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UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA

The
E.F.C. Ludowyk Memorial Lecture,
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by

Mr. Izeth Hussain

*Western Literature - The Problem
of Relevance*

5.00 p.m.
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Seminar Room
Faculty of Arts

Mr. Izeth Hussain was born in 1927 and received his secondary education at St. Joseph's College Colombo. He read English under Professor Ludowyk and graduated with honours from the University of Ceylon in 1950. He joined the Foreign Service in 1953, and was stationed in the United Kingdom, Pakistan, France, Egypt, China and the Philippines during his thirty five years in the service. He was Sri Lanka's Ambassador to the Philippines from 1982 to 1985. Mr. Hussain has written extensively on foreign affairs, Islam, the ethnic problem, and democracy in Sri Lanka. His publications also include articles on Leonard Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, Henry Adams, Wyndham Lewis, G.V. Desani, Vikram Seth, Shiva Naipaul, and Kipling. He retired from the Foreign Service in 1988.

The E.F.C. Ludowyk Memorial Lecture is the first foundation lecture instituted by this university. It is appropriate that it should have been set up in honour of a founding father of our university, and indeed our university system.

The lecture and the Ludowyk Prize for Shakespeare were instituted when Mr. H.A.I. Goonetilleke made a donation to the university for this purpose in 1988. Mr. Goonetilleke read English at the Ceylon University College under Professor Ludowyk and remained a life-long friend. He served this university as a librarian for over thirty years and was the University Librarian when he retired. He is internationally known as the author of the multi-volume A Bibliography of Ceylon/Sri Lanka, while he has also contributed several articles to learned journals and edited two volumes of impressions of Sri Lanka by foreign visitors. Mr. Goonetilleke's bibliography of the writings of Professor Ludowyk is included in Honouring E.F.C. Ludowyk which was published in 1984 to mark Professor Ludowyk's seventy-fifth birthday.

Professor E.F.C. Ludowyk

It is characteristic of the man we honour that his Understanding Shakespeare is inscribed to his students in this country, and that he says "I am conscious of all I learnt from classes in Ceylon in the twenty-five years of trying to understand Shakespeare there." He had the modesty and generosity of the perfectly civilised man, and was always very much a devotee of the common pursuit. But his modesty cannot obscure the fact that during these twenty-five years his teaching had a decisive impact. Every lecture had its creative design that yet seemed instinctive and not deliberate; the deft deployment of scholarship was beautifully balanced by superb readings from his authors and the sensitive explication of the words on the page. He was at once the most demanding and the most appreciative of tutors. He inspired in his students a deeply personal commitment to the experience of literature while encouraging them in sustained critical reading and awareness of nuance as the bases of judgment. His students became aficionados, recalling the memorable phrase, the telling gesture, the comment on a tutorial, years afterwards. Both Professor Ludowyk and Mrs. Ludowyk were unfailingly liberal with their time, hospitality and patience, though affectation was occasionally punctured with wit and subtlety. When living in retirement in Suffolk, the Ludowyks constantly hosted visitors from that country and overwhelmed former students and old friends with their warmth and their intense interest in events in Sri Lanka, sustained, as well, by constant correspondence.

Born on 16th October 1906 he received his early education at Richmond College, Galle and became a student in the Ceylon University College in 1925. He achieved First Class Honours in English in the London Examinations and won a scholarship to Cambridge in 1929 where he did equally well in the Tripos besides winning the Oldham Shakespeare Prize. Invited to join the staff of the University College in 1932, he became Professor in 1936 at the early age of thirty, a distinction which was followed by his election as Dean of Arts four years later--the first Ceylonese to hold this office. When the College became the University of Ceylon in 1942 he continued, as Professor and Dean, and remained Professor until his retirement in 1956. He was made Emeritus Professor of English following his retirement.

His first book, Marginal Comments (1945), was written during the war years and is described by the author as a stop-gap to meet the difficulty of obtaining books at the time. But it is in fact a remarkable performance which would have won wide recognition and use in colleges and universities if published in England. It played an important part in the success of the revolution in English teaching which had begun with Professor Ludowyk's complete re-organisation of the syllabi in English. After his retirement from the University Professor Ludowyk was able to give more time to writing. The first book to appear, The Footprint of the Buddha (1958), is like no other book on this country. Clearly the product of years of research and travel, it is a magnificent evocation of the great moments of the Island story before the colonial period, revealing the author's deep love and understanding of the land of his birth. His The Modern History of Ceylon (1966) brought the story up to date. In between, The Story of Ceylon (1963) provided further evidence of the deep-seated love of his country and the special perceptions he brought to bear on its history. Meanwhile Professor Ludowyk had also written Understanding Shakespeare and edited six Shakespeare plays for the Cambridge University Press.

Professor Ludowyk's contribution to the theatre in this country was as important as his teaching. He threw himself into the activities of the University Dramatic Society and gave it high standards of performance and discipline with twenty productions from Where Women Rule by the Quinteros in 1933 to Shaw's Androcles and the Lion in 1956. In the selection of plays he made it possible for Lankan audiences to have a taste of the modern theatre of Europe — thus it was he who introduced Brecht, Pirandello, Anouilh and Eugene O'Neill to Lankan theatregoers. His direction moulded actors and directors like Winston and Iranganie Serasinghe, Percy Colin-Thome, Osmund Jayaratne and Dennis Bartholomeusz who have made memorable contributions to our experience of drama. Besides, Professor Ediriwira Sarachchandra has shown how Professor Ludowyk collaborated with him and guided him in the early stages of the former's career, thus making a contribution to the Sinhala theatre.

WESTERN LITERATURE - THE PROBLEM OF RELEVANCE

I must make the usual conventional beginning by declaring how greatly honoured I feel to have been chosen to deliver this memorial lecture. At the same time I must declare my surprise, which certainly is a very pleasant surprise, over this choice as it seems to be a rather unconventional one. My literary output has been notable for its exiguity in recent years and furthermore, unlike the distinguished academics who have preceded me in this series of memorial lectures, I am a stranger to the groves of academe. Having spent my working years in the world of diplomacy which is remote from the world of literature.

Perhaps it is for this very reason that I have been chosen to speak today. A serious engagement with literature has to lead to the world outside literature and it might be thought, on the analogy of cross-fertilization, that someone who has spent his working life in public affairs might conceivably have something to contribute to the study of literature. This may be true more particularly of the kind of subject I have chosen for today's lecture, which is the way we interact with Western literature and the problem of its relevance for us as Sri Lankans living in Sri Lankan society.

Before I deal with that subject I must pay my memorial tribute to Ludowyk. It befits the kind of stature that he had that he should come to be regarded as an institution. But there is a danger that he may come to be regarded as a great panjandrum, because we Westernized Sri Lankans are still orientals who have inherited the traditional oriental veneration for the guru. In honouring the living man that he was, not the guru, I must refer to a meeting I had with I.A. Richards in 1966. He was delighted to meet

a former pupil of his own former pupil, Ludowyk, and exclaimed "He was such a delightful fellow." Richards wanted Ludowyk's address to write to him again after decades, and that I thought testified to the kind of warm affection that Ludowyk could inspire in those who knew him. Some of us know that he was always delighted to meet or correspond with his former pupils. Thinking of my own correspondence with him, I am reminded of Roy Campbell's line on Camoens, "I find a comrade where I sought a master."

In one of the letters he wrote to me in 1984 he emphasized how important it is in the study of literature to focus on "words on the page", which he went on to explicate as "how the language in its ramifications works, with its manifold associations, suggestions and its referential background." This might look like betraying a mandarin preoccupation with words, but the term "referential background" shows his constant awareness that the study of literature has to lead to the world outside literature.

Ludowyk exemplified for us the Scrutiny tradition in literary studies. It is a tradition which gives a crucial importance to the scrutiny of "words on the page" and close engagement with the literary text, but that is only the primary, and essential, discipline in the study of literature and in no way precludes concern with the social context of literature. The meticulous scrutiny of texts has always been there behind the best literary criticism, as can be seen from the writings of Johnson and Matthew Arnold. And both of them were, of course, deeply involved with the societies in which they lived. In illustration of the point that a serious engagement with literature leads to the world outside it, I must refer to the philosophical interests shown in Leavis' late book The

Living Principle. It is not at all surprising, since he had always insisted that the proper study of literature must be inter-disciplinary, that he should have made Marjorie Greene's philosophical work, The Knower and the Known, required reading for his pupils. And of course the social significance of literature was always a primary preoccupation in the Scrutiny tradition, as can be seen from the back numbers of Scrutiny and the books of Leavis.

Ludowyk located himself within the Scrutiny tradition by writing just as much on non-literary subjects as on literary ones. His study of literature led him to the world outside it by a process that has to be regarded as ineluctable in terms of the Scrutiny tradition. His books on Sri Lanka show rare insights into the society in which he lived, which had to be expected as a serious engagement with literature has to mean a serious engagement with one's society. We must remember also that he studied Sinhala when that was far from fashionable for our Westernized literati, and that he made a notable contribution to Sinhala drama. I believe for these reasons that he would have regarded the problem of the way in which Western literature could be relevant for Sri Lankans as an important subject.

I want to use Ludowyk's observation about "words on the page" as a guideline in approaching the subject of this lecture. But before proceeding further I must situate the problem of relevance in the social context from which it arises. This problem may preoccupy other Afro-Asians as well, but it has peculiar force in Sri Lanka because of historical reasons. Our colonial experience of almost four and a half centuries is comparable in longevity only to that of the Philippines, the other Afro-Asian countries

having been colonized for far briefer periods. The consequence is that the culture of the Westernized Sri Lankans has come to seem remote from the traditional culture symbolized by the Cultural Triangle. The Westernized Sri Lankans are seen as alienated from what is properly Sri Lankan, and here I must remark on the curious fact that the Filipino Westernized elite speak Tagalog or their provincial languages far more readily than the Westernized Sinhalese speak Sinhala. As the Westernized elite have been at the commanding heights for the most part since 1948, the English language itself has been seen as the "Kaduwa" (sword). There are of course degrees of Westernization, and we who are seriously engaged with Western literature might be seen as the ultra-Westernized of Sri Lanka. We evoke images of the mandarin and the ivory tower. My observations locating Ludowyk within the Scrutiny tradition, which was remarkable for giving centrality to the social function of literature, suggest that those images are distorted ones.

It is understandable in this social context that the search for relevance should have led to a turning to left-wing literature, or literature oriented to the people rather than the middle and upper classes, and later to Commonwealth literature which deals with experience that seems closer to ours than what is to be found in Western literature. There is nothing, of course, to be said against turning to left-wing or Commonwealth literature because of one's personal predilections or preoccupations. The mistake is to look for relevance in terms of ideology or subject matter. This is a mistake because, as I will argue, the Western experience embodied in Western literature could be just as relevant for us as anything else. The only test of relevance is whether a literary text

is good literature or bad literature. A further point that has to be made is that the search for relevance in terms of ideology or subject matter involves a shift of focus from language, the "words on the page", to content and - that - seems to lead to a holding in abeyance of the properly literary standards that we should bring to bear on our reading of literary texts.

The use of properly literary standards should lead to some reversals of judgments influenced by ideological stances. Malraux's La Condition Humaine may be a good revolutionary novel, but the best fiction of the Catholic Mauriac is certainly better. Paul Eluard, the Communist poet, wrote some weak political poetry which has been over-valued for ideological reasons, and also some beautiful lyrics, but he is a minor poet compared to the Catholic reactionary Paul Claudel, who is a very great poet. An ideological stance could lead to the under-valuing of Wyndham Lewis' anti-Communist novel, Revenge for Love, more particularly because he flirted with fascism for some time, and also an under-valuation of the living literature to be found in the Dos Passos trilogy, USA, because not only did he turn against Communism after his experience of the Spanish Civil War but came to be identified as a thoroughgoing reactionary. We may correctly assess Silone's story of the oppressed Italian peasantry, Fontamara, as a minor masterpiece and recognize that it somehow rings truer to our experience than comparable Western novels, probably because it is the product of a South European culture which is not very dissimilar to that of Afro-Asian countries. But we may fail to recognize, because it is not left-wing or revolutionary, that Manzoni's great novel, The Betrothed, also a product of South European culture, is even more relevant to us as Sri Lankans than Fontamara.

Ideological bias may make us declare that literature dealing with the Western upper class is irrelevant to us. For instance it has been argued that Jane Austen's fiction, which deals mostly with the English gentry and aristocracy of a past age, is not a fit subject for Sri Lankan students. This is to ignore the fact that her kind of hierarchically ordered society is not all that dissimilar to ours. The same kind of bias may make us under-value or even dismiss Henry James, Proust, or Virginia Woolf, although the first two are certainly great writers.

I will now outline a properly literary approach to Virginia Woolf, showing her relevance to us as Sri Lankans. In her memoirs, A Sketch of the Past, she claimed that she wrote out of what she called "a shock-receiving capacity", referring to two kinds of experiences. One was an experience of terror and alienation, which made Jeremy Hawthorne provide a Marxist critique of Mrs. Dalloway. The other kind of experience, which was at the core of her best work, To the Lighthouse, was certainly a mystical experience. It first came to her as a child when seeing a flower made her exclaim "That is the whole", and ever afterwards she had the sense of a pattern behind everything, to which all human beings are connected. It is the kind of mystical experience which is behind all the great world religions, and it is an experience which is certainly not specific to any particular class.

*A reading of Mrs. Woolf purely in terms of the Bloomsbury ethos, which is how her work is usually under-valued or dismissed, would be an insensitive reading as it would ignore the experience, infinitely remote from that ethos, which is at the core of her best work. The full assessment of a literary work

requires that its social context be taken into account and the Bloomsbury ethos, with its superficialization of a great civilization, is certainly relevant in this case. It meant that she lost the religious earnestness of her Clapham Sect forebears on her mother's side, and the moral earnestness of her father, Leslie Stephen, which he inherited from his Victorian forebears. Consequently she could not integrate her mystical experience into a meaningful whole, in which case she may have become a great writer. Instead we have a schizophrenic Virginia, with the brilliant malice shown in her letters on the Bloomsbury side of her, and on the other a totally unrelated mystical experience which she claimed inspired all her creative writing. Had someone mentioned Ramakrishna in connection with her experience, we can be sure that she would have reacted with a sniff of fastidious distaste and probably responded with something like Auden's remark when told that his friend Isherwood had turned to Vedanta, which was that Hinduism is no religion for a gentleman.

While the Bloomsbury ethos is relevant to a proper assessment of her work, it remains that we have to begin and end with "words on the page" and close engagement with the text, and that will show that To the Lighthouse is alive and will survive as a classic while The Waves, which deals with a comparable range of experience and is usually rated higher, is far inferior. Only a properly literary approach will allow us to get at the experience in To the Lighthouse, and allow the recognition that it certainly could be relevant to Sri Lankans.

The holding in abeyance of properly literary standards is much apparent in the case of Commonwealth literature. Certainly some valuable work

has been done in the re-interpretation of Conrad, Kipling, Forster and others, but there has been an inadequate focussing on the work of literature as literature. Otherwise it is difficult to explain why, for instance, T.E. Lawrence's Seven Pillars of Wisdom is ignored as a work of literature. When it was first published it had many admirers among the literati, notably Forster, and later James Reeves, a sober critic who makes careful assessments, wrote of it as "a great book" in his critical anthology, The Speaking Oak, published in 1951. It does continue to get attention, and it must be said legitimate attention, as an exhibit in the field of cross-cultural interaction as in Edward Said's Orientalism, but no longer as literature. It is striking also that there has been nothing like adequate recognition of the very remarkable literary quality of Karen Blixen's Out of Africa.

In the other field of Commonwealth literature, English language writing from the formerly colonized countries, the critical standards are not very noticeable. Raja Rao's Serpent and the Rope is taken seriously instead of being dismissed as one of the world's worst novels, a judgment I must say in which Ludowyk fully concurred with me. The perfect antidote to the pretentious spirituality in that book, G.V. Desani's All About H. Hatterr, which was admired by Eliot among others, seems to be forgotten or at any rate is not given anything like the place it merits. As far as I am aware not much critical attention has been given, apart from an essay by William Walsh, to Nirad Chaudhuri's Autobiography of an Unknown Indian, perhaps the greatest autobiography in the English language. One does not come across careful discriminations between the real poetry in Derek Walcott's long poem Another Life and the kind

of poetry in Wole Soyinka's Idanre. An anthology of Indian English poetry published recently in the U.K. contains no extract from Vikram Seth's The Golden Gate, the one poem by a Commonwealth writer which could acquire classic status. One does not find much insistence on the difference between free verse, in which most Commonwealth poetry is purportedly written, and chopped prose, a point which can be easily demonstrated through an analysis of the best work of William Carlos Williams. I am here providing no more than a few pointers to what looks like an abandonment of critical standards in the field of Commonwealth literature.

A further point to be made is that the term "Commonwealth" is a political category, not a literary one, which arbitrarily excludes a whole area of Afro-Asian literature. I refer to the English language literature of the Philippines, which has a longer tradition of creative writing in the English language than any other Afro-Asian country. F. Sionil Jose's fiction is comparable with the better fiction of the Commonwealth writers. Nick Joaquin's early fiction and drama should put him in the front rank of the Afro-Asian writers, and Jose Garcia Villa's best poetry is comparable to that of Walcott, Brathwaite, and Vikram Seth. Those writers seem to be ignored by Commonwealth readers, suggesting that the focus in Commonwealth literature is not adequately on literature.

The observations I have made on the turnings to left-wing and Commonwealth literature suggest that they are the wrong strategies to follow in the search for relevance. To the extent that they have led to insufficient attention being given to "words on the page" and close engagement with the literary text,

they have impoverished our literary culture.

The central question that has to be addressed is why the Western literature which deals with experiences that are apparently remote from Sri Lankan experience should so often engage our deepest interests. Why do we read poems about that English flower, the lesser celandine? I believe that the answer is that the act of reading is a creative one, in which we appropriate what is alien to us and make it a Sri Lankan experience. In the act of reading a poem about the lesser celandine, we transform it into a Sri Lankan flower. I refer here, of course, to the act of reading involved in a serious engagement with literature that can be taken seriously, not to the reading of literature as entertainment. In the genre of comic literature, for instance, the fiction of Wodehouse remains English because our deeper interests are not engaged by him, whereas Thurber does that and his best work could become Sri Lankan experience. And so does, of course, the great poetry of Wordsworth dealing with the lesser celandines and the mountains of the English Lake district.

Reading as a creative act provides part of the answer to the problem of relevance. In trying to establish that in reading we transform the alien into Sri Lankan experience, I will begin by making some observations on what seems to happen when we interact with Western literature. We read as the human beings that we are, and not with a compartmentalized part of our identity which deals only with literature. We inevitably bring to our reading our personal predilections and deeper preoccupations, which are shaped by the society in which we live. This is because there is no such thing as an individual in the abstract, as the

individual lives in nexus with his society and his very identity is formed by that nexus. What all this means is that we Sri Lankans can only interact with Western literature as Sri Lankans.

Our predilections and preoccupations determine the choice of what we read, and also come into the interpretative and evaluative processes that are involved in the act of reading. As these processes can vary greatly with each individual, I will make some observations on the way I interact with Western literature.

I have preoccupations about power and justice, like many Sri Lankans, which influence the choice of what I read and the way I evaluate what I read. I now turn to the literature dealing with power, for instance Tacitus' Annals, some Shakespeare plays, Marvell's Horatian Ode, or Shelley's Mask of Anarchy, with a far deeper sense of involvement than I did some decades ago, I now place a higher literary value on the political writings of Swift, Burke, and Rousseau than I did in the past. I now find it shocking that Yvor Winters' political poem Before Disaster finds no place in anthologies of twentieth century poetry, and even more shocking that neither does Kipling's great exhortation of the demagogue, A Servant When he Reigneth. My extra-literary preoccupations, of a political order, influence the choice of the literature I read and its evaluation.

Those preoccupations also influence the interpretations of what I read in ways that could be problematic. For me the important point about Conrad's Heart of Darkness is that Kurtz was deranged by absolute power, like the Tiberius of Tacitus, and I read that story as a parable of what can happen, even

among the most civilized, when power is uncontrolled. I can relish Empson's brilliant, and sometimes brilliantly wrong-headed, Freudian interpretation of the two Alice books of Lewis Carroll in his Some Versions of Pastoral; but for me that prim little Victorian miss is a delightful subversive in a world of mad adult power. It can be argued that interpretations of these texts in terms of a paradigm of power are far from being perverse. Conrad's story is on the factual level about imperialist power, and in the Freudian interpretation of the two Alice books the super-ego which is polarized against the id could be made to stand for Victorian convention and power.

But my extra-literary preoccupations come into my reading of Valery's Le Cimetière Marin (The Graveyard by the Sea), affecting my interpretation and evaluation and my total response, in a way that might seem impermissible but to me seems unavoidable. Leavis in an essay published as foreword to G. Singh's translations of Montale's poems, wrote of Valery's poem as "a brilliant demonstration of the poetic art conceived as a game", an astounding misjudgment showing that the greatest of all critics in the English language had his limitations. In his evaluation of the Valery poem he showed something like cultural insularity, which in practice may be impossible to avoid. The description "game" of a poem dealing with the problem of the One and the Many which has preoccupied serious minds over the millennia, and that description of a poem which as Leavis himself seems to recognize is intensely alive, has to be regarded as somewhat perverse. To respond adequately to the poem, we have to grasp that what we have in it is not just brilliant verbal pyrotechnics on a dry metaphysical problem which is remote from our normal and human preoccupations. The One is seen

as the realm of the perfect and the Many of the imperfect and of unavoidable human anguish. It is not just that creation is flawed but that creation itself is the flaw, an idea which leads to the problem of theodicy. It is what Hemingway probably had in mind when he wrote his memorable sentence, "A great writer is forged in injustice as a sword is forged." When I first read Leavis' essay fifteen years ago I agreed with his judgment. I now disagree, because I now bring to Valery's poem my preoccupations as a Sri Lankan about power and justice and human anguish. The politics of Sri Lanka shape the preoccupations that I bring to the reading of a great French poem, and Hemingway's sentence is now integral to my interpretation and evaluation of that poem.

I have presented my own interaction with Western literature as a case study, to show that we cannot keep out our extra-literary preoccupations from the act of reading. ^{As I have said} This is because, in a serious engagement with literature, we read as the human beings that we are, and not with a compartmentalized identity which deals only with literature. Our preoccupations have to be in some sense Sri Lankan, and that means that we can only interact with Western literature as Sri Lankans. Reading has to be a culture specific experience, an argument which implies that we could be reading the same literary text in a way that differs significantly from that of the Westerner.

This argument can be pursued by invoking modern literary theory which has revolutionized literary studies over the last quarter century. Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" continued the earlier argument in literary theory about the "intentional fallacy", according to which the meaning

of a literary text cannot be legitimated in terms of the author's intention, and that means that no definitive and final meaning of a literary text can be established. It is a fact that long before these theories came into vogue literary texts, more particularly the complex creative masterpieces, have been subjected to multiple interpretations.

Shakespeare in particular has been read in very different ways over the centuries. The obvious explanation for this is that as a culture changes in the course of time, readers at different periods bring different concepts and norms to their reading and Shakespeare is experienced and evaluated in different ways at different times. Hans Robert Jauss, in exploring the contemporary reader's interaction with the literature of the past, argued that the reader brings to his reading a different "horizon of expectations" from that of the past, which enables the contemporary reader to uncover potential meanings that are embedded in the classic text.

It is to be expected, whether or not we agree with Jauss' formulation, that Sri Lankan and other Afro-Asian readers will bring their own non-Western norms and conceptual frameworks to the reading of Western literature. It would have been argued formerly, that is to say before modern literary theory exploded the certitudes of the past, that provided an Afro-Asian reader is sufficiently familiar with Western literature and Western culture, and keeps his own cultural background in abeyance, his response to a Western literary text will be identical to that of any Westerner. That argument assumes, among other things, that there is a final meaning to a literary text and that it is possible to keep one's culture out of the reading experience. Both those assumptions are

certainly mistaken, and what has to be expected is that the Afro-Asian reader's response to Western literature will be significantly different from that of the Westerner.

This argument requires demonstration in detail, but within the space of this lecture I will confine myself to possible readings of Hemingway's story The Killers. According to the analysis in Brooks and Warren's Understanding Fiction, first published in 1945 and read by students of my generation, the main point of the story is that the protagonist Nick has awoken to the reality of evil after his encounter with the killers, whereas two of the other main characters, George and the black cook Sam, are already inured to evil. It seemed a satisfactory and definitive reading when one first read it, but today the Sri Lankan and other Afro-Asian readers can be expected to give more weight to Sam than is to be found in the Brooks and Warren exegesis. According to that exegesis Sam merely wants to avoid involvement in what has been happening. But in the story the emphasis is actually on Sam's very strong disapproval of anyone who wants to do anything to confront the evil in his society. In Sam we have the member of a submerged species, the American black of Hemingway's time, the "invisible man" of Ralph Ellison. The Afro-Asian reader could be expected to bring to the story his own experience of submerged humanity in countries where state power is uncontrolled, providing an exegesis that is significantly different from that of Brooks and Warren. In the Afro-Asian reading Sam could almost displace Nick as the protagonist. The Killers was evidently written out of Hemingway's early experience as a reporter in Chicago, a world utterly remote from that of Sri Lanka. But in reading it a Sri Lankan reader, provided he brings to bear his deeper preoccupations.

can be expected to make of that story a Sri Lankan experience.

Reading is a creative act, as I have argued, in which we appropriate what is alien and make it a Sri Lankan experience. This means that not only left-wing literature and Commonwealth literature but any literature, including Western literature which deals with experience that seems remote from ours, could be equally relevant to us as Sri Lankans. However, this may not seem by itself an adequate answer to the problem of relevance. It can be argued that all that it means is that the Westernized literati of Sri Lanka can enrich their experience through Western literature and continue with their alienated mandarin existence.

The further part of the answer to the problem of relevance is that the experience of literature is transformative one, in the sense that it can be expected to transform the reader and that certainly has social implications because there is no such thing as an individual without a social nexus. More particularly the experience of an alien literature, such as the Western one, can have a transformative power carrying subversive implications. This is because the alien norms and conceptual frameworks of Western literature can subvert the reader's, and impact on our society in a subversive way. There is, of course quite often a great deal to be said for subverting a society's shibboleths and conventions. They are not among the eternal verities.

In pursuing this argument I will revert to my earlier question, why should we read poems about the lesser celandine? The answer given earlier, that it becomes a Sri Lankan flower by the creative act of reading, had behind it modern literary theory. The

answer according to the earlier orthodoxy was that a poem on that flower, should it be worth reading, will be about more than just that flower, embodying a human experience which we Sri Lankans can absorb because there is an unchanging and universal human nature. But according to the orthodoxy of the post-Hegelian world in which we live there is no such human nature. There is a Sri Lankan nature which can be transformed by reading poems about the lesser celandine. The idea that what is alien can disrupt what is Sri Lankan has obvious subversive implications.

The transformative power of Western literature has to be set in an international perspective because it has become a commonplace that a global culture is taking shape. We now have Vikram Seth's The Golden Gate, a narrative poem by an Indian writer set in California without any Indian or Afro-Asian characters at all, a work which far from being a display of vacuous cosmopolitanism, as might have been expected, engages our deeper human concerns. Sri Lanka cannot, of course, immune itself from the rest of the world.

There are strategies other than the one I have followed in this lecture to establish the transformative power of literature. Auden, in reviewing Eliot's selection of Kipling's verse, paraphrased Collingwood's argument that the proper effect of art is disenchanting, and art by asserting that order is possible faces us with the command to make it actual. Derrida's deconstructionism can be used to argue that literature embodies what is antinomial in human experience, which means that it can be used to deconstruct and subvert any system.

I will not pursue those and other possible

strategies because, after all, it has long been acknowledged that language charged with meaning, which is the most apposite definition of literature for the argument I am advancing here, can be explosive. That is why rulers have usually kept a wary eye on the writer. When Solzhenitsyn wrote that a great writer is an alternative government he was echoing Plato who, over two thousand years earlier, banned poets from his utopian Republic. Since Plato was himself a great writer, we can be sure that should he have found himself in his Republic, he would have quickly recognized it as a ghastly dystopia, and proceeded forthwith to subvert it. Western literature has a relevance for us because it has more alternative governments, that is great writers, than any other.

I must return in conclusion to those explosives, Ludowyk's "words on the page". Only the words which are alive on the page provide the experience which can be transformed into Sri Lankan experience and transform the Sri Lankan reader, making Western literature relevant for us. Ludowyk always focussed on the "words on the page" and the techniques of close reading in his teaching of literature. I recall in particular his textual criticism of The Winter's Tale and King Lear in my final year, deploying the formidable erudition which he carried gracefully and which earned him his place in the Shakespeare scholarship of his time.
