

Southeast Asian Poetry: Tension for Unity

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The author analyzes the tension with which the Southeast Asian poet has to deal in his work. Exposure to Western patterns has changed the traditional fixity of his art, but not relevantly. He has adopted some Western postures but has not really grasped the spirit of these borrowed modes. She suggests two courses of action for the Southeast Asian poet: Intensify his use and understanding of the Western poetic practices that have a close affinity to already existing indigenous modes, and write about contemporary social problems, using forms and structures evolved from both Western and indigenous traditions.

Looking over the environment of poetry in the countries of Southeast Asia today, one is struck over again by the existing polarity of allegiances, a condition that is common to the countries that have assimilated Western influences to any significant extent. It is true that the admixture of Western and indigenous modes is inevitable and oftentimes even deliberately fostered in the national life of these countries, particularly in the practical and more overt aspects like politics and government, the industrial and technological processes, the rationale and the content of education in the schools.

One might observe, however, that although the Western influences might be significantly at work in the practical areas, they are likewise

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conspicuous but are not critical influences in the spheres of art and the imagination. The reasons would seem to be that art and the imagination are promptings from more psychical and spiritual origins, expressing the profound values of love and honor and sacrifice and hate and greed and courage and other deep-seated pains of the soul—the subtler values that are manifested in a region in ways so peculiar to the geography and the people that these patterns of behavior serve to mark them as distinct from other people. Being closely identified with the region and being also deeply rooted in the psychical and spiritual functions would tend to make these traits more resistant to alien contact. In the poetry there are indeed clear evidences of Western influences, but these borrowings are more external in nature, having to do with the prevailing Western styles in mood, prosody, and other processes of the poetry that could be handled through the more or less mechanical devices.

From these ambivalent cultural forces at work, we may readily see the resulting tension with which the Southeast Asian poet has to deal in his work. Exposure to Western patterns has changed the traditional fixity of his art, but not relevantly, not to the quick, so to speak. He has adopted some external Western postures but has not really grasped the spirit of these borrowed modes; anyway, the poetry does not show it.

Tension Between Old and New

Our purpose is to analyze what this tension between the old and the new poetic practices has done to the quality and relevance of Southeast Asian poetry today. Specifically, it will explore the different implications involved in adopting the gesture but not the spirit of Western poetic procedures. Finally, we will stick out our metaphorical neck and make some observations on possible ways that the Southeast Asian poet may use these disparate Western elements, to turn them into artistically legitimate devices for unity in his poetry.

At this point there is a need to substantiate the above generalization concerning the rather externalized quality of Western influences upon the poetry of Southeast Asia. I shall examine briefly the environment of poetry in a few representative countries in this group. But before I do this I would like, for the sake of clarity, to identify the countries referred to in this paper as the Southeast Asian group. They are Burma, Thailand, North and South Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Brunei. India, China, and Japan are absent from this group but are very much present in the spirit of this study, since these three countries are primary sources of the

literature of the Southeast Asian group. We will need to recall some related facts about the poetry of India, China, and Japan to understand what seems to be the main problem of Southeast Asian poetry today.

We would also make plain that the term, "Western influences," or "Western practices," as used here in relation to literature, refers to certain British and American literary patterns, as well as to some European influences, in particular the Dutch and the French. The term further includes implicitly the conventional Graeco-Roman practices which come to us indirectly, as these have been assimilated into the Western literary traditions that have touched us.

The influences of Western poetic modes are rather blatant but are not really crucial. We quote from an observation made by Donald Keene on the "Westernizing" modern poetry of Japan, a comment which is also applicable to the condition of poetry today in Southeast Asian countries. Donald Keene says of recent Japanese poetry:

The modern poets are by their own choice cut off from the heritage of Japanese (and Chinese) literature. No falling cherry blossoms or reddening maple leaves are permitted to grace their verses except ironically. . . . On the other hand, knowledge of Western poetry is not very profound either among poets or readers. A Japanese poet is unlikely to think of quoting Dante; if he did, the quotation as such would have little meaning to most readers.

And then follows the more cogent part of this quotation:

Japanese modern poetry tends thus to be bounded by the translatable parts of foreign poetry: **the decadence of Rimbaud without his overtones, the gloom of T. S. Eliot without his sense of tradition, the fantasy of Max Jacob without his religion** (bold mine).¹

The bold parts of the quoted statement affirm what we are saying about the present superficial use made of Western borrowings. Mr. Keene has set off the "decadence," the "gloom," and the "fantasy," all of these being traits that are easily borrowed, against the **cultural overtones, the sense of tradition, and the religious values**, traits which are not easily borrowed because, as mentioned earlier, they spring from the deep-seated ethnic and spiritual genius of a people. In other words, it is

¹ Donald Keene (ed.), *Modern Japanese Literature* (New York: Grove Press, 1956), p. 22.

easier to borrow the attitudes, the stances, because these are moods and not essences. It is true that attitudes and stances are also reactions to the prevailing social conditions, but they are often "catchy" and conspicuous and even degenerate into passing fads unless the more intrinsic values of the culture animate them. These values as pointed out by Keene will be made clearer shortly as we see them functioning in the poetic devices.

Other "translatable" Western poetic practices are generally used in ways that do not cause modifications in the intrinsic qualities of the indigenous work: this kind of borrowing has mainly to do with the prosody and other features like rhyme or the absence of rhyme, the stanzaic patterns and the other external limits of poetic forms, such as the sonnet, the ode, and other features that could be made to function extrinsically in the artistic work.

I do not wish the foregoing argument to sound like a sequence of pure enthymemes. Actually, the easy adoption and popularity of translatable poetic practices have been demonstrated before this. A good example may be drawn from late 18th century England, in the tremendous but very brief impact of the Ossianic writings of James MacPherson upon the Classical tradition of Europe. The shortlived but very popular influence of these so-called translations of Ossian could be properly explained by the fact that the works exploited **mood**, specifically the mood of fantasy and Romantic primitivism. Whatever profound national values might have resulted from the contact originated from local necessities and did not come as portions of the literary borrowing.

In Southeast Asian poetry, what are the results of the externalized use of Western poetic devices?

Southeast Asian Poet Avoids Issues

First, except in Indonesia and Malaysia and to a small but growing extent, the Philippines, the poetry of Southeast Asia unfortunately avoids grappling with their contemporary national issues, mainly because the poet is uncertain of the artistic feasibility of merging alien expression and indigenous substance. Wherever this hesitation prevails the poetry of the country is attenuated because it evades a proper concern with current sociological and political problems. Faced by the vacuum in substance that is created by this evasion, the poet has some obvious alternatives:

One, he can put aside all foreign devices and write in the tradi-

tional fashion, which would also necessitate writing on the outgrown sentiments and symbols of an earlier time.

Or, Two, he can borrow both Western substance and Western structure and produce poetry that is almost totally irrelevant in his native context.

Or, Three, he can borrow from Western expression but concentrate on the more universal concerns of the human soul, taking care not to cast these in traditional or contemporary indigenous terms, so as to escape the incongruity usually produced by merging deeply native substance with the Western mood and pattern.

In adopting this third choice he does write of material that is relevant not specially to Southeast Asians but to all human beings; nevertheless, his necessary evasion of the indigenous contemporary materials leaves a gap where the poet's social conscience should have been active.

A fourth choice may be to modify the traditional material dealing with pastoral sentiments and folk themes so as to give these a tough and ironic tone. The shift in tone is meant to suit the relatively casual Western style of presentation. This choice may produce structurally artistic congruities, but they would ultimately be insignificant or irrelevant because of the outmoded themes.

Whatever the choice, the one big mistake would be to act on the premise that the native spirit should be, or could be, supplanted with the psyche of the West. The essence of a country's poetry is naturally enough, its home-grown relevance, or it becomes an incongruity, since there is no *genius loci* to validate it.

Understanding Borrowed Devices

The artist therefore needs the awareness that within the inevitable reality of the Western influences at work, one of his big jobs is to understand the origins or bases of his borrowed literary devices. This demand for understanding the sources and motives of the foreign devices is as true for poetry as for the borrowed scientific and technological practices; when we appreciate the cultural necessities that gave birth to Western technology, then the Southeast Asian can make an **analogue** that he can hope would work more felicitously under his own native conditions. When the rationale of a technology is borrowed **in toto**, or willy-nilly, it could be destructive. I wholeheartedly disagree with one American economist who came to the Silliman University campus last year, who gave the impression that economic progress in Asia could be

effected by a clean sweep of what was termed as "superstitions," and to have these supplanted by more scientific attitudes from the West. Just like that. You would think that human beings could take lessons from vegetable nature and see, for instance, how some imported varieties of trees become indigenous when given time to modify inside the more workable traits of the host country. And vegetable would seem to be a rather apt analogy at this point.

The four choices we just pointed out are costly, inadequate, and unrealistic.

There remain therefore two choices which seem to be the most viable and useful for both poet and country. These are:

First, for the poet to intensify his use and understanding of the Western poetic practices that have a close affinity to already existing indigenous modes.

And second, for him to pay more serious attention to contemporary social problems as a strong material for poetry, and to evolve new forms and structures and symbolisms for the exploration of these contemporary problems. In evolving these new symbolisms and other poetic devices, the poet would find it necessary to draw from both the Western and indigenous traditions.

Two Choices and Three Questions

For the poet, these two choices are easier defined than taken because in adopting them there are three primary questions that he would be called upon to consider regarding both the matter of vitalized procedures and of socially-directed substance. These three questions are:

1. What are the common problems faced today by the Southeast Asian countries?
2. What are the indigenous poetic procedures that have affinity to the Western borrowings?
3. In evolving Southeast Asian poetry where the substance must not be incongruous to its poetic articulation, how is a poet to use his awareness of contemporary problems, and his knowledge of Western and native poetic devices that are similar?

Let us take these three questions one by one. The large contemporary problems that are common to Southeast Asian countries spring from the similarity in their historical background, particularly in their contact with the West. These common problems have to do with

the official retirement of Empire and the subsequent need of the newly independent countries to establish a workable political-economic base, one that could sustain the tensions between Western and indigenous demands. In other words, there is the common problem of building a nation on the foundation provided by the existing patterns of ideas and affirmations generated by the stimulating variety of races co-existing in these countries. The other large problem involves confirming the relationships with neighbor countries, toward political, military, and economic security. In the last two decades the Philippines, for example, has become increasingly involved in the religious, political, and economic problems of our Southeast Asian neighbors—Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Brunei, Thailand. We have sent either soldiers or missionaries to these countries. The contemporary problems posed by such Philippine involvements as these should become one of the rightful domains of the poet if the poetry of the country must be immediately influential and relevant.

Then the poet who is steeped in concerned awareness of these national problems moves on to the second question, on the need for a real understanding of the Western and indigenous poetic practices that are similar to each other. To begin with, these particular practices are basic and are used critically in the art, so that the Southeast Asian poet would gain from studying them carefully for their potential worth.

Western poetry has emphasized within the 20th century two or three crucial qualities that have been inherent in the earliest poetry of the Orient. I am thinking of the Imagist movement started in American poetry during the first two decades of this century, and which involved Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, John Gould Fletcher, Witter Bynner, H. D., among others.

Link Between Imagist Poetry and Haiku

It is always valuable to see the link between the Imagist poetry and the haiku poetry of the Japanese. Japanese *hokku*, or *haiku*, as it is better known, uses the device of "imaging" an experience by using picture-images instead of explaining or describing the experience.² The procedure of "imaging" as used in the *haiku* is essentially the very same principle with which the Imagists proclaimed their departure from the conventional Romantic poetry in the early part of this century. In believing that a poem should simply project a certain image and should do away with all

²J. L. Cranmer-Byng, M. C. (ed.), *Japanese Literature* (John Murray, Albermarle Street, London: W., First Edition, 1953), pp. 28-46.

explicit comments or observations relating to it, the Imagist procedure is as close to that of painting as literature can possibly get. The **haiku**, a three-line poem consisting of a total of 17 syllables (usually allotted as 5-7-5), has always adhered to the strict kind of economy insisted upon by the Imagists; no clear statement is made in a **haiku**, only a suggestive picture is rendered in the three short lines.

A **haiku** placed beside an Imagist poem will quickly show the affinity between the poetic devices used by both. We use here two **haikus** written in Japan in the 17th century by Basho, the master **haiku**-poet who refined this poetic form:

Dewdrops, let me cleanse
 In your sweet
 fleeting waters....
 These dark hands of life.

The poem subtly projects the delicate tension between the dark and turgid qualities of human struggle and the pristine qualities of the dewdrops in their brief moments of existence. The three lines also suggest the human being separated from spontaneous nature by the self-conscious demands of his human reason, and his return to restorative nature when he feels soiled by his own struggle.

Another **haiku**:

Under cherry-trees
 Soup, the salad,
 fish, and all....
 Seasoned with petals.

The unity achieved by the three lines is the result of the blending of the two tensions represented by the spiritual and intellectual on the one hand (the cherry-trees) and the physical appetites on the other (soup, salad, fish). The blending of opposites is achieved by the petals (spiritual) serving as seasoning (physical) for the food, in a picture of quiet and natural beauty.

Beside these two **haikus** we set two Imagist examples of the more "complete" sort. This one is from T. E. Hulme, the British writer:

Oh, God, make small
 The old star-eaten blanket of the sky,
 That I may fold it round me and in comfort lie.

The lines dramatize the sensitivity of the person in the poem, who could respond so vividly to the warmth of God's creation that his essen-

tially abstract response becomes transmuted into very tangible terms, such as folding the sky around him like an old comfortable blanket.

From Ezra Pound, the American poet, this famous poem, "Station at the Metro":

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

The way the two lines implicitly comment on the relationship between the grime and ugliness of industrialism as represented by a subway station (the wet black bough) and lined up all along its length, the fresh faces with their fragile humanity (the petals), is a procedure that is quietly compressed and explosive. **haiku**.

Literary scholars have already shown how Ezra Pound, the big figure in the Imagist movement, was influenced by Oriental poetry, particularly in his use of the delicate suggestiveness and economy that are characteristic of the **haiku** poem. We only cite the two Western poems to show the identical abbreviating and suggestive devices that have long made powerful the quiet images in **haiku** poetry.

Origin of Haiku

The **haiku** came out of the tradition of Japanese linked-verse, called the **renga**.³ Originally, a **haiku** served as the first three lines of a five-line linked-verse poem called the **tanka**, which was written by two people as a kind of literary game. Thus, the tag, "linked," because one poet wrote the first three lines, now called the **haiku**, and the other completed the **tanka** by adding the other two lines. Later, the last two lines were discarded, leaving only the three-line **haiku**.

The **tanka** has 31 syllables. The nature of this "game of writing" demanded that all the five short lines should be tightly packed with meaning. In time, when the last two lines were discarded, the **haiku** therefore had to intensify its craft, in its use of subtle literary allusions and in its extreme economy (sometimes the season of the year in which the key picture is set is indicated by just one word in the poem). Since the **haiku** was only part of an original whole, it has to demonstrate in itself the real point or conclusion, which has been cut off, and since there is too little space in which to state this point, it has to make use of double-meanings. All these literary devices in the **haiku** are also central in the Imagist poem.

³ *Ibid.*

And now let me approach what is possibly the most significant device of the **haiku** as far as its kinship to Western practices are concerned. The **haiku** suggests its conclusion by subtle double-meanings, and also by a very deft shift in the viewpoint which creates a tension of ideas in the poem. This tension transforms the **haiku's** simple picture-image into a scene that has very symbolic values. The internal shift is quite clear in the piece about the cherry trees, where the symbolic experience is triggered by the petals serving as food seasoning, the unity of the spiritual and the physical in the life process. This very functional shift as used in the **haiku** is the identical device that finally distinguishes the contemporary poetry of our Western influences from their more rhetorical efforts in the Romantic and Victorian periods.

Another recent practice in Western poetry is the device of juxtaposing. This device has its counterpart in an old Indonesian form called the **pantun**,⁴ which consists of two pairs of lines. The first two lines appear to be totally unrelated to the other two lines that follow. A closer look shows that the two pairs of verses are really parts of a single idea. One Indonesian **pantun** goes this way:
First two lines,

This soil is no good for rice,
But if it grows, the wind will blow it away.

Second two lines,

He's not the kind of man who should be a **hadji**,
Because now that he's a **hadji** he never prays.

The two lines are of course connected by the idea that a shallow superficial man cannot be a genuinely holy man, or a **hadji**, in the same way that good sturdy rice cannot grow on poor soil. Moreover, the obvious universal application (the "**penduniaan**") about the bedrock honesty of human excellence follows quite naturally by inference. There is compression of meaning here, the bare juxtaposition of two analogous statements creates the meaning.

In the Philippines, particularly in the North, where my own forebears originated, there are verse-forms that are similar to the **pantun** and the **haiku** in their procedure. When I was a little girl, my grandfather used to chant a very short but very solemn parable which is startling in its

⁴ Burton Raffel (ed.), **Anthology of Modern Indonesian Poetry** (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964), pp. 3-5.

similarity to these two forms:

There was a heart, a heart that erred,
 There was a firefly that glowed with fire,
 And it glowed brightest while it was flying.

Like the **haiku** the poem has three loaded lines. The simple-sounding lines glow with their own religious and philosophical intensities, for they assert that life must be lived, it cannot be passive or timid. It implies that even a life of error finds its glory in the very act of being lived, "while it was flying." We also notice the use of a heart to represent life. Beyond its obvious physical relevance to the life-process, **heart** as used here suggests that man's error proceeds not from rational choice, but from his more unpredictable nature, from his "heart." But we also observe that it is this very heart of man that "takes heart"—that is, that in spite of proneness to error, it takes to action, like the firefly flying. The moving firefly's intermittent flashes of light are of course reminiscent of the rhythm of the living breath as it goes with the heart's pulsations. A heart dare not stop beating even if it is an "erring" heart like the one in the poem. To stop beating would mean death. The obvious analogy here is a gentle observation on courage and dignity as natural factors of existence, that life cannot afford to be intimidated into useless passivity by the fact of its errors. Furthermore, the firefly while flying creates a trail of bright bursts of light followed by "split-errors" of darkness; still, "split-errors" and all, it is a **continuing** trail, just as long as the firefly keeps flying. There are also the fine points clued by the time of the flight. It takes place in a night of darkness, when the firefly is allowed to glow brightest by flying under such "adverse" conditions. Finally, why does the song use the past tense? This is the deep pathos of wisdom, that it is usually in the night of our life when we see our justification, in the bare fact of having dared to live at all. All of this in three lines that don't even have a title!

Kakekotoba: Device of Japanese Poetry

The **haiku** and the **pantun** are old forms, and since the devices they use do have relatively recent equivalents in Western practices, these are therefore the devices that the Southeast Asian poet could explore for more congruity and strength in his poetic technique.

For a final illustration of poetic procedures that have Western equivalents, I should like to mention the Japanese **kakekotoba**,⁵ or pivot-

⁵ J. L. Cranmer-Byng, M. C., *op. cit.*, pp. 4-6.

word, which is a striking device of Japanese poetry. The **kakekotoba** is a key-word that links two separate images in a poem by changing the direction of its own meaning. In the original Japanese, this pivot-word contains sounds that link it to two or more unrelated images, bringing these images together through the initial association of sound. The pivot-word then goes on to accomplish its full turn by means of a subtle evolution of its own form. Some roguish ditties in the Philippines make use of a variation of this device. I have attempted four examples of **kakekotoba** as closely as it could be rendered in English:

All the good things of life are freebooters
Of the man of sense.

All the good things of life are freeloading
At the expense of the bad.

In both these examples the pivot-word is of course the word "free," which pivots and expands to straddle and link two separate ideas.

The following are examples where the end-result is not anti-thesis, as in the above lines, but synthesis:

Every good boy does finally
What the scales show him to do.

All his life he had a fear of death-dealing
Weapons like guns, and words, and fear itself.

We observe in these last two examples how one image shifts its direction as it is augmented or intensified by a further image which is synthetical to it.

This device can turn into straight puns, as in these lines:

A man sews
According to how much he rips.

Or better:

She sews
According to how much he rips.

Likewise present in Western contemporary techniques are all the suggestive qualities generated by the **kakekotoba**, the **pantun**, and the internal shift in the **haiku**, the compression of images and ideas in a

small space, and the meaningful ambiguity of words that result from this compression.

The qualities of rich compression and subtly suggested multiplicity of meanings in Western poetry may be illustrated by these two lines from Robert Frost's poem, "Two Tramps in Mudtime":

The blows that a life of self-control
Spare to strike for the common good....

Frost's poem dramatizes his usual theme of a man's inner conflict concerning his duty to himself and his duty to society. In a beautiful use of compression and ambiguity, the word, "spares," serves both sides of the issue: "spares" means to *stint* on his efforts for society (to be sparing or stingy); but "spares" also means to *save* or to *reserve* his efforts for the good of society (to spare something for a rainy day).

The two viable choices of the Southeast Asian poet, therefore, demand a fine awareness of the spots in both the Western influences and the indigenous patterns where certain similar practices are found to be true and familiar; also demanded is the strengthening of the poetic substance by supplanting the obsolescent poetic sentiments with the newer and more vitally relevant issues of the country.

Indonesian and Malaysian Poets

In Indonesia and Malaysia the problem is not the operation of these two feasible alternatives regarding poetic material and procedures. Among the countries in the Southeast Asian group, Indonesia and Malaysia seem to be already more deeply engaged than their neighbors in discovering the viability of at least one of these two poetic choices. The recent poetry coming out of these two countries clearly show that the poets are writing on their contemporary issues, on revolutionary themes, and that they keep a finger on the pulse of social change. They no longer face the problem of making the choice for current subject matter for their poetry, because they *have* made that choice. Their problem now is artistic validity and refinement.

At this turbulent stage of their breakthrough into social awareness, a strict artistic evaluation of what is being done is frequently even beside the point. The Indonesian and Malaysian poets are committed to new themes dealing with contemporary political events and social problems, and the poetic influences of the old Javanese court have been replaced by strong nationalistic concern. This is the stirring condition

of their poetry today and ironically but naturally enough, it is the reason for their present acute literary instability. The attempt of the poets to deal with decisions for social change has created the near-frenetic shifts in literary directions and leadership that have transpired within such short periods.

For the writer as well as for the country in general, the cost of any decisive change is a transition period of great disorder, uncertainty, and chaos. There is an old folk saying in the United States that goes: "Things are always worse before they get better." Any housewife putting her kitchen shelves in order will confirm this homely truth.

In Indonesia the *avant garde* spirit is a quality of the writers in the '40's, a period dominated by the late Chairil Anwar, who was the acknowledged pioneer in the new poetry.⁶ Radical in his departure from the traditional themes and concentrating mainly on the sentiments of social and military revolution, Anwar simultaneously moved away from the indigenous literary patterns and adopted a frequently uneasy and unassimilated technique that derived from Western mannerisms of expression.

The period of the late '50's and '60's that followed is usually designated as the Sukarno Years. Even while the intellectual direction was a carryover from the rebel, Chairil Anwar, we notice a brief swingback to conventional modes of expression, such as the idyllic pastoral verses and romantic ballads which are a heritage from the traditional past. The literary leaders in the Sukarno Years were K. H. Ramadhan, who translated Lorca, the famous contemporary Spanish writer, and W. S. Rendra, who returned to the local folktales and legends for his materials. The influences of Anwar, Camus, and Pasternak were evident in the Cultural Manifesto which was eventually banned by Sukarno.⁷ The uneasy blend of Western-directed ideas with the pastoral moods of this period paralleled the divided stand of the writers themselves concerning their function. What happened confirms the ideas I mentioned earlier in this paper about the choices that the Southeast Asian poet has to make inevitably. The Indonesian writers in this period could not make up their minds whether to be committed to the ideological ferment, or whether to exploit their individual sensibilities and write only of the large verities of the human race. When Sukarno banned their politically-oriented Cultural Manifesto,

⁶ Goenawan Mohamad, "Contemporary Indonesian Literature," *Solidarity*, (September, 1968), pp. 22-28.

⁷ *Ibid.*

the writers of this period quit the contemporary issues and decided to write about the human verities.

Swing of Literary Pendulum

Between the **avant garde** tone of the '40's and the traditionalism in the styles of expression in the '50's and '60's is an abrupt swing of the literary pendulum. The ruling tension here may be seen as the correlative for the poetic problem of Southeast Asia. These two positions signal the polarity of allegiances that the poet has to reconcile into legitimate strengths for his poetry.

The present generation of Indonesian writers is called Angkatan '66, or the Generation from 1966. Again we sense an opposite swing of the cultural pendulum today in the fact that the themes of the writers are largely social and political criticism, as indicated in the works of Taufiq Ismail, Mochtar Lubis, and B. Sularto. This rapid swing of extremist tendencies make the literary scene of Indonesia very unstable, but as already mentioned, it is an indication of the writers' efforts to work their various choices toward a more coherent artistry.

Already Indonesia has handled the problem of a common language system with Malaysia.⁸ The two countries have worked out a common system of spelling that transcends both the Dutch influences in Indonesia and the British influences in Malaysia, Brunei, and Singapore. Stemming from a common source which is called Johor-Riau,⁹ Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Melayu, when they are finally unified, may yet be a strong stabilizer and provide a firmer instrument for poetic expression. It would be wise for the poets to re-explore and use the indigenous artistic intentions inherent in the poetic word and phrase; otherwise, because of the need to write on relevant current problems, the poets may fall into the posture of propaganda instead of producing good art. Thus, we see that the problem of the poetry in these two countries is artistic validity and refinement. Already, some critics have written on the transitory value of their present poems of protest.

H. B. Yassin, one of the most respected Indonesian writers, voices this opinion in a long essay on Indonesia's poets. Mr. Yassin writes of the poetry written in the Sukarno Years:

⁸ Asmah binti Haji Omar, "Towards the Unification of Bahasa Melayu and Bahasa Indonesia," *Tenggara One*, (1967), pp. 112-115.

⁹ S. T. Alisjahbana, "Critique of the Spelling Agreement," *Tanggara*, (April, 1968), pp. 84-89.

There is an opinion that a poem of struggle cannot have lasting value. As its contents are meant for a certain situation, when the situation changes it loses its value. This is especially so when such poems are not strengthened by faith, sincerity and purity of heart nor infused with high moral and religious awareness.... The superiority of the poets of Angkatan 66 lies in the fact that they pay attention to the aesthetic aspect—indeed, it is only in those terms that we can discuss literature—besides the fact that they write because there is something that demands expression.¹⁰

For the Southeast Asian poet who works within the tension of his mixed influences, we have outlined four possible but unwise alternatives. We also set up two choices that look more feasible, which would allow him to work with vigor, congruity, and relevance. The first of these two choices requires a depth study of the native and the borrowed poetic devices that are similar and which may be used with increasing artistry and strength. The second choice indicates his direction toward contemporary issues and problems, and toward the concern to evolve new forms and structures and symbolisms to express this contemporary material.

We also discussed some poetic qualities and practices that are common to both cultures, specifically those that are central in the **haiku**, the **pantun**, and the **kakekotoba**.

Gnomic and Aphoristic Verse of India

We cannot end this paper without mentioning India, which greatly contributed to the character of the poetry in this group. Possibly the strongest poetic contribution of India is its gnomic and aphoristic verse. Thus, we may add gnomic verse as the fourth item in this list of common devices, since Anglo-Saxon traditional verse also has a very pronounced and continuing gnomic personality and origin.

In India there exists no appreciable polarity of cultural influences. India was not crucially touched by the split in cultural sensibility in the 19th century, in which art and science became separated in the thinking of man. The Industrial Revolution deepened the separation of art and science in the thinking patterns of the world, except in India. In that country we may see poetry as very much a part of scientific expression, especially in law and politics; poetry, in fact, has been so much a part of all the

¹⁰ H. B. Yassin, "Angkatan 66; The Emergence of a New Generation," *Tenggara* 4, (April, 1969), p. 85.

cultural aspects that it is often hard to distinguish the scientific or factual literature from gnomic poetry.¹¹

Where does the Philippine poet stand in relation to these choices we mentioned? I believe our poets have taken the classic escapist solution a bit more seriously than they should. Our poets choose to write of the verities of the human being in universal terms, and thus try to avoid the inevitable challenge of making a choice. Our fiction writers do not hesitate to write on current problems, but there are only a very few poets who have taken the plunge that the Indonesian and Malaysian poets have made.

Which of these countries have taken the stand for traditionalism?

Some of the most conservative poets in the Southeast Asian group, if not the most conservative, are those of Thailand. Their poetry remains Classical and adheres rather closely to traditional forms and categories.¹²

In closing, I would like to say that the poet's closer involvement with national issues would not by itself automatically help him to invigorate the country's poetry. The poet would still have to move beyond the purely temporal justice of this new social concern, into the "faith and sincerity and purity of heart" and the "high moral and religious awareness," and the serious attention to aesthetic demands that Mr. Jassin so rightly sees as the focal ingredients of artistic writing.

The most significant poetry has always gone past its dated particulars and into the universal and human relevances. Poetry of this kind are as moving and eternal today as any of the Biblical cries wrenched from the individual and nationalistic agonies of the prophets and psalmists of those times.

Finally, to borrow from Mr. Allen Tate, the unity of art has always subsisted on the tug and pull of its tensions. The Southeast Asian poet is given the rare opportunity to create relevantly within a built-in environment of cultural tension and diverse influences. Unity in his poetry is predicative, and not truly the goal that his art strives for, only when his cultural conflicts become a nagging reality for him, which means that then he indeed understands functionally the diversities of his Southeast Asian world.

¹¹ M. Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature*, translated from the German, with additions by Subhadra Iha (Delhi; Patna; Varanasi, India, Motilal Banarsidass, 1963), Vol. III, Part I, p. 150.

¹² James N. Mosel, *Trends and Structure in Contemporary Thai Poetry*, a monograph (Ithaca, New York: Department of Far Eastern Studies, Cornell University, August, 1961), pp. 3-11.

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