. No husband."

But looking out of the dirty window, Mala saw that what had once been jungle, hill and remoteness had been cut, levelled and made a home. She smiled at Lucy and the boy, about three, whose face was still covered with the remnants of his breakfast.

"Sankah, good man," Lucy said. "Make lot of money. Like Chinese himself!"

It might have been the car journey or the windless hall, but Mala felt giddy and looked for a place to sit.

"Better go to the room," Sanker said. "Rest."

He opened the door to the bedroom, to an unmade, stained mattress, and the barest of furniture. He ran down the steps and returned with some packages of food and hot tea in a plastic bag.

Sanker was in his office most of the day or out on assignments. Mala didn't know exactly what he was doing. He thrust some money into her hands at night, after they had made love, and told her to buy the things necessary for a home.

"All this will change," he said, "when we've more money. Just do some simple cooking. Make use of whatever we've now. Lucy manages even without a husband."

Mala had adjusted a little to the situation. A meal was there if Sanker wanted it. The days he followed his business out of his office, she ate alone. Lucy had made it clear from the first day that she didn't want her son fed by any stranger. She was, however, pleasant about other matters. Mala derived fascination just watching Lucy's transformation in the evenings. She ceased to be the sloppy, flabby woman she was in the mornings. A smart dress emphasized her suddenly ample, tight breasts, the make-up her new-found vitality. The boy had an old woman to look after him on some days. When there was no one he

cried and tired himself and lay curled on the cold, terrazo floor of the hall. It was from there that Lucy picked him up, grumbling, in the early hours of the morning.

"Children, they give us not time," Lucy said around noon, when she got out of bed. "Bawl! Bawl! Bawl! All day. Prevent them."

The advice was unnecessary. Sanker had taken Mala to a doctor, who put some metal inside her. After that Sanker ceased to be gentle in bed with her. She was reminded of the way her mother had punished her with water. The slapping, the bending down and the humiliation had followed her into marriage. There was the lethargy, the stupor too, the following morning.

"We'll have children when we're better off," Sanker said to pacify her.

She cleaned the pots and pans, saucers and cups, sometimes more than once, in the course of the day. She gave Sanker his tea when he ran up the stairs and burst into the hall. Dinner was soon prepared and then the waiting for her husband began. He swayed in some nights, reeking of liquor, mumbled something about 'contacts' and fumbled for her in the dark.

"I'm working hard for all of us," he said the next morning, rushing through breakfast. "The ones who come later will benefit."

He got a colour TV for her, raking up the money from somewhere. She had gone to the office one week to clean it. It was so bare that she wondered how business could be conducted in it at all. Lucy surprised her as well. There was something common between her and Sanker. Lucy never mentioned the work she was doing, but when she stayed home she displayed her fatigue as someone proud of having slogged away. She fed her boy something that made him

sleep for hours. Lucy then sat on the floor, in a thin, loose dress, flipping through a pile of glossy magazines.

"Ask your man buy furniture," she told Mala. "Share half half. This look like pig cage."

Mala passed on the word. Sanker and Lucy came to an agreement and the sofa, armchair and coffee-tables arrived. Lucy spent whole mornings on the sofa, under the blackened fan that was never switched off. One afternoon a man delivered a sound system Lucy had ordered. It was an expensive, complex set. From it came all kinds of music, but mainly Chinese songs that filled the flat with a militant resonance. Lucy never allowed the boy near it Once she smacked his fingers for touching it and she wiped off the marks with a velvety, thick cloth. Mala had to distract him from his howling.

Sanker took her to an English film one night, sitting beside her with restless absorption. While he sighed in wonder, she watched with embarrassment the couple on the screen sun themselves, half-naked, then dance in a night-club led on by a barebreasted woman who wriggled sensuously and finally make love with unashamed hunger

"See, see," Sanker muttered. "One day we could be like that."

He was full of his dreams on the way back to the flat. They would buy a better, new car; move out to a house in a prestigious area; fly to a holidy in a foreign country.

"They showed all those things in the film," she said

"What's there to be ashamed about?" he said, drawn out of his preoccupations.

Susi visited them for a week, dragging Mala out to the various shopping complexes She bought a dress or two.

make-up and shoes.

"Have you anything to tell me?" she asked Mala confidentially.

"What do you mean?"

Susi giggled, rubbing her belly.

"He says when we've more money," Mala said.

"You should enjoy yourself," Susi said, accompanying Lucy out that night.

She left for home reluctantly. Sanker had changed during her stay. He made her discard her saris and wear dresses.

"Don't rub tumeric on your face," he said.

"It won't be smooth and clean," she said.

"I bought a lotion and other things," he said. "Lucy can teach you how to use them."

She submitted. Lucy worked like a magician on her face. When she showed Mala a glass, she gasped. Her face resembled that of the women she had seen at the shopping complexes.

"Me! Me!" Lucy said, slapping her thighs, pleased.

As Lucy removed the make-up, Mala's face felt cool and then shrunken. She cried on returning to the flat, after Sanker had her hair cut. The hair-dresser had handed her the snipped hair in a bag that carried the salon's name and logo. She laid out the truncated length, that, once part of her, had reached down to her waist.

Lucy became attached to her. She described the places in the city she frequented and the food she ate, with

guests, at large, crowded restaurants.

"Why you like this?" she said. "All time in here. No children. Good time taste many things. I show you."

Mala shook her head, only accepting to look after the boy when Lucy went out. Lucy was not easily put off. Sanker was angry with Mala for refusing Lucy's services.

"She only wants to show you the city," he said. "You must learn about people and their ways."

"You take me out," Mala said.

"I don't have the time," he said sensing that she accused him of not wanting to be seen with her during the day.

"He have woman work for him," Lucy told Mala one morning. "Plenty customers. That why he marry."

Lucy did not elaborate. Sanker grumbled at dinner, "Too much work."

"Did anyone help you before?" Mala asked.

"A secretary," Sanker said. "She was too expensive. You could do some work for me. But you're afraid of leaving this flat."

Lucy's boy was proving to be too wild for Mala. He had been left so much to himself that he turned aggressive if she fed or dressed him. Mala thought about Sanker's suggestion. It was time she shed some of her fears. Lucy was encouraging.

"Go, help your man," she said. "He go mad, if not."

"I can read and write," Mala told Sanker. "Enough?"

"You must know typing, how to answer the phone," he said.

"I can learn," Mala said.

"Practise here first," Sanker told her, smiling.

He bought her a second-hand typewriter and a manual on typing. Mala spent her morning getting in practice. The process was trying. Her fingers flew all over the keys. She aimed for speed, but she only achieved mistakes. A frustrating garble met her gaze during the first weeks.

Sanker sighed. He put down the copies abruptly.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked. "Have you got sticks for fingers?"

"I haven't done this kind of work before," Mala said.

"That doesn't mean you've to spoil good, expensive paper," he said.

Mala did not cook meals that day. Sanker had to buy dinner from the shop round the corner. Though Mala was tired, her typing showed some improvement. Sanker gruffly acknowledged her progress.

The traffic roared past her flat; Lucy's boy bawled for attention. Lucy herself would prattle away from the sofa, but Mala heard none of these. She was glad that she didn't have the long hair that would fall over the machine. She had learned to write formal, pleasant letters and correct simple stylistic mistakes when Sanker announced that she could go down to the office.

"Ask Lucy how to dress for work," he told her briefly.

Lucy bustled herself about Mala. She made Mala put on a dress, then take it off. She tried various tones of lipstick, eyebrow pencils and make-up. Mala saw in the dresser mirror a girl stiff and frightened. Lucy had done a good piece of work -- Mala hardly recognized herself. And she wanted to be that way. For a moment, she recalled the dawns she had stood under the mango tree, up north. She had peeled, she realized, but into someone not of her making.

Sanker ran a packaging business. He had the rates drawn up neatly on a card. The firm that provided the boxes had its phone number underlined in red, and pinned on the wall facing the typewriter. Lorry-owners' phone numbers were listed on a separate card. A little, black book, indexed, contained clients' names. When Sanker sat at his table on the other side of the small office, he was a different man.

"We aren't husband and wife here," he had said on showing her into the office one morning. "Don't bring unnecessary problems to me. Do whatever is necessary."

He briefed her on the work at the end of which he relapsed, for a moment, into the Sanker she had known. In bed that night he was consciously affectionate towards her.

"It's all for our own good," he said. "Once I get my big contracts we can start a new life."

Mala lay, consoled, against his heaving chest. When he talked about business a certain thickness entered his voice and he moved restlessly on the bed. She had to talk to him then, guessing at his ambitions, agreeing, and sympathetically massage him into sleep.

In the morning he inspected her clothes, make-up and the way she bore herself.

"You slouch too much," he said, one morning.

"Make-up mustn't be that thick," he said on another. "They might think you're a country cow."

"Clothes should follow the body, not hide it," he commented on a third.

Mala had learned to adjust herself to his criticisms.

Always, he gave her an encouraging hug just before they descended the steps to the office. Mala was careful to earn that affection. Though most of the time she could not understand his ferocity or that distant expression on his face, she treasured these moments of nearness. They compensated for the silence of the family she had left behind and scorn of that gossip, the neighbour woman.

Mala began to enjoy the activities of the day. Whenever she answered the phone she sensed the pleased pause at the other end. She retailed the rates, the kind of services available and took down times and dates if the client wanted to hear from the 'boss'. It was strange hearing Sanker referred to as 'boss'; he became someone important and unreachable in her life.

The office changed its atmosphere in the few months that Mala attended to its secretarial demands. Sanker was out most of the time, hunting down that first major contract. He came over to her on the phone from various parts of the city. He described an individual in detail and asked if the man had shown up at the office.

"No," Mala said.

"Be nice to him when he comes," Sanker said.

In Sanker's absence, a few men called at the office. These were lorry drivers or packaging sub-agents. They sat on the oblong, backless settee Sanker had installed against the wall. They flicked cigarette ash into the potted plants on either side of the settee

"The boss isn't in," she said. "Will be back at eleven."

"We can wait," the young men said.

Mala typed or answered the phone. The men sat on, crossing and uncrossing their legs.

"How's business, Miss?" one of the young men asked.

"Only the boss knows," she said, too shy to refer to her husband by name.

"Secretaries know better than their bosses," another said.

Mala went on with her work, glad if a phone call came through to break the tension.

"This one won't even talk, lah!" one of the young men said as they got up to leave.

Mala complained to Sanker when he returned from his fruitless excursion.

"Too many men come in here," she said.

"This is a place of business," he said looking at the list of people who had rung up while he had been away.

"Lorry drivers and those other men!" Mala said.

"They may bring some orders," Sanker said. "Get on with your work."

At night he persuaded her that she must learn to take care of herself when he was absent. He emphasized how important it was for her to be courteous to them. He ended by saying, "A customer is always right."

Sanker had stacked the folded-up cartons behind his desk. An almost empty filing cabinet stood behind Mala's desk. Labels of his company were pinned on the walls along with posters of various foreign, scenic landscapes. Some weeks there were busy mornings. Men came in and went out. She typed invoices, rang up lorry drivers and made entries into the office ledger. Sanker stayed in on these days.

"A special client is coming today," he announced one morning as they went down to the office.

He had paid more attention to her clothes and appearance during that daily inspection. She wore a tight dress he had recommended. Even Lucy came out of her room on hearing Sanker talk excitedly. She whistled on seeing Mala.

"You smart girl now!" she said. "Can even do my work."

"Any woman can do your work," Sanker said.

"What does she do?" Mala asked before they reached the office.

"Nothing you can't do," he said carelessly.

Mala watched Sanker seat himself upright at his desk.

"Order some flowers," he told her giving her the florist's number.

The flowers, arranged in a boat-like container, gave the office a cold, formal colour. Whenever the phone rang Sanker leaned forward quickly. At last, a nasal stream of broken English came over the line. Mala handed the phone to Sanker.

"Yes, yes," Sanker said. "Any time. Come over. Everything will be ready for you."

He put down the phone and rushed out of the office.

By the time the client arrived, Sanker had brought in a smaller table from the adjoining room. A caterer delivered some savoury, covered dishes, three glasses, a bottle of whiskey and a jug of cold water. The man himself came soon after, a confident smile greeting them.

"My secretary," Sanker said introducing them.

The man shook hands with her, Mala finding that he had quickly, easily taken hers in a burst of pleasure.

"Nice, nice," he said, surveying everything.

Sanker nodded at her. Mala sat at her desk confused by the signal.

"She will serve us," Sanker said.

Mala understood and went with suppressed anger to the cloth-covered, smaller table.

"No need trouble her," the man said, his pallid face crinkling into a smile again.

Mala got used to refilling their glasses unobtrusively while they talked endlessly and the man swallowed the balls of meat or bits of steamed fish. He drank more than Sanker, but he didn't stumble on a single word. At last he rose, smiled at Mala and moved towards the door, which Sanker held open for him. Sanker took some time returning from seeing the man off.

"We've something big here," he said.

Then he noticed Mala's expression and, breaking the office rule, came to her.

"I should have showed you how to serve the food and

drink," he said. "These are things we've to do until we're well off."

They had a quarrel that night, but Sanker was adamant.

"I saved you from that black hole up there!" he said. "Is this how you show your gratitude?"

"All I want is a child," Mala said, sobbing. "Not to wait on any man who comes to that office."

"You'll never understand," he said and slept on his side of the bed.

Mala didn't go down to the office the following morning. Sanker pleaded with her, but she only put a pillow over her head.

"Yes, bury yourself like an insect!" Sanker shouted and stormed out of the room.

"Why make unhappiness, ah?" Lucy said, later in the morning. "Just do what he want. How I feed that boy? Obey men, that's all. Want go out? Change place, change feeling."

They wandered through the crowded, softly, monotonously lighted cubicles of the shopping arcade. Mala followed Lucy wherever she was led. Lucy stopped at a boutique and looked at the dresses draped over mannequins. The dummies had blue, vaguely-staring eyes. As the two women peered through the pane of glass, a man entered the case and stripped a mannequin with brutish efficiency. There she stood, bare, imperturbable, while the man arranged the latest dress over her shoulders and between her cleftless thighs. When the man had finished, he twisted her arms into a new posture. The dummy had acquired a fashionableness, which Lucy praised.

Mala was tired, but she dragged on after Lucy. They sat, at last, in a low-ceilinged snacks stall. The tables were small, neat pieces resting on a thick, stained carpet. Lucy picked up a dirty, well-thumbed menu and taught Mala how to choose her food. Mala went through the motions suffused with the steady, dull light and the cold that poured in via the airconditioning vents. Mala recognized in the gestures of Lucy and the pale smile of the special customer the silent pressure of a force from which there was no escape.

Department of English
University of Malaya

SOME REMARKS ON BLENDING*

by

Su Soon Peng

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogroves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.
(Lewis Carroll 1971:191)

These famous lines of nonsense words have often been quoted or referred to in the study of word-coinage (for instance, Adams 1973:149 and Pound 1913b:29). Humpty Dumpty, in explaining *slithy* and *mimsy* to Alice, calls them portmanteau words because, like a travelling bag which opens into two compartments, a portmanteau word has "two meanings packed into one word" (Carroll 1971:192). Thus *slithy* is made up of *lithe* and *slimy*, and *mimsy* of *flimsy* and *miserable*. Two or more words are blended together to form one word.

Blending has been practised for centuries. Wentworth (1934:2) noticed an instance of blending that occurred as long ago as 430 B.C. in the Greek word *euripidaristophanizein*. However, it was not until this century that blending gained importance: "... blends are being made with the greatest frequency, and have their widest diffusion, at the present time" (Pound 1913a:407-408). Blends appear in personal names (e.g. *Adrielle* from *Adrienna* and *Belle*,

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*This paper is partially based on my M.A. thesis entitled "Compounding and Other World-Formation Processes in the English of Malaysian Newspaper Advertisements", University of Malaya, 1983.

Olouise from *Olive* and *Louise* - see Marchand 1969:454), place names (e.g. *Del-Mar* from *Delaware* and *Maryland*, *Calexico* from *California* and *Mexico* - see Marchand 1969: 454), newspaper and magazine writings (e.g. *Reaganomics* from *Reagan* and *economics*, *slo-robics* from *slow* and *aerobics*), and even novels (especially Joyce's works - see Moholy-Nagy 1956:341-350 which lists examples of Joycean multi-lingual blends). Pound recognises that blending is an established word-formation process especially for the names of compounds in chemistry and other sciences (1913b:36). It may be added that it is also an often-used process in the creation of brand names for commercial products, and, after compounding and derivation (see Su 1983), is the most heavily-used process for creating nonce words in advertising. Most trade names (defined as names "created for the specific purpose of furthering trade" /Praninskas 1968:12/, thus including brand names) and blends which are created for the purpose of selling and describing a product do not "survive" beyond a certain brief period, but, to quote Pound again, "some words in commercial terminology win their way into the dictionary language with the standardization of the article which called forth the name" (1913b:30). Some examples given are *electrolier* and *gasalier*. In this paper, I shall illustrate blending with some data collected from press advertisements.

As Marchand (1969:451) observes, the term blending is generally used to refer to different things. He cites Koziol who uses it as an umbrella term for "words incidentally changed through association with other words..., folk-mythologies..., manufactured words" and Wentworth who "treats as a blend practically any word that has undergone a formal alteration due to external influences" (1969:451). Since word-formation is a morphological process, one way to identify blending is to examine it in terms of morphology. This, in effect, is very difficult as morphology is itself a field that is fraught with controversies. Nevertheless, our examination of blending will benefit from Bloomfield's (1935) notion of bound form and free form.

Bound forms cannot stand on their own and they occur as part of the construction of larger forms. The *-ness*, *-s*, *-ly* in *goodness*, *books*, *quickly* respectively are some of the examples of bound forms while the forms to which the bound forms are attached, *good*, *book*, *quick*, are called free forms as they can exist independently. A blend consists of, at most, one full free form, but more likely a combination of two or more curtailed free forms, seen for instance in *radiotrician* (where the first part is a full free form, *radio*) and *smog* (where the curtailed parts of *smoke* and *fog* are involved). The curtailed parts may or may not be bound forms, according to Bloomfield's further qualification of bound forms as linguistic forms with constant meanings (1935:160). Rather, they are better known as splinters which are the "tail of the last initial word (*-trician*, *-lator*, *-og*, *-rene*, etc)" (Berman 1961:279), or quasi-suffixes, i.e. "a group of letters normally occurring at the end of recognised words, but used as a separable suffix" (Wentworth 1934:46). Some examples are: *nitwitariat* (*nitwit* + *proletariat*), *walkathon* (*walk*/*walking* + *marathon*) and *motorcade* (*motor* + *cavalcade*).

The above points out a distinctive characteristic of the morphological make-up of blends, i.e. a curtailed part of a free morpheme is a feature of blends. Based on this formal aspect, definitions of blends or blending like those of Pound's and Berman's are acceptable: "...blend words proper may be defined as, or restricted to, those having two, or at most three, elements in combination" (Pound 1913a:412) and "Blending or Telescoping can be defined as such a process of coining new words under which a blend is formed by adding the splinter of the last initial word to the stem or to the shortened substitute of the stem of the first initial word (words)" (Berman 1961:279-280).

Apart from form, meaning and sound must also be considered in the formation of blends. The importance of sound is especially evident in haplologic blends where two words are combined in such a way that "a sound in one part of the compound may be suppressed, because a similar

sound is heard in the other part" (Levy 1950:59). This combination by the play of sound is undeniably present in such formations as *decanterbury* (*decanter* + *Canterbury*), *alcoholiday* (*alcohol* + *holiday*), *sarcasticagator* (*sarcastic* + *castigator*) and *lolly-popularity* (*lollypop* + *popularity*), all of which share a similar sound at some point -- usually the last part of the first component and the initial part of the second component. A clear use of sound in blending is seen in the various creations in Burges Johnson's "Bungal-Ode" (cited by Levy 1950:66 and Pound 1914:23, footnote) based on the word *bungalow*: *bungalonely*, *bungaloafing*, *bungalotus*, *bungaloping*, *bungalowly*, *bungalonging*, *bungalocomotive*, *bungaloan*, and others, all of which play on the sound */lo/*

Sound is not divorced from meaning in that it has suggestive power, as illustrated by Pound (1913a:410):

> ... the initial *sq-* of *squeeze*, *squelch*, *squirt*, *squirm*, may unconsciously convey the idea of impetus or motion, rather violent motion, perhaps. The final *-sh* of *crush*, *crash*, *splash*, *wash*, *gush*, *dash*, *squash*, *mash*, *swash*, etc., also suggests motion, in this case motion which is continuous.

Pound's illustration indicates that there is an association with familiar words in which the sounds occur. Thus, for blends like *bumble*, established words like *bungle*, *fumble*, *jumble* and *stumble* are also suggested in the sound contained in *-umble*; similarly, *snaggle* suggests *snigger*, *giggle*, *gag*, *haggle*, etc. and *flaze* suggests *blaze*, *flare*, *flame*, *flash*, etc. (all these examples are from Pound 1913a:413-414). As the meanings contained in sounds is a subtle subject that still awaits intensive research, linguists who treat blends have, in the main, given only a superficial treatment of the element of sound in the formation of blends.

On the other hand, the semantic content is more emphasized. Bergstrom (1906:40) in fact, considers that

"it is coincidence of meaning that is the chief factor instrumental in creating blends", while "in all cases phonetic likeness facilitates the blending". The latter part of the quotation would have been better if modified to "some cases" or even "most cases" rather than the absolute "all cases", as it was seen in the discussion above how sounds can function as suggestive symbolism, and thus are likely to influence (perhaps unconsciously) the creation of blends. However, there is no doubt that much of the process of blending hinges on the choice of words semantically. This, therefore, represents an economy device of expressing two or more meanings in one word, "like a portmanteau" (Carroll 1971:192), as mentioned at the beginning of the paper. Apart from *slithy* and *mimsy*, further examples from the same source are: *chortle* which combines the meanings of *chuckle* and *snort*, *galumph* which has the meanings of *gallop* and *triumph*, and *frumious*, the meanings of *furious* and *fuming*.

Portmanteau words represent one of the ways in which blending is carried out -- "in such a way that the component parts are equally obvious -- like a double exposure on the same film" (Withington 1930:158). Another method in blending is by telescopage where "two words can slide together if one can absorb the other easily, or if they have a syllable in common to serve as a phonetic link, provided that they denote related concepts" (Levy 1950:60). An example of a telescope word is *cinemagnate* (Wentworth 1934:30) where the original two words *cinema* and *magnate* can be easily distinguished as both parts of the blend are complete, with *-ma-* as the phonetic link. Haplology is thus involved. These two processes of creating words through portmanteau and telescope words belong to what Pound (1913a:409) terms "definite blends". A third manner of blending, which involves indefinite blends, borders on blending, fusion, onomatopoeia and the "unconscious symbolism of sounds" (Pound 1913a:409). This causes a difficulty in the analysis of indefinite blends. Moreover, "The impelling motive in their creation is less conscious imitation than vague recollection" (Pound 1913a:

412), as compared to the first two types of blends which are most likely to be conscious formations. Pound illustrates this with the word *slump* which, according to the *New English Dictionary*, is "'probably imitative' in origin; but compare the group *slip, swamp, thump, bump*, etc., from which it might well have been built" (1913a:412, footnote).

From a sample of blend words collected from a random selection of press advertisements, it would seem that blending to form portmanteau words is the most popular of the three methods of blending. Although the sample is too small to form the basis for any conclusive statements on blending, they do serve to indicate the manner in which blending is used in advertising. Most of the following portmanteau words consist of a full stem and a splinter: *guesstimates* (*guess* + *estimates*) as in "...don't accept 'guesstimates'", *funtastic* (*fun* + *fantastic*) as in "Funtastic Bubblegummers", *eggs-traordinary* (*eggs* + *extraordinary*) as in "Don't miss this eggs-traordinary occasion /Easter/", *eggs-tra* (*eggs* + *extra*) as in "Eggs-tra! 20% discount" and *eggsactly* (*eggs* + *exactly*) as in "It'll be eggsactly that". The last three blends appeared in the same advertisement where there was a heavy play on the symbol of Easter and on the sound of *eggs* which is conveniently similar to the sound of *ex-*. A play on sound is again exploited in the next two blends, *two-derful* and *three-derful* (*two/three* + *wonderful*) where the sound of *won-* is similar to that of *one*. This is made explicit in the context of the copy: "Instrumentation inside the car is wonderful. In fact, I am tempted to describe it as two-derful or even three-derful".

Other portmanteau words are listed below:

econovan : economy + van
as in "Ford econovan"

econoquick : economy + quick
as in "Econoquick system to produce a quick picture from

a cold start"; product advertised is a television set

econo-power : economy/economic + power as in "It's the all-new econo-power Honda C70!"

flexipockets : flexible/flexibility + pockets as in "Deep and shallow flexi-pockets: for storage flexibility"; product advertised is a refrigerator

vibro-massage : vibrate + -o- + massage as in "...the world's first portable vibro-massage belt" (*-o-* forms the linking vowel between the components of the blend)

odostop : odour + stop as in "New Rexona with odostop protects against perspiration odour"

Euro-International: Europe + International as in "John Master's Euro-International range of shirts"

Immunactive : immune/immunity + active as in "...a new immunactive anti-cancer drug"

silentronic : silent/silence + electronic as in "silentronic typewriters"

magi-flap : magic + flap as in "...popular Starlite Fixed Screens, with the special magi-flap to reach window catches"

fantasia : fantasy + -ia
as in "The fantasia of pageant"

Bacteriostat : bacteria + -ostat (as in thermostat?)
as in "Patented bacteriostat agent in Sani-Flush Granules...kills common toilet germs)

The last two blends differ from the rest in that they are made up of a combination of two curtailed parts.

In comparison with the portmanteau words, there are relatively fewer blends formed by telescopage. Two examples of telescope words are: *Psychorientology* (*Psycho* + *orientology*) as in "...Dr. Jose Sylvia's Psychorientology is now here", and *maKANDOSedap* (*Makan* + *Kandos* + *Sedap*). The latter blend appeared as a slogan for the brand of chocolates called *Kandos*. *Makan* and *Sedap* are Malay words meaning "eat" and "delicious" respectively. This blend is what Wentworth (1934:36) terms a "blend-phrase". Note also that the brand is capitalized so that it will be immediately recognised in the blend.

One characteristic shared by all the blends listed above is their transparency: there is no problem in interpreting the blends; the faintest doubt is immediately resolved by the context in which the blends appear. There is, of course, the possibility that blends can be opaque, in the sense of not yielding to clear and unambiguous interpretation. For instance, translating *slithy* and *mimsy* into *lithe* and *slimy*, and *flimsy* and *miserable* respectively are Humpty Dumpty's and Lewis Carroll's readings of the two blends which need not necessarily be the same readings attributed by some other reader(s). *Slithy* could, for instance, suggest *slight* and *slithery*. Similarly, *frumious* could take on other possible readings. Elizabeth Sewell in "The Balance of Brillig" (1952) cites Partridge's as "frumpish, gloomy" and gives her own as "fume, with a

connection with French *brume* and English *brumous*, frumenty, rheumy".

One can posit a difference between Carroll's blends and the blends used in advertisements (and most other modern "light" writings). Carroll's are coined for fun and are meant to read as nonsense words before he or his character explains them. As nonsense formations they suggest references to other established words rather than possess some inherently defined meaning themselves - if they did they would cease to be nonsense words. On the other hand, the blends gathered from the advertisements are meant to communicate, and thus must be (relatively) transparent in order to be easily interpreted. It may be said then that there is a scale to blending, with transparency at one end and opacity at the other.

Use of blending to create trade-names tends towards the transparency end of the scale. There is certainly little problem in interpreting trade-names such as *AutoComp* and *MicroTec* which deal with computers and microprocessors, *Mobira* (Talkman) which deals with mobile radio telephones, (IBM) *Selectric* typewriters, *Eveready* batteries, (ICI) *Autocolor* or paint for cars, *HiTech* which is a popular name for products ranging from pens to air-conditioners, and so on. Indeed, blending is a productive process in the creation of trade-names because it is possible to embody several meanings in one word and still be easily understood. Moreover, blends are "distinctive, striking appellations" (Wentworth 1934:51) which make them doubly suitable for use in trade-names.

The description of blending given in this paper is by no means exhaustive or extensive. For a fuller treatment, the interested reader is referred to Wentworth (1934), who worked on a sample of 2,800 or more blends, to Pound (1914), whose work represents one of the earlier, invaluable studies on blends, or to Praninskas (1968), whose study on

trade-names includes blending as one of the essential word-formation processes.

Department of English
University of Malaya

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PIECES OF MOON
(for Po Wah)

by

Kee Thuan Chye

Two dragons fighting over
a moon
perched atop a pagoda.
What if the moon should topple and shatter into pieces
like my fifteenth day of the eighth moon mooncake
which, doubtless, she had blessed with her joss ash?

Catch a moon
in a water basin
and you'll see
pieces of moon
shimmering in the ripples.
A streak of cloud
cuts the moon in the middle
into a pair of oracle blocks,
but only a scimitar stroke
could conjure a crescent moon.
Scoop the moon out of the water
and she becomes
the bulb in your torch
which you shine on van Gogh's starry night.
Han Yu's whetted sickle
divides a peach
for you and me
as we hear a wild wolf worship
underneath some tinsel festoons.

You took a photograph of
two dragons fighting over
a moon
perched atop a pagoda.
What if the moon should topple and shatter into pieces?
What of it?
She will rise again tomorrow night.

June 16, 1976

BETWEEN FAIRIES AND WEREWOLVES

by

Kee Thuan Chye

Let me dream of peacock gardens rising out of groaning
pavements;
Our lily faces know too well the stomp-stamping of boots.
The cigarette brands my fingertips a
sickly yellow ice cream feels like a mountain
stream sliding down my chimneys stabbing
the sky blue-black until it bursts into tears of
soot.
Give me tears to cry away the bite of rabid werewolves;
Rheumatics on cement floors, we dream of bamboo cots.
Mouths full of fangs snatch
and champ the strawberry candy the good
fairy sent me and phantoms of shrivelled limbs in
sidewalk tatters wail in front of Aladdin's cave.
The rainbow is a dragon yet I know what shrouds are for,
And homeless butterflies will drop at the feet of smiling
snowmen.
Grin, grunt, squeak, shreak, bulldozing jaws behead
willowy lily-hyacinths whispering with buttercups;
Little Red Riding Hood picks an iris in the wood
and bullets tear the blood out of every
goddamn sonovabitch.
I see in portly men with big cigars
Cyclops with the olive stake impaled in his eye,
I see in tombstone rooftops shutting out the sky
The Gorgon horror with its slimy serpents...
Ding dong bell, the fairy has cast a spell
Robin Hood and Little John meet a frog in a lily pond
The moon is shining as bright as day, yay!

June 13, 1976

REGIONALISM AND THE NOVEL IN MODERN QUEBEC: THE EXAMPLE OF ROCH CARRIER

by

D.M.E. Roskies

In the interests both of safety and courtesy, it seems the wisest course to begin with a few fairly anaemic generalisations that may serve to clear the ground as well as to command specialist assent. And what better place to start than the OED? This gives the sense of region as "a place, a state or condition, having a certain character or subject to certain influences," regionalism in its turn translating as "localism with a regional basis" — which sounds a bit vapid and unhelpfully begs a few questions but has at least the merit of being acceptable across the board (or perhaps is simply not worth contesting at any length). So let us give thanks for small mercies: unlike, say, Marxism, we have not got dealings here with a mischievous notion, one that is inherently fissile or liable to explode in the hands of amateurs and trained personnel alike. And while like Marxism again it obviously admits of more than one determination, it is probably true to say here that the plurality of meaning is interesting without being disputatious. To the social psychologist, regionalism is presumably shorthand for the attachment to the originally conditioning environment; an attachment protective of locality and exulting for their own sake in the insularities and intensities of place. The student of politics will have in mind the antonym of nationalism, a phenomenon emerging correspondingly as a platform from what Northrop Frye wickedly calls "the blood-and-soil bit"[1] and issuing, often, in a call to action leading to autonomy from the controlling centre on behalf of cultural or linguistic groups residing more or less precariously on the circumference. Then again, economists will be thinking

of one pole in a binary system of exchange and primary production resting upon a complex division of labour and governed by the principles of complementarity, symbiosis, and relative underdevelopment. In so far as they pertain to a country like Canada, consisting of "distinct regions oriented along an east-west axis imposed upon the north-south axis of the geography of North America",[2] these distinctions are admittedly loose and pliable. None the less, they are analytically useful because consistent with themselves and with each other. Which is a good deal more than can be said for regionalism considered as a literary concept.

Indeed to bandy the term about in this connection is to ask for trouble. The attempt, unavoidably fierce and sometimes verging on the ferocious, to safe-guard some customarily neglected experience, to celebrate and develop for writing a sector of national life relatively unknown in the metropolis and usually patronised by an entrenched intelligentsia, may in several ways prove self-defeating or atavistic. Most obviously there is the danger of polemic, a danger at its worst the greater the geographical distances and the more eccentric the writer's provenance to the cultural matrix in which assessments of merit are arbitrated and, more prejudicially perhaps, Great Traditions asserted and defended. Especially where, as in the French-Canadian imbroglio, disparities of race, political status and economic position overlap or are co-terminous, the end-product in literature is sure to be a coded argument: it would be worrying as well as startling were it otherwise. Here is one reason for the tendentiousness of much recent writing from Quebec. In so far as it *is* tendentious, which is to say, given clumsily to bearing messages or noisily to advancing a cause, this has surely much to do with the wish — in itself entirely commendable but in this context disastrous — to intensify the image of the *patria* or *heimatland* so that it may assume a new and fundamental potency, particularly in the minds of readers untutored in the subject. One thinks here of the tradition to which Roch Carrier (born in the Quebec

village of St.-Justin-de-Dorchester and thus a son of a province-within-a-province) is affiliated. This includes the novels of Marie-Claire Blais and Anne Hébert, of the working-class milieux depicted with *saeva indignatio* by Claude Jasmin, Jacques Rénaud, André Major, and with a lachrymose irony by Jacques Fernon and Réjean Ducharme.[3] The tradition, if we can call it that, has its heart in the right place but, I think it just to claim, is in other respects undistinguished or at any rate less distinguished than we have a right to expect.

For I am not, heaven forbid, maintaining that regionalism as an imaginative project in its own right (or as a constituent of a larger project) is a non-starter. Even if this were the argument Hardy, Jean Giono, Sholokhov in the Soviet Union and Steinbeck in the USA exist as proof, if proof be needed, to the contrary. The point (bearing equally upon writing from the Third World) concerns the hazards of identification, which for the reasons just adverted to are more worrying at the periphery than at the core. In as much as the regional writer does commonly operate in obedience to the identificatory impulse he has perenially to fret about putting himself and his statement at the service of the necessarily limited and limiting programmes of documentary truthtelling ("This is what it was like ...") or nostalgic recuperation, after the manner, say, of *Maria Chapdelaine*. Not to mention having to avoid like the plague indulgence in agitprop exercises on behalf of political separatism on the model of Pierre Vallières' Fanon-inspired confection, *Negres Blancs d'Amerique* (1968). As always the justification for *engagement* — and the regional writer in Canada as elsewhere is whether or not he acknowledges it 'engaged' in the Sartrean sense — needs ultimately to be sought and found in audacities and intrepidities of aesthetic form, in the detectable *how* as well as in the *what* of the saying. You can rationalise timidity or incapacity in this department, but it would — unless critical standards are to be abdicated — be scandalous to condone them on an appeal to manifest sincerity of purpose, *parti pris* or anthropological finesse, virtuous as these

competencies may in themselves be

And yet, excuses are exactly what one senses lying behind, or underneath, the exaggeratedly favourable reception of Carrier's *ouevre* at the time of its first appearance in print and since. Or if not excuses, then a fascination with the exotic combined with a tendency to confuse explanation with adjudication; which is possibly endearing but comes in the end to the same thing. Or could it be that bad conscience has entered the equation, a late-bourgeois guilt that requires to be assuaged and is in a sense pandered to by displays of commiseration or condolence? At any rate, the encomium "First-rate writer" given him by the *Toronto Globe and Mail* in 1969,[4] following the publication of *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* seems really a bit much. To put it gently, the novels, while not exactly *bad* (in Orwell's sense of Good Bad Books) do present criticism with the kind of problem which, I'm afraid, arises so often in Canadian literature: the co-presence of intelligence and seriousness in novels which, as imaginative writing, as aspirants to the realm of "art", are radically unsatisfactory. The good news is that Carrier's is primarily a talent for creating farcical and bizarre incident in a style descriptive rather than dramatic. The disappointing, is that this talent is only good so far as it goes, which on any comparative scale isn't far enough. What, for example, is one to make of the allegorical crudenesses — even allowing for the fact that the novels are transparently written to a popular formula? Or the recourse regularly had to the language of disquisition not revelation? Or the longueurs in the storytelling, which readers (or at any rate this reader) might be pardoned for seeing as being contrived to subdue the most hardened insomniac?

It requires, then, no immersion in Jamesian sophistications to concede that Carrier on this indictment is, as a novelist, small fry in that manifestly he fails for much of the time to deliver on promises made in his name by the apparatus of convention he has elected to use. And

yet withal he is undeniably a writer of some special force and significance. How to account for this?

For answer it would I think be best to rehearse the itinerary of the three novels — plot being too grand a way of describing some sensational goings-on almost ostentatiously lacking design or direction. But this is surely to be curmudgeonly, since what the La Guerre trilogy purports to offer is not a consecutively evolving action, but rather an apparently haphazard concatenation of events which in its very disjointedness efficiently distils and dramatises with assurance some quintessential attitudes observable in lived historical experience. As its racily mnemonic title announces, *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* claims as its topic the deep-rooted hostility of many Québecois to federally-inspired and orchestrated efforts at national mobilisation made during the Second World War. The testimony urges that in choosing his subject Carrier is in fact writing extremely close to the grain of circumstantial truth. Mason Wade, doyen of French-Canadian historians, has much to say on the mood of "potential opposition and isolation from the rest of Canada" and on the "development of the rift between the races which had been such a tragic feature of the First World War."[5] Noting the growing tide of nationalist feeling in Quebec and discontent with economic arrangements, he chronicles the marked deterioration in the enthusiasm for the war on the part of a people who were being seen and more importantly who were coming to see themselves as "a refractory people hesitating to obey the law and even sabotaging it."[6] In Wade's estimate "the war was beginning to weigh heavily upon a Quebec which found its way of life radically altered without its consent, while little attention was paid to its sentiments, which were no longer clearly understood at Ottawa."[7] Commenting on the secessionist temper of French Canada in emergency, he notes that

> It was in a disgruntled and uncooperative mood as the result of brickbats which had come its way for not doing more for the

> war effort than it already had, which in its own eyes was already too much. It was deeply involved in a rapid if relatively peaceful social revolution which had shaken the framework of its society.[8]

And, being, Wade concludes, "in no state of mind to respond enthusiastically to the stepped-up programme which English Canadians soon came to demand," Quebec (if we can speak of it for the moment as a corporate abstraction) found itself accused of embarrassing the "limited national unity"[9] which once again came to be seen for the highly questionable notion it was and arguably still is.

So *non-serviam* and a certain cussedness were if the record is to be credited generic attitudes. Is it too simple-minded to suggest that and as if in confirmation *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* ratifies them in retrospect? I think not. Consider the way the novel gets off literally as well as figuratively to a flying start as the villager Joseph unceremoniously severs an arm to render himself ineligible for the Canadian draft, on the no doubt mitigating grounds that "their Christly shells would have made jam out of me!"[10] This insurrectionary self-mutilation inaugurates a catalogue of protest and uproar, as we follow the people of Carrier's village — anonymous, but at the same time metonymic of the Laurentian settlements — from one erotic adventure and anti-authoritarian contretemps to another. The picaresque business considered as a whole enfolds itself around the figure of Corriveau, the prototypical and prototypically put-upon folk-hero killed in the far-away war of the *maudits anglais*. His death (or judicial murder, as it is seen and perhaps in this empathetic context, should be called) in a conflict he doesn't begin to understand sanctions an engagingly anti-establishmentarian rage that issues in an idiom charged with bawdy and threat. And this rage, annexed to a sour, sub-Rabelaisian comedy, is the datum of the novel and precipitates its substance. An example of the former — of, that is, the animus against "Them" — is the potted version of French-Canadian

history conveyed through *style indirect libre*: The meditation is that of an English soldier mounted sentry over Corriveau's coffin:

> When the English arrived in the colony the French Canadians were less civilized than the Indians. The French Canadians lived grouped in little villages along the shores of the St. Lawrence, in wooden cabins filled with dirty, sick, starving children, and lousy, dying old men. Every year English ships used to go up the St. Lawrence because England had decided to get involved in New France, which has been neglected and abandoned by the Frenchmen. The English ships were anchored in front of the villages, and the Englishmen got off to offer their protection to the French Canadians, to become friends with them. But as soon as they had seen the British flag waving on the St. Lawrence the French Canadians had gone and hidden in the woods. Real animals. They hadn't a vestige of politeness, these pigs. They didn't even think of defending themselves. What they left behind - their cabins, animals, furniture, clothes - were so dirty, so crawling with vermin, so smelly, that the English had had to burn it all in order to disinfect the area. If they hadn't destroyed it the vermin would have invaded the whole country.
>
> (p.82)

If an inspection of this passage suggests nothing else it suggests, surely, the writer's generous and principled complicity with his native folk and with their universe of discourse. It's a pastiche, of course, though one that follows more or less explicitly the historical agenda. Yet at the same time it's an intriguingly flexible imaginative stance, permitting an inquest to be mounted into, on the one hand, parochial fecklessness and myopia and, on the other, renegotiating and retrieving a misappro-

priated story. Point-of-view in the passage just quoted is interstitial, located somewhere between subtext and 'top'-text. Certainly it belongs to the dispossessed, and relatively unequal, Québecois, whose collective story as encoded in the official texts has been told and rationalised *for* them instead of *by* them once too often. But, the satire, notice, is adroit in being designed not only to pillory insolent stereotype but also to upbraid those who tamely accept such impositions because they know no better or couldn't care less.

Yet the striking thing about the satire is the way it is generated by an acute and ultimately forgiving — acute perhaps *because* forgiving — rapport with *les paysans*. It's an at-one-ment felt most intensely in the riotous set-piece scenes depicting Corriveau's wake, during which -

> The feast spread to the living room too. The flag covering Corriveau's coffin became a table-cloth where plates and glasses were left and cider was spilled. People sitting at the kitchen table leaned against a wall because it was hard to keep your balance with a plate in one hand, a glass of cider in the other, fat from the *tourtière* streaming down cheeks and chin; or they kept their heads high and dry on a pile of greasy dishes, or else standing in the doorway which was open to the snow and cold, they tried to vomit to get rid of their dizziness; or they put both hands on Antoinette's generous backside or tried to see through the wool covering Philomene's breasts; and they ate juicy *tourtière* in the living room, in the odour of the candles which were going out, and they prayed in the heavy odour of the kitchen where the smell of grease mingled with that of the sweat of the men and women.
>
> (p.57)

In such episodes there is sexuality, violence and social chaos, but these elements never obtrude or monopolise because of a rapier-like precision and economy of style, constructive of a total effect and meaning. The asphyxiating hugger-mugger of the village is set over against what are seen as characteristically urban estrangements, such as Berubé's glum liaison with the English prostitute Molly, frivolously contracted on active service scouring loos in Newfoundland. And these contrarieties underscore the fact, and the fitness, of membership, which is the central conceit of the novel.[11] Sodality, to be endured or relished as circumstances demand, is celebrated through a terse, basic prose; language that exploits and subverts cliché so as to make of it in the first instance effective verbal pyrotechnic, but also, behind this, something that leaves a memorable sense of corporate reality and suffering.

To retreat, as Carrier does in his second novel, backwards in time to the wedding night of the Corriveau parents is effectively to relocate from Quebec during the war — which is to say, from a Canada fratricidally divided against itself, the governed and the governors in inveterate contention — the unspectacular and even counter-heroic inward world of the *habitant*. This emotional territory is movingly and entertainingly brought to life in *Floralie, Where Are You?* (1971) and its compulsions and confusions expertly placed and sifted. It is this steady willingness to scrutinise the awkward and portray it with robust imaginative sympathy that makes Carrier's foray into the twilit world of Anthyme Corriveau and his sort so remarkable. *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* discovered Anthyme and Floralie grouped in *tableau vivant* around their son's coffin, draped in the accursed British flag and — adding insult to injury! — guarded in the ultimate gesture of incorporation by English soldiers, the occasion supplying any number of pretexts for raillery and immolating sarcasm at the expense of "les gros". The successive novel retreats thence to a point thirty years in the past. The season is spring not winter, and the occasion a marriage not a wake. And there is a further

and more telling difference in that whereas *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* knowingly observed from within a community adopting in the face of death routines of affiliation and opposition, *Floralie, Where Are You?* shows them to be divided and riven, preying upon each other in the acts of love. As its plangently interrogative title declares, the novel is in some sense all about such paradoxes. And Carrier may be said to be committed to delineating and unobtrusively to evaluating the contradictory energies flowing without check through characters like Anthyme and sponsoring his at times alarmingly wayward conduct.

I say wayward, because *Floralie* reconstructs (as distinct from merely recording) the night-progress of the newlyweds back to the village after the marriage ceremony through scrubland and forest, in the course of which Anthyme, behaving towards his tremulous bride with consistent if unwitting brutishness, possesses her on the floor of the jolting buggy only to discover, as he quaintly puts it, that "my wife's a fallen woman! No wall, no curtain ... it was an open door. And to punish her my horse packs up!"[12] French Canadian Catholicism being what it sometimes so repressively is, particularly in the rural townships, it comes as no surprise to find that he is subsequently visited by lurid fears of retribution and tormented by Jansenist visions of damnation. More arresting is the way these in turn receive a spectacular gloss in the antics of a troupe of wandering mummers in the medieval Morality and Mystery traditions, led or rather incited by a mountebank preacher with a nice line in ecclesiastical flummery tinged with salaciousness. The grotesquerie of these proceedings together with their repercussions in the consciousness of the two principals, rivet the attention, or are at any rate meant to. More than once the attention *is* riveted, as in the following example (you can positively *hear* the authorial voice - over relishing the effect):

> Horses had disappeared, taking their carriages with them, even taking a plough once, as if the earth had swallowed them up like a huge mouth. Such things had happened in his part of the country. Anthyme knew some farmers, like himself, who knew a traveller who had been the victim of such an accident. He was a peddler who charged too much for the old clothes he sold to poor people. And he used to take unfair advantage of the women, too, when their husbands had been away in the forest for too long and they were dying for a man.
>
> The Devil had come for the peddler and dragged him off to Hell, because the horse wasn't really a horse, it was the Devil disguised as a horse.
>
> Some people thought it wasn't the Devil. Not the Devil? But its hooves had left black marks; they had burned the gravel on the road. The horse's shoes were red from the fires of Hell. That was a curse that had punished an honest-to-goodness sinner, a public sinner, but Anthyme hadn't committed such grave sins. He didn't deserve that kind of punishment: he got drunk only rarely, he never took the name of the Lord in vain and Floralie, his wife, was the first woman he had had.
>
> (pp.34-35)

What Carrier's impressionistic and faux-naif story-telling is in a qualified way successful in doing here is two things. One is to present people who can be felt by sympathy although not entered into by intelligence. The other is to convey the essentially problematical nature of such characters — problematical in ways that involve the convergence of the personal and the political involving, as I see it, questions of who gets what and why. Anthyme Corriveau is a thick-set block of a character, one of the tribe of the nearly sub-articulate towards

whom Carrier has a special if reserved sympathy. When Anthyme thinks or reflects or puzzles about his predicament, his mind creaks: the reader is aware of the clumsy stretching of muscles. Anthyme's thoughts are incapable of escaping from their deep infection by his moods, from the euphoria with which he embraces his role of husband and master, and from his despair when he finally twigs that in this role he is ridiculous and dangerous. Ridiculous, not just inherently but in the eyes of the institution which in every sense has it in its power to give the imprimatur to such a role: the Catholic church as represented by the doltish Father Nombrillet, whose apt name is an amusingly delinquent play on the French "nombril" (meaning "navel"). Dangerous, because he, Anthyme, can be cracklingly irascible to the point of bloodymindedness. He has the will to move to a moral level of existence, but he is without the capacity to make his will effective or the lucidity of consciousness which is the condition of self-knowledge and positve action. Enfranchised in the sense of *chez nous* he may be, within the parish, but there's the rub (which Carrier has the wit to perceive): so long as he is cloistered within it he remains, too, caged in the prison of his own clogged and occluded nature.

Floralie, Where Are You?, ending as it does on a festal note as "villagers, their shirts open and dishevelled from the night's watch, their clothes stained with beer ... danced around ... the man and woman entwined in the grass" (p.107), is a comedy in the classical acceptation of tumult assimilated to pattern, a mating which is also a taming. It is also experimental (albeit conventionally) in eschewing realism in favour of a deeper representation, schematic but searching, of the strangeness of the humdrum. The accelerating fantasy involves a seemingly loose, episodic and far from rigidly consistent "story-line" and is played against the base of a gravely objective scrutiny. The point to stress, however, is that this defection from lifelikeness is instrumental to an implicit but vigorous critique of the cultural text of French Canada. It's a way of subjecting to forensic

examination the hallowed traditions *de bon vieux temps* — the extended family, the xenophobia, the parish priest seen as having the monopoly of truth and a hot-line to its very source. Carrier squints at these shibboleths through a cracked lens or (to alter the metaphor) through the wrong end of the telescope. And what he espies from this perspective are the moral lineaments of a social personality which has at its heart a certain insistent if not always winsome simplicity: not self-confidence but trust in self, yet to be tested. Like any novelist worth his salt he is not in business neutrally to observe but covertly to make judgements. And in Anthyme Corriveau's case, what is being judged and in a sense found wanting is the persistent and finally desperate, even perverse, thrust of an abrasively independent identity immobilised and obsessed by prohibitionist religion and obsessed with vetoed sex.

From the foregoing it will be obvious that, read as documents, Carrier's novels locate themselves acrimoniously and with some urgency at the juncture of class, nation and region in the French Canadian polity. He is mesmerised by the spectacle of a parochial sensibility haunted by the dislocation of private and public realms; a sensibility which as it happens can neither be assimilated to nor skirted by the ruling Americanoid or Anglocentric tendencies within the Canadian cultural domain. Village and family life are the microcosms within which the larger transforming agencies of this fissured culture are most visibly and painfully at work — painful because accompanied by great disturbance. (It may be worth noting here that for all the moist sentimentality Roger Lemelin's Plouffe Family saga offers a similar coign of vantage.) To illustrate Carrier's conscious, even rationcinative, grasp of this process, marked as it was and still is by fragmentation, exclusion, and status-ambiguity, one can do no better than to cite remarks made during a 1972 interview with Donald Cameron. There he owns (the phraseology is a little infelicitous) that the concluding novel in his trilogy is "the story of many Quebecois who came to

Montreal: the work here was English, and they were French *paysans*; the work here was technical and they were badly prepared for it. It was a drama for them which has an influence on what is happening now."[13] On his own admission, then, Carrier is working by choice within a nexus of misprisions, deluded hopes, frustrations and resentments and is committed to siting them within their facilitating cultural moment. The moment is Québec in the Duplessis era, the period of industrial "take-off", the growth of dynamic conurbations in the St. Lawrence river valley and, in consequence, a veritable haemmorhaging of country people (like the eponymous Philibert) from stable, self-contained communities working the land to the metropoles (where commercial specialisms are the rule and lucrative occupations the goal), with all that such bleeding implied (partly as cause and partly as effect) by way of anomie, bafflement of spirit and exacerbation of the class-friction running enduringly athwart the two solitudes.[14]

Accordingly, *Is it The Sun, Philibert?* discovers its adolescent hero adrift without resource or means of support in a *Gesellschaft* Montreal, a City of Dre dful Night that would do a Céline or a William Burroughs proud. Having thus shifted its venue the novel attempts, through the medium of one registering consciousness, to define an attitude to this deranging and multifariously perplexing terrain. The scapegrace son of the lewdly ruminative gravedigger in *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* revealingly metamorphoses to "Mister Phil" amid snow discoloured by car-exhaust fumes and on the rebound from an encounter with sexually rapacious society hostesses playing Lady Bountiful to the likes of "these poor starving dogs /tossed/ into the streets ... and he can't even speak English.... Could he be Yugoslavian or perhaps Hungarian?"[15] This is the sort of humour the pitch-blackness of which makes solemnity redundant.

But the grim jokiness is also constitutive, part of an overall policy of morbid narration. We can come at this by indirections, via Walter Benjamin's essay on Baudelaire.

This essay speaks of the way in which the vicissitudes of life under industrial capitalism — mobility and context-free communication, labour migration and bureaucratic employment — make the stock experience of the crowd the norm. "Fear, revulsion and horror", he says characteristically perturb the big-city mass, which inflicts upon the individual discontinuous, atomising jolts and elicits a shift from pattern to systematic randomness, in which experience is *ad hoc*, rapidly turned-over and personal loyalties suspended or rendered defunct. "The shock experience which the passer-by in the crowd has", Benjamin says, "corresponds to what the worker 'experience' /sic/ at his machine",[16] and it is, he argues, the part of literary art to give expression to this representative uncertainty in respect of values and a concomitant tendency towards minimal affirmation. With such traumas of dislodgement and dispersal as his found subject it is perhaps to be expected, then, that Carrier should seek to invest the drabbest urban naturalism with subjective fantasy and defamiliarising strangeness. Helpless vis-à-vis a new order in which he has no leverage and to which his adaptation must perforce be partial and parasitic, Philibert is glimpsed in near-absurdist fugues of schizophrenic daydream and isolation, the absurdism modulating into hauntingly convincing pictures of the civic inferno with its vertigos of adjustment:

> He raised his eyes and it looked to him as though ten villages had been thrown down, piled on top of each other with all their houses and churches and cars and old men .... The walls receded before his eyes as though they were floating. The snow tasted of mud. People were walking behind one another, colliding, their heads pulled down between their shoulders. They wore bushy, living overcoats. A door was open in front of him. Would he go in? A bit of warmth caressed his face. He would go in. He didn't dare. Where would this bus take him, anyway? He wouldn't get on

> it. The bus would take him some place and he would never come back. But it was warm. "Why don't they build their goddamn cities like villages? Then maybe we wouldn't get lost." He would not get on the bus. He would retrace his steps, find another truck and go back to where he came from. "No, *Baptême*, I won't go back to the village!" The driver at the wheel motioned him to get on. He was getting impatient.... In the bus there were heads sticking out of coats. The faces were broad and they neither smiled nor slept ... "Let me off, *Baptême*! I want to walk on my own two feet!" The faces glistened like the dough for the tourtières when his mother brushed melted butter over them. The driver's smile had nothing good in it.
>
> (pp.22-23)

What Carrier gives us here — or rather what he donates to his own kind, through the medium of his gormless creation — is an image of struggle, often lame and ineffectual, for however modest a sense of coherence and self-reliance. Clearly this kind of writing is the product of a man with a powerful appreciation of the limitations that clichés of behaviour and feeling place on those ill-equipped to resist them. Hence the novel's flair for switching dialogue into absurdist or allegorical ritual with undertones of violence, and the kaleidescopic transitions between dialogue, half-soliloquy and dream-world vacuity.

But the differences of method among the novels are interesting. Whereas *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* and *Floralie, Where Are You?* vacillate between a dour illusionism and a tendency towards the phantasmagoric or mythic, *Is It The Sun, Philibert?* pulls out all the stops and plumps without compunction for fantasy-sequence. Some of these imaginings are quite gorgeous (as towards the end, when, pinned beneath the ancient Chevrolet purchased in a bid to seduce

the dolly-bird teller at the local savings bank, Philibert has the equivalent of drug-induced apparition in which he watches himself being consumed by a copybook serpent from hell and excreted, in a death which is also, or should one say is also supposed to be, an equivocally symbolic regeneration). Others are merely banal. But fantasy regularly evicts reality, serving either as a complete substitute for it or creating a manageable surrogate for it and for its interpretation. The fantasy whatever its form is mimetic of the jarred sensorium of a peasant boy attracted up from the country to the city like file to magnet, and is a particularly efficient way of endorsing his subliminal knowledge of cultural expropriation and social deracination. Philibert the casual labourer "digging his own grave" through snow on St. Catherine Street whilst all around "tires screamed like circular saws" (p.42); working in a factory in which, anthropomorphically, "machines for making the soles of shoes were chewing at the leather with loud cries" (p.44); boiling over with unspecifying rage at "the guy that's responsible" for these depredations and refusing the etiolated Marxism placatorily profferred by a fellow wage-slave with the rider that "the Good Lord, he made the world the way he wanted, with rich guys and poor guys, little guys like us and big guys" (p.46) — the novel is organised around these Chaplinesque images. In them are inscribed the fluidity, the indeterminatedness and the turbulence of a Brecht-universe which has at its centre — at once everywhere and nowhere — the nightclubs of St. Laurent Boulevard featuring Anita the African Tigress and patronised by "muscular lumberjacks, coughing schoolboys, salesmen with slicked-down hair" (p.76).

No wonder, then, at the irrealism or even surrealism of technique. This is evinced in the almost lunar landscape, in the endless-seeming recurrence of action which in any case takes a low trajectory, and in the Nathaniel West-like peripheralism of the subject-matter, the poverty, the isolation, the narrowness. Equally, there is a kind of

intensity-reaction in the constant threats of violence or resorts to it. And in imaginary exchanges like the following there is a disembodied extension of a vocal cry that amounts to a mocking disillusion and a terrible indictment. The exchange takes place in Phil's head and is perhaps an hallucination triggered by the actual return to the ancestral hearth, now derelict:

> His grandparents were sitting in their usual places, in their chairs that danced like ships on the seas of the past. Grandmother was embroidering a cushion; she said she was making a sky. Grandfather spat. There were pigs nosing about in the room. Philibert was amazed. He wanted to leave. One pig was dozing silently, leaning against a door. Another was tumbling down the stairs and its weight made the house shake. "We were young once," said Grandfather. "We were young like you," said Grandmother. "We were younger than you." "Now we're old." "So, to give us something to leave behind for our children to inherit when we die, we sold the house." "I had seventeen children in this house. It was in this very house that our children became men and women...." "Nuns, a priest, farmers ... a salesman, soldiers." "Or they died." "We loved it, this house of ours. When we bought it, it was already old." "But it got younger because we were young." "We sold it because our children are pretty fond of money." "And inheritances".
>
> (pp.15-16)

Intramural loss, loss of the homeland and of the fellowship native (or putatively attributable) to it, are the novel's pervasive threads and those of the trilogy's for that matter. In adumbration of this theme it can to be honest sometimes read like an overhealed tract. But the passage just quoted impresses by building towards this theme

incrementally through a montage of voices, tracing in the process the contours of the inner life of consciousness, recording a spiritual morphology.

The *La Guerre* novels are grieving but not forlorn reports. Their melancholy annotates the marginalisation and contradiction, experiences which are given their inverted analogue in the one Boris Rataploffsky a giant who rejoices in the soubriquet of The Man with the Face of Steel and whose manager the peregrinating Phil, his eye ever on the main chance, becomes. Despite or perhaps because of his size this preposterous figure projects himself as the avatar of all Carrier's little men, "les petits canadiens-francais", semi-articulate, full of half-acknowledged animosities, lacking in ideology, or even in class-consciousness but always primordially aware of being on the receiving rather than the executive end of things as they stand, cock-eyed in their view, in La Belle Province. In an ambience of victims and freaks Boris, abused and manhandled by the crowds he pulls in at fairgrounds until he is driven to suicide, performs a vicarious office. Village has ceded to town, a mere machine for living, and friendship commutes to profit as the universal motive. Quite how lethal the substitution is can be observed in "Mister Phil's" pathetically acquisitive petitbourgeois reveries, domesticated through a style endowed with an immediately obvious local base. "Pathetic" may not be quite the right word in the present context, Carrier being shrewd enough to know that calculation — of interest, prospects, and social promotion — is of the essence where the concern is with those debarred as a category from positions of real power. This does not, however, stop him from eavesdropping upon "Mister Phil's" egalitarian expectations and aspirations with unconcealed exuberance, the humour serving as a diacritical mark of an identity which persists, limpet-like, amid the new conditions and surroundings:

Philibert would be a grocer. A little grocery-store as clean as a house, whth jars of jam arranged in multicoloured pyramids and dusted every day. A grocery store that smelled good, big with a big front window. His hands would be clean. He would use a white towel frequently to wipe them on. He would wear a white shirt and a blue or red bow-tie. The walls would be white too. The ceiling might be a bright pink colour. He would swallow his bad language in front of his customers because he would be a respectable grocer. He would be polite. After they had done their shopping he would escort the customers to the door and he would be careful not to pinch their bums. The store would be called "Boris and Philibert." No "Boris and Son"? No. "Rataploffsky and Associate"? No, that sounded too Jewish. Anyway, the name painted on the front of the store wasn't very important, the basic truth was written in his soul: he owed his life to the Ninth Wonder of the World. He would enroll in a night course to learn English, because English was the language of business, big business and monkey business. If you can't speak English you can't even take a leak when you want to. He would subscribe to English magazines like the office workers he'd seen on the bus. Those magazines told you things. *Baptême!* They had great pictures of naked women to give you some energy too. Then he would take a course in accounting because when he went to school they had taught him how to go to Heaven but not how to go to the bank. Before he became the manager of the Ninth Wonder of the World he couldn't even tell a profit from a loss. If he ran the grocery store well it would grow and prosper. Then later, perhaps he would... He didn't even dare think about it. Go into politics. He

> mustn't think about it. Politics.... It was forbidden to think about it: he might as well dream of having a prick as big as a locomotive. *Baptême!* He might as well dream of having the wings of an angel.
>
> (p.92)

Which brings us to a consideration of Carrier's uncompromising way with words. "Calice d'hostie de tabernacle!" may be wearyingly familiar to some ears and, even extenuated as a compensatory mechanism, hard to get on with. But where Carrier's prose really makes us sit up and take notice is at moments of unrestrained invective or imprecation. When Arsène, Philibert's father, gives his son the low-down on life he tells him that "The Anglais, my boy, are like everybody else. The men pee standing up and the women do it sitting down!" And this is how Joseph, the pacifist villager in *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* responds to a drop in the temperature: "May God change my mother into a horse with the head of a cow if I've ever seen so much snow in my life. And I've seen some!" Now if like most Canadian literary critics one has been well brought-up the first impulse is of course to apologise for a prose so ribald and so studded with expletives as to be unacceptable for quotation to respectable audiences. Which is very much its point. The ungenteel candour is tactical, amounting to a refusal, in literature as in life, to take things lying down. Sometimes, it has to be said, the demotic is used in so explicit, self-satisfied, and sermonising a way that its merit is lost in the stridency of the advocacy. Or else the frankness of statement is overwhelmed by the hectic and all too often formless posturings which surround it. But more often the refusal of literary propriety is exhilarating rather than gratuitous or self-indulgent. Even in necessarily diluted translation Carrier's *joual*, with its "hosties!", "baptêmes!", its ripe vulgarities like "Christ on a bun with onions!", is a vivacious expressive device. "Christ au bicyclette sur son Calvaire, Gros tas de merde debout!" — this sort of thing is a double-edged sword, deployed

with panache to embarrass Westmount and Don Mills, and, no less, to enclose the collective consciousness of the impotent, used as these are to being dished out a raw deal by the powerful. As such it's by implication a quasi-political idiom, embodying the gesture of rejection as well as the gaiety of the undefeated. Its sublime impertinence depends on a felt fraternal solidarity and on a taken-for-granted allergy to church and state and to their hegemonies. In their radical seizure of language, a language collecting oaths and curses of every kind, Carrier's people, caught on the hop between contestation and collaboration, are (if I can put it somewhat fancifully) FLQ militants without knowing it and *avant la lettre*.[17]

In a nutshell, then, Roch Carrier's novels require to be viewed under several heads. They are, to begin with, comic narratives of resistance and accommodation to the changing actualities of power and institutional controls in post-war French Canada. As such, they register the impact of renascent political nationalism and social change on a rural proletariat traditionally remote from metropolitan stimuli but now finding itself squarely on the anvil of urbanisation and industrialisation. Yet at the same time they assert a profound allegiance, not only in thought and morality but also to a certain extent in expressive form, to the idea of a self-differentiating French-Canadian mentality. In them the colloquial speech of Quebec Province is adapted, always revealingly and sometimes with verve, to communicate the idiosyncratic quality of a subnational sensibility; a sensibility mutinously at odds with its larger surroundings and bent on celebrating as well as preserving its distinctive character. In this respect if in no other they constitute an important though decidedly minor achievement in the field of the novel in Canada today, bidding fair to do for Quebec — much more modestly but with a not dissimilar panache — what Faulkner does for the American South.

Department of English Language and Literature
National University of Singapore

NOTES

1. *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto, House of Anansi Press Ltd., 1971), v.

2. David Staines, "Introduction: Canada Observed", in Staines (ed.), *The Canadian Imagination: Dimensions of a Literary Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1977), p.2.

3. In this connexion, see W.H. New, *Among Worlds: An Introduction to Modern Commonwealth and South African Fiction* (Erin, Ontario, Press Porcepic, 1975), esp.pp. 101-133; Edmund Wilson, *O Canada: an American's Notes on Canadian Culture* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), esp.pp.179-211; and Ronald Sutherland, *Second Image: Comparative Studies in Quebec-Canadian Literature* (Don Mills, Ont., New Press, 1971), *passim*.

4. Cited from the dustjacket blurb of *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, trans. Sheila Fischman (Toronto, House of Anansi Press Ltd., 1971).

5. *The French Canadians, 1776-1945* (Toronto, Macmillan Company of Canada Ltd., 1956), pp.930, 940.

6. Ibid., p.943.

7. Ibid., p.962.

8. Ibid., p.990.

9. Ibid., p.957.

10. *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, p.5. All further quotations are from the edition cited above and are given directly in the text below.

11. For a professional view of the syndrome as it actually existed on the ground — and more generally as context for the texts discussed above — see A.R.M. Lower, "Two Ways of Life: The Primary Antithesis of Canadian History", in *Approaches to Canadian History: Essays by W.A. Mackintosh, A.R.M. Lower, F.H. Underhill, W.L. Morton, D.G. Creighton, J.M.S. Careless, M. Brunet* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1967), pp.15-29, esp.pp.16-24.

12. *Floralie, Where Are You?*, trans. Sheila Fischman (Toronto, House of Anansi Ltd., 1971), p.33. All further quotations are from this edition and are given directly in the text below.

13. Quoted in Robert Weaver and William Toye (eds.), *The Oxford Anthology of Canadian Literature* (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1973), p.59.

14. For the background of events and reactions, see Edward M. Corbett, *Quebec Confronts Canada* (Baltimore, John Hopkins Press, 1967), *passim*.

15. Quoted in Robert Weaver and William Toye (eds.), *The Oxford Anthology of Canadian Literature* (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1973), p.59.

16. 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', in *Illuminations*, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London, Fontana/Collins, 1973), p.178.

17. In this connection, see the corroborative evidence offered (unsubtly and hamfistedly) in the topical collection of essays edited by Gary Geddes, *Divided We Stand* (Toronto, Peter Martin Associates Ltd., 1977), esp. the broadsides of Walter Gordon, Richard Rohmer, and André Laurendeau.

LOVE'S NOT THE THING

by

ONN

This thing called love, it's not so great,
It wears out with time, and in time,
You will awake, though it's too late,
To find you've wasted all your prime.

For sometimes when you love too deep,
You'll find your trust will much abound,
And life you let the good fates keep;
Just then will love run you around.

For breaking midway in a kiss
She sadly says she loves you not,
She says it's you she doesn't miss,
That's when it's clear, these twists in plot.

Just in case you're not satisfied
And try to question how and why,
She'll tell of times when how she'd cried,
And well, that, even love can die.

But for all that, she might just say
How she would never forget you,
And with fondness your music play,
Remembering things you used to do.

She'ld say how much she still would care,
Though your love must now be left to fate
It's then you might just let tears drop,
(Which drives her off in plain disgust).
And you act like a great big sop,
When you rant against love and trust.
But as for the other guy there,
He finds it all so amusing,
That now you are so abusing,
For didn't you know all this while,
He'd courted her with all his guile,
And that to win, he knew that lust is much the
greater thing!

Language Centre
University of Malaya

COURT THE WIND

by

ONN

If you court the wind, expect impending storm,
The sky's stretched, thunder racked and lightning split,
Unburdening hail to pelt, rain to spit;
Cower thus, for no earth's dry, no hearth's warm.

Did you think courtship glides on downy breeze -
Lifting leaves into a twirl, a pirouet,
Gently eddying into a minuet,
While promises waft from swaying trees?

Or do you intend love the way you like -
Breeding with hopeful breath in stagnant air,
Magic moments handled with rehearsed flair,
With passions dammed in a stone hearted dyke,
For fear blights are spawned from men who have sinned?
Then vault all love and never court the wind!

Language Centre
University of Malaya

MACLALS SEMINAR
ENGLISH PROFICIENCY TARGETS FOR MALAYSIA

A brief report
compiled by
Audrey Yeoh and Henry Thambyrajah

The seminar, organised by MACLALS with full sponsorship from the Malaysian Tobacco Company, was held on 27th April 1985. The seminar was organised particularly for teachers and other educationists involved in the teaching of English in the Federal Territory and Selangor. As such, participants ranged from teachers in both rural and urban schools at primary and secondary levels, representatives from the various sections of the Ministry of Education and the State Education Departments, to teachers at tertiary institutions. A week before the day of the seminar, copies of project papers with the following titles were distributed to participants:

'Procedures for Defining English Language Targets for Malaysia' written by Dr. Hena Mukherjee the Faculty of Education, University of Malaya.

'A Scale for Assessing English Proficiency levels' written by Dr. Abdul Majid of the English Department, University of Malaya

and 'Some Practical Points to consider in Establishing and Evaluating English Language Proficiency Targets' written by Mrs Nesamalar Chitravelu of the Language Centre, University of Malaya.

For the seminar proper two panel discussions were held on the morning of the 27th, followed by a workshop session in the afternoon, after lunch. Reproduced below are the project papers distributed to participants, and brief

reports on the panel discussions and workshop session.

Project Papers

1. Procedures for Defining English Language Targets for Malaysia ... Hena Mukherjee

Language policy-makers in Malaysia are sensitive to the notion that English Language proficiency targets (ELPT) need to be reviewed from time to time if they are to be both realistic and relevant to the changing uses of the language. As in other developing countries with heterogenous language backgrounds, language planning processes must be responsive to national developmental needs which include economic self-sufficiency, social integration and cultural considerations.

Since centralized curriculum planning in Malaysia is a vital catalyst for change and since the formal educational system is used as a deliberate instrument of social change, policy related to ELPT must span all phases and dimensions of the regulative process from the statement of general objectives to an examination of the means by which they are realized, as well as their outcomes. This section briefly outlines procedures (some of which are currently practised) that policy-making bodies need to undertake in order to provide themselves with systematic, empirically-based inputs.

An appraisal of policy statements related to the aims of English Language (EL) instruction in Malaysia is the obvious starting point. This needs to be carefully done from several angles - clarity, scope, specificity and their compatability with other educational and non-educational policies, e.g. higher education, business, commerce, etc.

The feasibility of EL policies needs to be clearly examined in relation to the existing school

curriculum. In particular, two major questions must be honestly answered:

(a) Are stated EL goals practicable, given the length and intensity of EL lessons in schools, curriculum materials and teacher preparation strategies that we have?

(b) Are these goals appropriate in terms of the discernible needs of students within the educational system at various levels, the world of work and the society for which schooling is a preparation?

Next, systems of evaluation need to be set up that include planned indicators which will assist monitoring activities: e.g. assessments, impact of teacher in-service programmes, etc. Such systematic analyses will focus on various components such as textbooks, teacher preparation, analysis of skills introduced at various stages, differential emphases placed on skills, etc.

Empirical information about the use and needs of EL in Malaysia must be gathered and referred to. This feature indicates the importance of systematic research and the building up of an institutional framework that makes use of relevant research findings. The specific purposes of systematic research in the field are:

(a) to obtain a detailed description of the extent to which EL is used in a wide variety of situations; and

(b) to assess the relationship between the actual use of English and factors such as educational attainment and occupation. The dimension of employment must be seen as of crucial importance in such an empirical study with an examination

of the level of importance placed on EL skills in private sector recruitment. A clear link should emerge between EL taught in schools and the requirements of the job market.

The procedures suggested here are some of the major ways in which documented input for ELPT can be obtained. Data emerging from such systematic strategies should not only assist the formulation of realistic proficiency targets but also have implications for instructional materials and teacher preparation.

2. A Scale for Assessing English Proficiency Levels

... Abdul Majid b. Nabi Baksh

In Malaysia today, proficiency in English is assessed in terms of the examinations passed in the language. Thus, proficiency in English is usually described by stating that an individual has passed the SRP English, SPM English 322, GCE English/SPM English 1119, HSC English or that an individual is an English graduate, a "Masters" in English or a Ph.D. in English. Further the examinations, in the order they are arranged above, constitute a hierarchy with each succeeding examination signifying a higher level of proficiency. These examinations thus constitute a scale -- beginning with the SRP and stretching through SPM, HSC, B.A., M.A. to Ph.D. -- with reference to which an individual's proficiency in English can be described; an individual who has passed only SPM English 322 is lower on the scale than one who has passed the HSC. Within each point on the scale, there is further graduation: an "A" in SPM 1119 signifies a higher level of proficiency than a "B" or "C" or "D" and so on. This examination-based scale, though not explicitly acknowledged as such, is assumed to help distinguish and designate different levels of proficiency in English.

The examination-based scale may be of some use in the educational system (from which it arises and which it serves) but has limited practical value in the world outside academia. To concretize this, we can refer to a hypothetical individual who last year obtained an "A" grade in SPM English 322. Those who know the "Communicational Syllabus" on which the pupil is examined in the SPM 322 paper may be aware that the aim of the Communicational Syllabus is to enable pupils to effect basic communication in some 16 situations (making a simple phone-call, describing an accident, etc.). This knowledge is, however, of very little practical value to an employer. Can the employer assume that the individual with an "A" in the SPM 322 paper has a sufficient command of the language to comprehend and respond to say, a letter complaining about defective merchandise or poor service? Further, can the employer assume, as between an individual with an "A" in the SPM 322 and another with a pass in GCE English/SPM 1119, that the latter is necessarily more proficient in English than the former? It may well be that this is indeed the case but that is not the issue at hand. Rather, the point is that while the different examinations may testify to a higher or lower competence in the language in relation to each other, the level of competence certified by each examination, and the difference between the level signified by one examination and the next are not expressed objectively, in terms relevant outside the educational system. Even within the educational system, the situation is not necessarily all that clear as is indicated by the dilemma of those who have to decide whether an individual who has passed the SPM 322 paper has a sufficient mastery of the language to cope with one of Shakespeare's plays. All this points to the absence of a scale which can be used to determine and describe levels of language proficiency in objective, practically useful terms.

The absence of, or alternatively, the need for such a scale is also indicated by the situation produced by the

shift in the medium of instruction from English to Bahasa Malaysia in our schools. Before 1970, when this shift began, a Credit in the Form Five English Language paper signified a certain proficiency in the language as a result of eleven years exposure to it. That that level of proficiency cannot be expected of those who have a "Credit" in the present Form Five SPM English 322 paper is obvious. But the problem that remains is that of equating the grade obtained in the SPM English 322 paper with the level of proficiency in English in the pre- 1970 days: does a pass in the SPM English 322 paper signify a command of language which in the old days, a person had after Form Three? Or, after Form I? Or, after Std. 5? Various guesses exist but no definite answer is possible because of the absence of a scale of measurement for this purpose

To move on. Employers require individuals with different levels of English for different jobs. For instance, the positions of typist, clerk, secretary, junior executive and office manager require varying levels of proficiency in English. At the moment, employers are unable to specify the level of proficiency in English that they require for specific positions and finding someone with the requisite command of the language is a hit-and-miss process very much like a lottery. Clearly, if a scale for ascertaining and describing different proficiency levels existed, employers would be able to prescribe the level of proficiency in English needed for a particular position.

The situation whether within or without the field of education then, is clearly one that cries out for a scale for ascertaining and describing different levels of proficiency in English. The issue that remains to be resolved is the nature of such a scale. Such a scale should, at the very least, perform the following functions:

(1) It should be capable of demarcating the levels of proficiency in English in hard objective terms. If there are 24 points on the scale, the capability of each point should be clearly spelt

out. The scale could begin with Point 1, meaning a command of the language sufficient to permit the comprehension of directions on simple signs as "To the Office" and the like and proceed through different points until say, Point 13, signifying the ability to deal with a letter complaining about defective merchandise. Point 13 could also, for instance, indicate the ability to comprehend and discuss the plot of say, one of the simpler novels of George Eliot, e.g. *Silas Marner*.

(2) Together with the foregoing functions, the scale should also have a diachronic capability that is, it should permit the comparison or equation of proficiency levels over a period of time. It should, for example, be capable of specifying that the level of proficiency signified by a pass in the 1983 SPM English 322 paper is the equivalent of the proficiency in English which was certified by the Standard Six examination in 1955.

In sum then, the scale should be capable of permitting a synchronic as well as diachronic assessment of proficiency levels in English expressed objectively in terms which would be useable by educators, employers and others who need to ascertain and describe specific levels of proficiency.

3. Some Practical Points To Consider In Establishing And Evaluating English Language Proficiency Targets ...

Nesamalar Chitravelu

Establishing Targets

Often when we think of proficiency targets, we limit our visions to the statement of objectives, to what we expect students to be able to do at the end of each stage

in the educational system. Logic and reality, however, would dictate that we extend our view a little further. For example, at Standard V level in Malaysia, the objectives in our Handbook for Teachers tell us that our students should be able to read texts at the 1,300 word-level. Yet at university level - after six further years of reading instruction - some lecturers claim the students are still "functional illiterates". Such discrepancies, therefore, would point to the fact that, among other things, we need also to look at the system which helps to translate the hopes inherent in the objectives into the realities of actual performance. This would seem particularly necessary where the gulf between what the student *ought* to be able to do and what he *can* do is as wide as the example above would seem to suggest.

As illustration, let us look at just one aspect of the infrastructure: the quality of teachers of English and the student-teacher ratio. What is the English proficiency of teachers of English in Malaysia? A recent study in Nepal showed that no secondary teacher was operating at a level of more than 1,500 words of English while the pupils were operating at under 300 words. What is our teachers' reading vocabulary? Does teacher proficiency set the upper limit on student proficiency? Given the level of proficiency of our teachers, are the approaches to teaching adopted appropriate? Can, for example, a teacher whose own proficiency in language is poor have enough language resources to run a KBSR English class, however good the KBSR method per se might be? Given, on the average, 50 students in each class and three classes to one teacher, are the KBSR or the communicational Syllabus of Form IV and V really viable? Is an approach that is more "teacher-proof" preferable?

Evaluating Proficiency

Most exams in our school system, as in most school systems the world over, are achievement tests. They test what has been taught in the syllabus. But proficiency is

more than this. Clarke defines the difference in these terms:

> A fundamental operational distinction between proficiency tests and achievement tests ... is that proficiency tests are intended to measure developed competence in the language, regardless of how that competence was acquired, while achievement tests are intended to measure the examinee's acquisition of those specific linguistic features that have been presented in the course of a particular instructional sequence.

This achievement-proficiency difference has to be resolved in some way so that the grades achieved by the students in our public exams can signify some meaningful performance level to the society that uses these grades for employment, placement in courses of study, etc.

A rule of thumb observed by most test writers in piloting the items of a test and by standards setting committees is that at least 50% of the target population must be able to get 50% of the items correct, that is, the test is tailor-made for a specific group of students. It is norm-referenced. The test is set to give a profile of proficiency at a specific period in time and according to norms existing at that time. Because of this, one cannot, for example, "prove" the view so current now that proficiency levels in English have fallen drastically. We cannot say, for example, whether there is a drop of proficiency in absolute terms (e.g. there were 10,000 good speakers of English in 1975 and now there are only 500), or whether the drop in proficiency is in relative terms (e.g. there are still 10,000 good speakers of English but the number of speakers of English has increased from 20,000 to 100,000 so that although there are now still 10,000 good speakers of English this is only 10% of the total number speaking English, whereas before it was 50% of those speaking English). We cannot make this distinction because the

grades obtained on the tests, say in 1975, cannot be compared with the grades obtained in, say, 1985 because although the grades may be the same the target of proficiency measured by each instrument is not the same. Each test measures the proficiency of a student relative to his peers and not in terms of absolute proficiency.

Monitoring proficiency over time and resolving the achievement-proficiency dichotomy for the school population as a whole are tricky issues. If a public exam is criterion-referenced and the focus of attention is on what point the student has reached on the proficiency cline and not on how his proficiency relates to the proficiency of his peers, and standards are falling, then it is likely that the performance curve would become progressively skewed to the left. More importantly, the setting of standards which are beyond the achievement of most students would act as a disincentive to learning. Besides, as the test could be difficult for most, dispersion would be poor and teachers would not be able to distinguish between the weak, the average and the good within national norms. As for the achievement-proficiency issue, a test that does not look like it is testing what it is supposed to test would have no face validity for the candidate and a proficiency test may well look very different from the English the students have been learning, especially if their syllabus has been very heavily structure-based. A compromise is perhaps called for. Since a criterion-referenced proficiency test at national level poses problems and yet some kind of monitor is needed for practical purposes of employment and placement in a course of study, it may be possible to devise a criterion-referenced test such as the FSI test (appended) for all four skills - listening, speaking, reading and writing - and administer the test each year to a representative sample of students so that the results on this test can be used in any diachronic study of proficiency profiles. Perhaps correlational studies could be done between this test and the norm-referenced public exam for each year to establish concurrent validity for the public exams and to

indicate what a student with a particular grade can do with English in performance terms.

Appendix to Mrs Nesamalar Chitravelu's paper

The Foreign Service Institute Rating Procedure

The FSI oral proficiency rating is an overall judgment about the student's speaking competence.[1] The five levels of proficiency are described as follows:

> Level 1 : Able to satisfy routine travel needs and minimum courtesy requirements. Can ask and answer questions on topics very familier to him or her; within the scope of his or her very limited language experience can understand simple questions and statements, allowing for slowed speech, repetition or paraphrase; speaking vocabulary inadequate to express anything but the most elementary needs; errors in pronunciation and grammar are frequent, but can be understood by a native speaker used to dealing with foreigners attempting to speak his or her language. While elementary needs vary considerably from individual to individual, any person at level 1 should be able to order a simple meal, ask for shelter or lodging, ask and give simple directions, make purchases, and tell time.
>
> Level 2 : Able to satisfy routine social demands and limited work requirements. Can handle with confidence but not with facility most social situations including introductions and casual

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[1] For a discussion of the Foreign Service speaking tests, see Claudia P. Wilds, "The Oral Interview Test," in Randall L. Jones and Bernard Spolsky, eds., *Testing Language Proficiency* (Arlington, Va.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1975).

conversations about current events, as well as work, family, and autobiographical information; can handle limited work requirements, needing help in handling any complications or difficulties; can get the gist of most conversations on non-technical subjects (i.e. topics that require no specialized knowledge) and has a speaking vocabulary sufficient to express himself or herself simply with some circumlocutions; accent, though often quite faulty, is intelligible; can usually handle elementary constructions quite accurately but does not have thorough or confident control of the grammar.

Level 3 : Able to speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, and professional topics. Can discuss particular interests and special fields of competence with reasonable ease; comprehension is quite complete for a normal rate of speech; vocabulary is broad enough that he or she rarely has to grope for a word; accent may be obviously foreign; control of grammar good; errors never interfere with understanding and rarely disturb the native speaker.

Level 4 : Able to use the language fluently and accurately on all levels normally pertinent to professional needs. Can understand and participate in any conversation within the range of his or her experience with a high degree of fluency and precision of vocabulary; would rarely be taken for a native speaker, but can respond appropriately even in unfamiliar situations; errors of pronunciation and grammar quite rare; can handle informal interpreting from and into the language.

Level 5 : Speaking proficiency equivalent to that of an educated native speaker. Has complete fluency

> in the language such that his or her speech on all levels is fully accepted by educated native speakers in all of its features, including breadth of vocabulary and idiom, colloquialisms, and pertinent cultural references.
>
> The language proficiency oral interview is carefully structured to allow the examiner to explore the many facets of the student's speaking ability so as to place him or her in one of the above categories. If necessary, the following numerical rating procedure is used to supplement the verbal descriptions of the levels.

The FSI numerical rating procedure evaluates accent, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. In each category there are six categories ranging from poor (category 1) to excellent (category 6). These categories do not correspond to the levels of proficiency described above. Here are the numerical ratings:

Accent

1. Pronunciation frequently unintelligble.
2. Frequent gross errors and a very heavy accent make understanding difficult, require frequent repetition.
3. "Foreign accent" requires concentrated listening and mispronunciations lead to occasional misunderstanding and apparent errors in grammar or vocabulary.
4. Marked "foreign accent" and occasional mispronunciations that do not interfere with understanding.
5. No conspicuous mispronunciations, but would not be taken for a native speaker.
6. Native pronunciation, with no trace of "foreign accent".

Grammar

1. Grammar almost entirely inaccurate except in stock phrases.
2. Constant errors showing control of very few major patterns and frequently preventing communication.
3. Frequent errors showing some major patterns uncontrolled and causing occasional irritation and misunderstanding.
4. Occasional errors showing imperfect control of some patterns but no weakness that causes misunderstanding.
5. Few errors, with no patterns of failure.
6. No more than two errors during the interview.

Vocabulary

1. Vocabulary inadequate for even the simplest conversation.
2. Vocabulary limited to basic personal and survival areas (time, food, transportation, family, etc.)
3. Choice of words sometimes inaccurate, limitations of vocabulary prevent discussion of some common professional and social topics.
4. Professional vocabulary adequate to discuss special interests; general vocabulary permits discussion of any nontechnical subject with some circumlocutions.
5. Professional vocabulary broad and precise; general vocabulary adequate to cope with complex practical problems and varied social situations.
6. Vocabulary apparently as accurate and extensive as that of an educated native speaker.

Fluency

1. Speech is so halting and fragmentary that conversation is virtually impossible.
2. Speech is very slow and uneven except for short or routine sentences.

3. Speech is frequently hesitant and jerky; sentences may be left uncompleted.

4. Speech is occasionally hesitant, with some unevenness caused by rephrasing and groping for words.

5. Speech is effortless and smooth, but perceptible non-native in speed and evenness.

6. Speech on all professional and general topics as effortless and smooth as a native speaker's.

Comprehension

1. Understands too little for the simplest type of conversation.

2. Understands only slow, very simple speech on common social and touristic topics; requires constant repetition and rephrasing.

3. Understands careful, somewhat simplified speech directed to him or her, with considerable repetition and rephrasing.

4. Understands quite well normal educated speech directed to him or her, but requires occasional repetition or rephrasing.

5. Understands everything in normal educated conversation except for very colloquial or low-frequency items or exceptionally rapid or slurred speech.

6. Understands everything in both formal and colloquial speech to be expected of an educated native speaker.

First Panel Discussion

There were two speakers for the session; Mr. John Doraisamy from the Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, and Mr. Lee Boon Leong, a Language Officer from the Curriculum Development Centre.

The first speaker, Mr John Doraisamy, touched on the current English language situation in the country. According to him, many thousands of children learn English in an environment where they do not use the language outside the classroom. The language as a subject is restricted to the specific periods in the timetable and it lacks status in the public exam system. As a result, the standard of English varies widely from school to school. In some schools where certain traditions have been maintained, oratorical competitions are still held. In other schools, teachers of English cannot seem to get beyond the stage of getting students to write grammatically correct sentences. One factor contributing to the decline in English standards is the quality of language teachers. This problem has its roots in the selection process. The best possible candidates should be selected for teacher training courses. One cannot expect to provide trainees, who lack the necessary skills, with remedial training in the colleges. During a discussion session later, Mrs Teo Saw Choo, who is involved in training teachers of English, acknowledged that very often the trainees selected to teach English are not the best possible material. She explained that this arises because English language teaching is not accorded priority. So a candidate who has good grades in English may be diverted to teach Maths or Science since his or her grades are good in those subjects as well.

The second speaker, Mr Lee Boon Leong, highlighted the problems of differing standards. More recently trained teachers have different expectations of student performance than traditionally-trained teachers. Public examination results do not seem to reflect the standard required for tertiary education. Employers in the private sector have different requirements for different jobs. In view of differing expectations and requirements for English language proficiency, one has to be careful in making and responding to statements regarding rising and falling standards. In Malaysia, there is no established way, unlike in the U.S., of measuring proficiency to gauge whether there is really a rise or fall in standards.

From the point of view of the curriculum, the target is set to the maximum that the student can achieve. The teacher looks at the target but is expected to teach at the level of the ability of the student. Teaching English was likened to playing a game of cards where success depends on doing the best with the particular cards you have been dealt. During the discussion later, some speakers from the floor pointed out that syllabus requirements do not allow the teacher to work at the pace necessary for the class. Representatives from the Ministry stressed that the teacher has a large measure of freedom in deciding when and what to teach from the syllabus. They reminded the audience that the Units in the syllabus were there more for organisational ease. One of the representatives, Mr Devinder Raj, stated that teachers were not required to cover all the Units in cases where the students could not cope. With this, the participants adjourned for coffee.

Second Panel Discussion

There were four speakers in the second session of the morning, Mr Devinder Raj from the Schools Division, Ministry of Education, Mrs Jagjit Singh from the Maktab Perguruan Lembah Pantai, Miss Edda de Silva of Oxford University Press/Fajar Bakti and Puan Nik Faizah of the Ministry of Education Curriculum Development Centre. Mr Devinder Raj spoke on the large number of English Language teachers not actually trained to teach English, who not only lacked a satisfactory level of proficiency in English but also tended to follow textbooks religiously. He also suggested the setting up of a body comprising representatives from the Ministry of Education and employers to help set English Proficiency targets for the country, making allowances at the same time for differences in proficiency levels to be expected between rural and urban children. Mrs Jagjit Singh stressed the need for an immersion programme to help improve the proficiency of English Language teacher trainees. She suggested training these teachers specifically to teach English, with exposure

throughout to various aspects of English and English Language teaching.

Miss Edda de Silva spoke on the overdependence of teachers on out-dated textbooks, which emphasised grammar rather than communication. She also felt the need for any newly-revised syllabus to be introduced to teachers and teacher trainees before it is implemented, to ensure smooth transition. The last speaker, Puan Nik Faizah, touched on the KBSR programme. The KBSR programme, according to her, allows the teacher to be innovative and creative, the intention being to make English Language learning fun and interesting. Comments were also generated from the floor during this session on the need for clearly laid out objectives in the English Language syllabus, the need for making available training in the English Language to all students irrespective of their backgrounds, especially in view of the difficulty of determining future needs of students.

Workshop Session

For the afternoon session, participants were divided into groups based on the level at which they were teaching, i.e. those teaching at SRP level and below, SPM level, STPM/HSC/A level and those teaching in tertiary institutions. Suggestions made by the SRP and below group for improving proficiency included moving away from textbook-workbook-based teaching towards an oral approach with the emphasis on reinforcement of what is being taught, with smaller classes and more preparation time for teachers. They also felt the SRP examination paper for English was not a true test of the students' writing ability since questions were objective-type ones. Teachers at the SPM level proposed two examination papers at the SPM level, one of which would be higher in standard than the other. They also proposed a scale linked to grades achieved at the SPM level with each grade actually spelling out the

proficiency level of a person who has achieved a particular grade.

The SPTM group felt the need for the introduction of English Language as a course in the STPM, with the suggestion that this course be along the lines of the GCE 'O' level paper set by the Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. English Literature should also be emphasized as a means of exposing students to English at its highest level of usage. The last group, those teaching in tertiary institutions, suggested teaching grammar through literature and materials including films and magazines which students are likely to enjoy.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

K.S. Maniam is a graduate from the English Department, University of Malaya. His stories have appeared from 1976 onwards in *Commentary*, *Stories from Africa and Asia*, *Malaysian Short Stories* (ed. Lloyd Fernando, Heinemann, 1981). His novel, *The Return* (Heinemann), was published in 1981 and his play, *The Cord*, in 1983. He is a lecturer with the Department of English, University of Malaya.

Su Soon Peng is a graduate from the English Department, University of Malaya, where she is now a lecturer. Her main field of interest is Stylistics.

Kee Thuan Chye is a graduate from Universiti Sains Malaysia, and is now Entertainment Editor with the *New Straits Times*. He is keenly interested in theatre, having written, acted and directed for the stage. His most recent work is the play *1984 Here and Now*, a Malaysian version of Orwell's *1984*.

D M E Roskies was educated at Sussex and has taught in Britain, the Middle East and the Far East. Writing from the Commonwealth and the Third World (especially the Malay Archipelago) is a main interest. He has numerous publications in these and other fields. Fellow in English Literature, University of Singapore until July 1985.

Andre Kok Onn graduated from the English Department, University of Malaya, in 1979. He has been teaching for five years and is now a language teacher in the Language Centre, University of Malaya.